

The Impact of Conversation on Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Students

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Abstract

Learners begin to build up reading and language skills at a very young age. Kindergarten is a crucial time for introducing students to a variety of literacy topics and instruction, including several comprehension strategies and how to engage in purposeful talk. Research has proven that many benefits stem from this purposeful talk and the social experience created in the classroom through interactions between teacher and students, or students with their peers. This action research study explored the impact of student-to-student interaction and conversation on kindergarten students' comprehension after an interactive classroom read aloud. Participants received instruction on reading comprehension strategies as well as strategies for productive talk. Findings have shown that students' comprehension was impacted through the depth of their responses and vocabulary use, and the accuracy of their story retellings and responses to questions. Student engagement also increased.

Keywords: Student to student interaction, comprehension, kindergarten, classroom read-alouds

Introduction

Young students' development of literacy is a complex process that starts before they even receive formal reading instruction. Vocabulary development is one of the top skills young learners need to obtain before they begin learning to read (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012). Emergent literacy skills such as vocabulary knowledge can be developed through the very important context of a classroom read aloud (Pentimonti & Justice, 2009). Several studies have shown that students' participation in read-aloud activities has been especially influential to developing these early literacy skills. Many of the benefits stem from the social experience created between teacher and student, and the high-quality conversation included within the read aloud. Students can interact with their teacher or peers, learning language and vocabulary skills, while also understanding how to be involved in literacy activities. Since students are exposed to a variety of texts, and then have the opportunity to talk about them, they will become better prepared for later interactions involving literacy as well (Pentimonti & Justice, 2009).

The part of read alouds particularly relevant to this research study is the conversational piece. When young learners participate in conversations about text with their teachers and peers, they learn to talk about stories and characters and answer many questions surrounding the main points of the text. Students are able to be a part of more complex conversations in which the teacher can scaffold their early literacy skills. Students' engagement with read alouds allows for tremendous vocabulary and comprehension growth through repeated readings, retellings and questioning (Pentimonti & Justice, 2009).

After an interactive read aloud, students can increase their reading comprehension through conversations with their teacher and with one another. In her book *Comprehension*

Through Conversation, Nichols (2006) states that students make meaning, create ideas, and develop structures for independent thought when they are able to converse with each other about text. They work together to come up with ways of creating stronger ideas than those they originally had, and work to clarify thinking they did not understand at first. To think together is not only valuable in the classroom, but valuable in life. Just as Isaacs quoted in Nichols (2006) states, “Together we are more aware and smarter than we are on our own” (p. 4).

Getting learners involved in classroom conversations geared around carefully selected texts, and using the best teacher facilitated learning strategies such as questioning, in combination with peer to peer discussions after a classroom interactive read aloud can enhance students’ reading comprehension, preparing them for first grade and beyond. Because of this finding, I have directed my action research study to further explore the impact of conversation after a read aloud, specifically on kindergarten students’ comprehension. My research question is: How does student-to-student talk impact kindergarteners’ reading comprehension after an interactive read aloud?

Literature Review

Comprehension Instruction

Reading instruction used to follow closely with what basal reading curricula had to offer: independent practice in workbooks to get ready for tests that looked very similar to the corresponding workbook skills sheets. Comprehension instruction was mainly composed of reading a text and then answering specific questions related to the text. Teachers hoped that after students completed the skill-based questions in workbooks over and over, they would get better at answering the questions asked of them after reading out of the basals (Pearson & Dole, 1987). Over the years, however, several research studies have been done, confirming that this is

not enough for teaching comprehension. Teachers can do a much better job of teaching comprehension through new instructional frameworks than the traditional basal series filled with practice worksheets following each section of text (Pearson & Dole, 1987).

Research by Durkin (1978) documented that there was little explicit comprehension instruction evident in classrooms, but there were multiple assessments of comprehension in elementary schools. In other studies conducted during the late 1970s, Durkin found that there was no direct teaching of comprehension skills, why they were used, when to use them, or how to even use them. Because this way of teaching has not drastically changed since, comprehension strategies and explicit instruction need to be built into reading instruction everywhere. Educators need to be the ones to build students up with comprehension tools that are transferable. To promote comprehension, teachers need to assist learners in understanding text at deep levels, beyond what is specifically stated in the text. They need to practice predicting and inferencing and take what they have learned from word learning strategies, answering and discussing questions and written responses to be successful in understanding text (Onofrey & Theurer, 2007).

To be an influential teacher, one must continually focus on helping learners comprehend by making sense of what they read. These teachers make the reading process something of highest value within the classrooms that they teach, while creating environments that allow students to engage with text in ways that extend their abilities. To encourage deep levels of comprehending text, educators teach reading comprehension strategies to their students. Strategies such as previewing, self-questioning, making connections, visualizing, monitoring, summarizing and evaluating are just some of the key comprehension strategies that good readers use. Teacher support is present in learning these strategies initially and then

responsibility is gradually given to learners for them to engage on their own (McLaughlin, 2012). Duke and Pearson (2008/2009) also suggest teaching those same valuable comprehension strategies: building a curriculum with prediction, student and teacher think alouds, and visual representations of text.

Readers make meaning from text when they are able to connect what they know (prior knowledge) with what they are reading (the text) (McLaughlin, 2012). Background knowledge is such an important piece for students' creation of meaning. Therefore, teachers should help students activate prior knowledge before reading aloud, so listeners are able to easily access connections with concepts and topics in the text (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). So much learning takes place when new information is blended with what is already known. Readers make connections and ask questions as they read and learn new information (Ketch, 2005). The more a learner knows about a specific topic, the more smoothly they can make connections and build upon their comprehension of text.

It is important for teachers to understand the students' roles in the overall reading comprehension process during a read aloud. One critical role is for learners to be active participants in their reading. Educators should help students become metacognitive readers (readers who are able to monitor their thinking simultaneously while/with reading). Readers use strategies like determining importance, inferring, retelling and synthesizing. Students improve in comprehension through opportunities for practicing these strategies in authentic, real-life ways (Ketch, 2005). Conversations with peers about text provide the context for an authentic experience with literature.

McLaughlin (2012) suggests using multiple modes of representing thinking and using formative assessments daily in the classroom to enhance comprehension as well. Educators use

the insights into student learning gained from those assessments to help improve student comprehension and where to go with their lessons. Many formative assessments can be done quickly, such as observations of learners and their reading habits and discussions or written responses to text. Educators use the assessments to guide the learning and teaching process (McLaughlin, 2012). Classroom read alouds provide a perfect opportunity for observation and formative assessment on student comprehension. Teachers are able to listen to understandings of their students as they engage in conversation and discuss the answers to questions posed, or retell stories together with their peers. For students to comprehend well, reading needs to be an active process in which students connect personally and socially with text. Teachers help students enjoy the process by allowing them to respond to text through read alouds, react to important questions, and apply their learning through conversations centered on authentic literature (Garcia et al., 2011).

Another part of excellent comprehension teaching through read alouds is the concept of “expert scaffolding.” The idea of expert scaffolding can be applied when teaching children how to engage in conversations and interactions with their peers. This takes place when a teacher is able to support learners in the classroom environment and then allow them to gradually take on new skills. The teacher models comprehension strategies and conversation skills for the students, and provides an explanation for why and how to use them. Students then gradually take on responsibility for using the strategies on their own, with little to no modeling (Pearson & Dole, 1987). Duke and Pearson (2008/2009) mention similar steps for gradual release of responsibility. First, there is an exact description of the strategy, explaining how and why the strategy should be used. Next, the teacher models that strategy in action. Then, the students and teacher work together to practice using the strategy, followed by guided practice using the

strategy with the gradual release of responsibility. Last, the students know and have practiced enough to use the strategy independently (Duke & Pearson, 2008/2009). Through interactive read alouds, a teacher begins with this same idea. Teachers model strategies and structure discussions around specific questions to guide learners as they interact back and forth with the teacher. Later, students take the initiative themselves, taking on more responsibility and leading more of the conversation themselves and with peers.

Classroom Read Alouds-Text Selection

A huge part of comprehension is also student motivation and engagement with text. Because interest and motivation are linked with higher reading comprehension, teachers need to make these aspects a priority. To encourage students' involvement in and enjoyment of reading daily, they must be a part of a book-rich classroom, have choice in their reading, and have a reading model in their teacher (McLaughlin, 2012). To encourage reading comprehension, students need to be provided with a large selection of materials and text to choose from. They need multiple types and multiple levels at their fingertips. Teachers can use interest inventories to find out what their students are most into and use that information to select read aloud texts that fit their learners.

Expert teachers from around the country make sure that the books they choose for their classroom read alouds match the interests of their students and are appropriate for them in all aspects of their lives- developmentally, socially, and emotionally (Fischer, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004). Onofrey & Theurer (2007) suggest using text that has strong visual images such as picture books or poetry. This allows for assisting students in creating mental images to guide them in their comprehension of text. When readers are able to visualize while they read, they construct meaning and make connections.

Fischer et al. (2004), in their article on interactive read alouds, mentioned that the books chosen by effective teachers who used read-alouds also had been previewed and practiced by those teachers before using them with kids. The educators decided ahead of time when the best places for pausing for questioning would be, as well as pulling out the difficult vocabulary for clarification. They established a purpose of the read-aloud before they began, and modeled fluent reading when the text was read. In this research study, a seventh grade teacher provided her class with the purpose of two comprehension skills, summarizing and predicting, before she began reading *Holes* (Sachar, 2000) with them. Throughout the story she asked her students to retell previous chapters with peers and predict about what was coming next. According to Duke and Pearson (2008/2009), predicting and summarizing are two effective individual comprehension strategies recommended for teaching developing readers. These strategies used for *Holes* and other novels can also be applied to texts at the elementary level.

Selection and use of appropriate texts is also very critical in regard to talking about text in the classroom. Teachers reported in the Garcia et al. (2011) study that students were much more able to connect to complex narrative literature. “Little books” at students’ instructional levels made this connecting more difficult, so teacher read alouds were sure to be focused on authentic texts with real-life events. Picture books used as read aloud texts have an extra layer of support for meaning making through their vivid illustrations, pictures or photographs. Pictures allow for more understanding of the events and characters of a story, while also offering clarity and help with ease of students communicating their thinking to others (Nichols, 2006).

Classroom Read Alouds-Teacher-Facilitated Comprehension Strategies

Read-alouds are effective when children are actively engaged in the process of asking and answering questions, instead of just listening. If they are involved in making predictions and inferencing along the way, they are much more likely to make gains in comprehension and vocabulary development (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Students' comprehension and recall is defined and shaped by the questions asked of them. If learners are typically asked questions about recalling specific facts, they will begin to always focus their attention on particular factual details when reading or listening to text. Teachers should provide questions of a variety of types, some that look for direct answers, others for more open-ended responses. Students learn to adapt their understandings and make connections to the text if the teacher questions direct them to do so (Duke & Pearson, 2008/2009).

Current research in reading suggests that students need to comprehend at much deeper levels and understand more than just the printed text on the page. They need to be able to question, think beyond a particular topic and analyze messages from authors (McLaughlin, 2012). Think-alouds or read alouds make the processes of questioning and challenging perspectives possible. Students are able to become readers and "text critics in everyday life" (McLaughlin, p. 439, 2012).

Findings in research have shown that student participation in read alouds with questioning has a very positive effect on vocabulary growth (Pentimonti & Justice, 2009). The repeated interactive read-aloud approach is a specific research-based strategy to use with young children in order to increase comprehension and vocabulary through questioning. It plays a part in the development of vocabulary in children, as well as vocabulary acquisition. Through read-alouds, gains are made in students' expressive language (Fischer et al., 2004). Research by

Wasik and Iannone-Campbell (2012) suggests that through the use of conversations in classrooms, children's use of language increases. They also suggest that the conversations need to be purposeful and strategic, focusing on constructing meaning of words through a variety of experiences (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012).

The specific strategy of repeated interactive-read alouds begins with a book introduction, talking about the front cover, back cover and title page. The objective is to get the students excited about the story first, and then focus on its meaning. The use of gestures, dramatic pauses and substantial amount of eye contact keep the students engaged in the story. To support vocabulary development, teachers also select a critical group of vocabulary words to focus on throughout the reading and define when they turn up in the story. Teachers can then sneak in the short explanations of words as they read, as to not interrupt the story (McGee and Schickedanz, 2007). For example, if a story was building context around a *feast*, the teacher could add in a small explanation of the word ("that's a really big dinner") when it is mentioned in the text.

Children learn new vocabulary words the best when they are introduced in a meaningful and familiar context, such as discovering new words embedded in a story (Wasik and Iannone-Campbell, 2012). Upon completing a read-aloud, teachers ask "why" questions about the book to enhance inferencing skills. As in the book *Henny Penny*, students could be asked why the fox in the story did not eat up all of the birds at the end. Children's' focus would then be on the illustrations and any clues they gain from them to help themselves answer the questions posed (McGee and Schickedanz, 2007). Later read alouds of the same story are for the learners to improve their story comprehension and be presented with chances to engage in analytic talk. More words are defined verbally by inserting explanations (as mentioned above), and more focus is placed on characters and inferencing about what they are thinking and feeling (McGee

and Schickedanz, 2007). There is also an opportunity to reinforce the vocabulary selected from previous read-alouds as the teacher builds on prior discussions.

Read alouds provide great opportunities to use effective practices for increasing vocabulary development, a huge part of the comprehension process. To ensure students are exposed to a variation of new vocabulary words, they should be exposed to a variety of texts. They need teachers who provide multiple opportunities for them to discover new words and use them in their normal language (McLaughlin, 2012). Beginning readers need to be exposed to “book language” since they often times are exposed to only decodable and familiar texts in their own independent reading. Read-alouds are the perfect way to hear this language because stories are typically full of uncommon words and descriptive language. Kindle (2009) states that the words students need to know are often the words that do not come up in everyday conversations, but are often included in our written text (called Tier 2 words). For example, the Caldecott Award winning book “Interrupting Chicken” (Stein, 2010) could be used to learn words such as *interrupt* or *panic* and the book “Chrysanthemum” (Henkes, 2008) used to discuss the words *envious* and *inform*. Kindle (2009) also states that repetitions of tier two words “help students move to deeper levels of word knowledge- from *never heard it*, to *sounds familiar*, to *it has something to do with*, to *well known*” (p. 203). Clarifying students’ responses is another critical practice. Sometimes students will have misconceptions about a word or only partial understandings, and it is crucial that an educator make sure they are clarified immediately. With the focused intention of the effective teacher, this context of word learning within the read-aloud proves to be a great setting for increasing vocabulary and comprehension in students of all ages (Kindle, 2009).

Student-to-Student Interaction

Parents and teachers everywhere want the best future for their learners. Learners have opportunities to be successful when they can think and talk with peers at school, preparing them for their future. The ability to communicate with others is a sought out quality in employees and individuals throughout society. Beginning at a young age, students need to be prepared for life outside the classroom, building their communication and language skills. According to Nichols (2006), “The path toward creating a future filled with opportunity and choice for our children is paved with the ability to think and talk with others in purposeful ways, as a means of generating ideas and constructing understanding” (p. 7).

Conversation is a huge part of learning and making meaning from the world around us. It is an educator’s job to take this knowledge of conversation and use it to promote learning in classrooms. Conversations create a safe way for learners to engage in thinking out loud and then be asked why they are thinking that way. When students are learning in this very real way, teachers are able to target comprehension development (Ketch, 2005).

In a study by Garcia et al. (2011) teachers used texts that incorporated open-ended “big” issues and high-interest themes to get class discussions going and focused students around “big, fat, juicy questions.” Students were encouraged to make their own connections and respond to the literature as they engaged in discussions about open ended questions and comprehension of the text. The idea behind this was to get students conversing on their own about text at deep levels. There was also a goal for teachers to guide their students in discovering their own learning through the conversations among their peers. This approach involves learners constructing their own understanding in collaboration with others. Through this social

interaction and conversation, learners were actively participating in creating their own thoughts, opinions and problem solving instead of passively participating (Garcia et al., 2011).

Literature response journals are another way to get students relating their lives to a theme. Instead of being instructed on a reading strategy, the learners would answer questions and talk about their written responses to the text that have tied in their own personal knowledge and experience with evidence from the text (Garcia et al., 2011). Teachers saw the benefits that came from student-led discussion groups of this sort and were able to use a gradual release of responsibility in their instruction. This allowed more control for the learners, as teachers were willing to give up more and more to them, increasing the engagement and motivation for learning. Research by Ketch (2005) supports that when conversation is used in classrooms, engagement is remarkably high. Conversation is what gets students going because it allows them to practice their thinking.

Students need to share and talk about their ideas, instead of just reciting back answers. Sometimes learners need the opportunities to talk through their thinking, and construct meaning together. Purposeful talk often does not make itself visible in classrooms where only “right answers” are valued, so to make this meaning known for all is essential. Students all should know that their answers are valued no matter how correct they are. Effective teachers make sure to emphasize growing ideas instead of only correct answers (Nichols, 2006).

Conversation pulls all learners in and gets them thinking deeply. They are each responsible for their own thinking and then held accountable. Through think/pair/share activities, students use the thinking process to expand their own thoughts and stray from the limitations of their own insights (Ketch, 2005). Through purposeful talk in the classroom, solutions represent the way of the group, not the individual. Learners work together to

understand one another's point of view and negotiate meaning through dialogue. The groups and individuals both become thoughtful listeners and responders. All of this can be seen in highly effective teachers' classrooms. This talk is modeled all through the school year and has more of a conversational flow than a teacher controlled exchange between individuals. Learners need to be receptive to other ideas, shape and mold their own, and allow one another to construct their meaning together (Nichols, 2006).

Classrooms also need to be setup for engaging in purposeful talk. Nichols (2006) recommends a gathering area for students to meet together and involve themselves in discussion, questioning, solving problems, and making meaning. Students receive roles in their discussion groups, so teachers are sure to hear all of their learners' voices (Nichols, 2006). Students benefit from time to reflect, form their own ideas, and comprehend. Teachers who foster discussions led by students in their classrooms know that there is value in conversation and interaction. Through practice and going through the conversation process, students become critical thinkers over time. Interactions with their peers allow students to make sense of their world, have a respect for others' opinions, build understanding, and take charge of their own learning.

In her article "Conversation: The Comprehension Connection," Ketch (2005) states that conversation promotes comprehension acquisition. It links to understanding, enriching and refining a student's knowledge. Individuals learn so much through conversation with others. When hearing other's points of view, students can monitor their own thinking and increase understanding. With careful modeling, discussion and coaching from teachers, students evolve their own thoughts. When exchanging thoughts orally, learners are then able to clarify and solidify any thoughts they may have. Feedback provides them with new ideas, and the

decision to support or reject what they hear. Different viewpoints allow discussions to become more and more complex.

Observations from a study by Perry, Phillips and Dowler (2004) indicated that children enjoyed working together in a supportive environment. More importantly, the collaborations among them improved their understanding and confidence. Students were able to regulate their own learning and support other peers as well. According to the research by Parsons et al. (2015), the most engaging tasks for the students involved in their study were tasks that were authentic, collaborative, and involved choice (Parsons, Malloy, Parsons & Burrowbridge, 2015). Collaborative activities such as conversation about read alouds allows for more engagement and motivation to learn. It is a real task that will get kids excited about reading, excited about text, and prepare them for life outside of school.

Methodology

Participants

The subjects of this study include eleven kindergarten students, seven girls and four boys. There was one student reading above grade level, as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment system and the rest were Pre-A or emergent readers. All of the learners in this class were Caucasian. A focus group was chosen for specific assessment and data collection purposes, although the entire class participated in the classroom read alouds and discussions. Some whole class data is included, but the focus group included six of the students (names included are pseudonyms) at varying levels for reading abilities and comprehension. The classification of students was determined by notes from read aloud discussions early in the school year and observations taken from literacy study during guided reading groups.

Table 1

Kindergarten Student Focus Group, Gender and Comprehension Level

Name	Gender	Comprehension Level
Samuel	Male	Low
Carissa	Female	Low
Jenna	Female	Average
Katie	Female	Average
Lana	Female	High
Lizzy	Female	High

Setting and Materials

This study was conducted in an elementary school with a population of approximately 399 students ranging from grades pre-kindergarten through 5th grade. The setting is in a very small rural town. This school's student population was 95% white, with small percentages of Asian, Hispanic, African American, or Native American students. Many grades have two sections, while the 1st and 5th grades at this school have one larger section. The school's enrollment numbers have been gradually declining in the five years I have been teaching there. I am one of the two kindergarten teachers, and I conducted this study with my regular classroom students. This action research study was implemented during whole-class interactive read alouds with a mix between partner and whole-group discussions during the daily literacy block or allotted read aloud times.

To engage students in the whole-group read alouds, picture books were chosen for mentor texts, all of them fiction. A list of books used for classroom read alouds can be found in Appendix A. Since the main focus of this study involved comprehension and conversation, texts

were needed that allowed for learners' "favorite parts" as well as plot structure for retelling. When choosing texts for use in this study, I selected texts from popular authors, and texts that interested my students. I also chose texts that allowed for thought-provoking, open-ended questions that encouraged kindergarten students' engagement and discussion among peers.

Procedures

The first step in my research was to obtain permission from parents using a formal letter. All students and parents encouraged my research and were happy to be a part of it. I began by taking a preliminary sample of observational data after a read aloud and asking my students comprehension questions. I also took observational notes on students' abilities to retell the story after it was read aloud to them. To collect observational data throughout the research project, I recorded student responses and discussions using an iPad. The iPad was not focused on video, but only recorded the audio of the conversations for documentation and analysis. I saved the audio recordings on my computer to use for transcription and analysis. I kept record of the texts that were read and why they were chosen. I wrote down anecdotal notes immediately following the read aloud and discussions, each session we participated in together.

After reviewing my initial data on the first classroom read aloud (no discussion with peers following) it was evident that my students needed to be scaffolded in the process of engaging in discussion techniques to enhance their comprehension. My learners needed to understand the techniques we would be using and the specifics for how to use them. Since it was the beginning of a new school year, and my learners were 5-6 years old, they also needed instruction and scaffolding with correct behaviors during a read aloud time, as well as how to

participate in a discussion with a partner or the whole class. The descriptions below explain the teacher scaffolding.

Strategy Introduction

It was very important to me that my students were actively involved with the read aloud and discussion process, so I used some techniques to assure they were fun and engaging. The next read aloud was focused more on the expectations of students and what was to happen during our interactive read alouds. We practiced sitting still and sitting on our bottoms, using a phrase, “Criss cross, applesauce. Spiders in your laps!” I learned this catchy phrase from my co-worker and all of my past and present students seem to like it. I used this phrase as an attention getter, as well as reminder to students what respectful listening looks like, and how they could get the most out of the classroom read alouds. All students sat near their learning partner for the week, which was posted in a pocket chart on the back wall. This helped with transition time and being able to quickly find someone to talk with. Learning partners were rotated each week, so students were able to discuss with several different peers throughout the course of this study.

Following the instruction and practice with listening behaviors, I then had to explain to my students what “retelling” a story meant and model how to do it. I mentioned that order was very important for the stories and retellings to make sense using examples from their daily lives such as, “Why is the order important for brushing teeth or getting dressed etc?” Students learned about retelling in depth during other shared reading portions of the morning as well as when writing personal narratives during the writing block.

I used a Whole Brain Teaching engagement strategy for which the students also needed to learn the procedures (Biffle, 2008). The teacher poses a question to the pairs of students sitting at the rug and then claps twice and says, “TEACH!” The students respond back with two claps,

and then, “OK!,” followed by immediate discussion with their learning partner. The students really liked this engagement technique and it was a way to get their discussions started with energy! The students were expected to be talking “on topic” with their learning partners and listen for the code word, “CLASS” for them to stop. After the teacher says, “CLAAAAASSSSSSSS,” and in whatever way it is said, the students respond with, “YEEEEESSSSSSSS” and stop what they are doing to reconvene. Not all students would be selected to share with the whole group, but all were able to engage in a valuable discussion and have the opportunity to be a part of student-to-student talk prior to whole-group sharing. These techniques were used to keep students’ interest, but they also provided a structure to follow and guide them along the way of their discussion process.

The read alouds began with some pre-reading questions focusing on prior knowledge and predicting, using the cover art and title or picture walking through the book. The read alouds continued with a text specifically chosen for my students and their interests, to fuel engagement in the stories. The books were previewed and practiced beforehand, so they could be read with full expression. I also chose a word or two that I wanted to clarify for the kids as I was reading. For example, when reading *Knuffle Bunny*, I chose to mention that an “errand” was “running to get something done quickly” and the “laundromat” was “a place to go do some laundry and wash clothes if you do not have a washer and dryer at your home.” When the word came up in the story I would provide a synonym or short meaning of the word (kid-friendly) to help with their understanding. We would stop throughout the story to use the illustrations and predict what would happen to the characters next, or infer something that had happened.

When the story was complete, the students engaged in teacher-directed discussions. A question was posed and learners were given “think time.” I often followed this time by asking

them to retell the story and all the details they could remember to their learning partner. The pairs would turn and talk, working together to retell the story. While the students were interacting, I walked around among the groups at the rug and asked any clarifying questions, listened to students' responses and what was being said between the learners. I collected some observational notes here.

After the student-to-student talk, one or two students would be able to retell the story to the whole group. If pieces were missing from their retell, I used prompts to help the class fill in the holes. The retell was followed by some comprehension questions, a couple specific to the particular story that was read, some more open-ended and general to be used following each read aloud. For example, "What was your favorite part of the story?" or "Were any of your predictions correct?" Occasionally the students needed to reconvene and talk together to generate more ideas when they were "stuck." The class discussions ended with a teacher re-cap and a class vote (thumbs up or down in front of their chest) on whether they liked the choice of story or not.

Further Practice

As the read alouds continued throughout the following weeks, I needed to continue to provide scaffolding for the students and structure for the discussions. It was necessary for the learners to have structured discussions to stay on track. As more books were read, the students grasped the routine well and were able to understand the types of questions better, provide more detailed responses and prompt their peers without me as much. Although I maintained an active role throughout the discussions, modeling responses, repeating for clarification, and demonstrating what different conversations sounded like, I felt that the students were able to take on more responsibility as we continued. Students were more confident in their responses to their

peers, especially in the whole group. I was able to step back a bit and facilitate the discussions instead of directing them as I did near the beginning. Over time, the students' discussions and communication improved, however, they still relied on me for the structure and questioning.

Data Collection and Analysis

To keep track of progress in student discussions and their impact on their comprehension, I used several methods to collect data. I audio-recorded the read alouds, student retells, and comprehension discussions. I used those audio recordings to complete transcriptions of class discussions, one from the beginning, middle and end of the research study. I analyzed the transcriptions at the end of the study to look for any changes in the students' discussion techniques, or comprehension abilities.

Over the course of the research study, I recorded observational notes following the read alouds and discussions, writing down any important take-aways. The point of recording these field notes was to keep track of the dialogue students were engaging in with the partner collaboration and whole group discussions. I kept track of areas that needed improvement as well as improvements in comprehension. The notes I took provided very valuable insight into how the discussions were progressing and how well the students were comprehending text. They helped me to decide what my students needed for the next read aloud and discussion. The observational notes I took were also used for analysis at the end of the study.

To collect data on specific comprehension of students I also gathered samples of student writing following the read alouds. The students were allowed to practice retelling with their learning partners using the procedure mentioned above, and then asked to write what they could remember from the story instead of all sharing aloud. The writing samples were used for

analysis of literal comprehension of the text read and any details students were able to record on their own after the peer verbal exchange.

Findings and Discussion

After analyzing my data, four main ideas emerged: 1) Student engagement with peer discussion and interaction; 2) Depth of student responses and vocabulary use; 3) Accuracy of student retells and responses to comprehension questions.

Student Engagement with Peer Discussion and Interaction

Over the course of this study I believe that student engagement increased. There are several factors that I believe contributed to this increase, including type of text chosen, encouragement of active participation, and student ability to contribute to the group. Whole Brain techniques used for attention getting and transitions, allowed for the discussions to flow smoothly and stay on track as well.

Research mentioned in my literature review by Fischer et al. states that expert teachers make sure books they choose for their classroom read alouds match their students' interests. I used what I knew of my students and their interests in previous read alouds to select literature by their favorite authors or stories that included their favorite characters, as well as texts that provide insight into experiences they may be having in their lives at ages five and six. The literature I selected proved to be great texts for my learners for engaging them and encouraging them to participate in the discussions. I could tell by the amount of enthusiasm in their reactions to parts of the stories as well as their votes at the end of the read aloud whether or not they enjoyed the text. Throughout the read alouds, specifically during the Mo Willems books, students would be silent and listening, awaiting the next page to see what would happen. All eyes were on me, in anticipation of what was coming. Sometimes the kindergarten kids would

talk back to the characters themselves, laugh out loud, or react with expression. For example, Gerald, the elephant and main character in *I Will Take a Nap*, would ask questions of his friend, Piggie. The students would answer back for Piggie if they could read his word bubble in the text, or if they had a prediction of what he would say back. It was hard to keep the students from “shouting out” their feelings and reactions to the events in the story because they were so excited about the story. They would clap out loud if their predictions were correct, and smile from ear to ear, proud as can be. There were very few students who ever gave a “thumbs to the side” or “thumbs down” vote following the conclusion of the stories.

Engagement increased as students became more comfortable sharing with each other and then sharing in front of the whole class. The “turn and talk” method allowed them to share with just one or two peers first, instead of facing the whole class right away. They felt sure of their answers and received encouragement from their learning partner before presenting their idea to a much larger group. This class has three students with speech delays, and those students also were able to build up a significant amount of confidence to share out ideas, whether they were their own or their partner’s. Just as Nichols (2006) described in her research, the less confident learners who were able to turn and talk first, before sharing whole group, gained the support they needed to include themselves in the whole-group conversation.

Depth of Student Responses and Vocabulary Use

Another finding from my research study was that the depth of students’ responses increased. I was able to observe that the students picked up on new vocabulary words from the text or words mentioned by me during the read alouds. Students increased in their ability to infer and predict using clues from the illustrations that allowed for more in-depth retelling and answers to comprehension questions. Discussions with their learning partners allowed learners

to talk more about things they picked up from the text instead of tuning out while students round robin shared their individual answers. They were responsible for contributing to a paired discussion and did not have the option of sitting back and not participating. The depth of the responses was evident in how much the students were able to remember after talking with a partner, as well as the level of vocabulary words they used. After reading the book *I Will Take a Nap* by Mo Willems, Jenna was retelling the story. I asked her how Gerald, the main character, was feeling in the story. She used the words “tired” and “frustrated,” words that she had heard through discussion during the earlier read aloud portion. It did not say anywhere in the text that Gerald was frustrated, but after looking at illustrations and discussing feelings of characters in the “turn and talk format, she was able to use this descriptive word when retelling to the class.

Observational notes and recorded conversations have led me to believe that the students spoke more and used complete sentences (see Table 2). They were able to comprehend at deeper levels and answer those inferencing or predicting questions that they may not have been able to do without the paired discussions prior. Students paid more attention to the illustrations and looked for details to help them with their predictions. For example, in the book, *Knuffle Bunny Too*, Trixie (the main character) notices that someone else has the same stuffed bunny that she does when she goes to her first day of Pre-K. The text does not tell us this, but when asked, one student, Jenna was able to infer this and share for the class when she noticed this in the illustrations. Some students were able to share more complex thoughts and provide reasons for that thinking. Lizzy, another student from the focus group, was able to tell us why the text said “The afternoon was worse,” because she noticed that the girls were fighting over their Knuffle Bunnies and the teacher had to put them away,

To begin collecting my preliminary data, I first read the story *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to the students gathered at the rug. This early read aloud (with no discussion afterward) included several comments that had to do with a caterpillar, but not things to do with the story. Some of those comments when asked to retell the story were: “One time I saw a caterpillar on a leaf” or, “I have a stuffed caterpillar at home.” “One time I found a caterpillar and it pooped on me twice!” When students were retelling the story, they often left out big parts of the story, such as when the hungry caterpillar formed a chrysalis before changing into a butterfly. They were less detailed with their responses (ie: He turned into that. Instead of using a naming word like chrysalis or butterfly) and the parts they shared were not always the important parts of the story. See Table 2 for a comparison of students’ retellings.

Table 2

Retelling Comparison of Three Students

Retelling Beginning of Study (The Very Hungry Caterpillar)	Retelling Later in Study (Knuffle Bunny)
“One time I saw a caterpillar on a leaf.”	“They went to the laundry place to find the bunny. They keep on walking and keep on walking to find the bunny and they put it in the washer!”
“He was fat and he turned into a beautiful butterfly.”	“ I remember they went to the laundry store. Then they forgot Knuffle Bunny and he screamed. When they found him he screamed ‘Knuffle Bunny! (his first words)’”

<p>“I have a stuffed caterpillar at home. I use it and make it crawl. Um, I, um, I mean, he ate one apple, and three cupcakes.”</p>	<p>“They went to the laundromat and they put her bunny in the washing machine and she cried when she wanted her bunny back. And then she did whatever she could to tell her daddy what she wanted.”</p>
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The table includes retellings from two different stories, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Knuffle Bunny*. Each row contains a story retell from one student early in the study and later in the study. Later in the study you could already tell the students were including more events in their retellings. They could still use more practice with including specific details, but I also could see growth in this area.

Accuracy of Student Retells and Responses to Comprehension Questions

As the classroom engaged in more interactive read alouds, the students also became more accurate and detailed with their responses. They used a more varied vocabulary, and complete sentences instead of just one word responses and sitting in silence, which sometimes occurred after a read aloud with no paired discussion present. Table 3 shows the addition of more detail as this student, Lizzy, answered questions throughout the study.

Table 3

Accuracy of Student Responses-Lizzy

Audio-Recorded Transcript <u>Beginning of Study</u>	Audio-Recorded Transcript <u>Mid Study</u>	Audio-Recorded Transcript <u>Conclusion of Study</u>
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<p>“He was in a egg and he didn’t get any food so he went to pick up some food and eat it.”</p>	<p>“Um, he said ‘cock-a-doodle-doo, wanna catch some flies?’ and um, the spider was all done making his web so he caught one</p>	<p>“ She was screaming and sideways when she was at home and they forgot Knuffle Bunny!”</p>
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At the beginning of the study, many students could retell parts of the story, but big ideas were left out. Sometimes the ending was completely left off of their retelling. By the conclusions of the study students had learned that retelling encompasses the beginning, middle, and end of the story. When engaging in whole-class discussions, students were able to build off each other’s retellings and add more details as we discussed. An example conversation from the conclusion of the study is included below to show students’ ability to accurately include details from the story. We had just read the story *A Bad Case of the Stripes* by David Shannon. In the story, the main character Camilla, loved lima beans. She was afraid for her friends to find out, so she pretended that she did not like them. When she gets up on the first day of school, she has stripes! As the days go on, her skin changes to fit words that others are saying (ie: checkerboard pattern at the mention of checkers). No doctors are able to cure her until a woman brings by some lima beans. See below for the class conversation.

Teacher: Now we were able to generate some ideas from talking with our partners. Can someone share with us what happened after she had the stripes?

Student 1: She went to school and all the kids said mean things about her. And when they said the Pledge of Allegiance, she turned red, white, and blue.

Teacher: Yes, she started changing into different colors! And Lizzy mentioned what the other kids were doing...

Lizzy: They were laughing at her!

Teacher: Then did the lady with the beans come?

Class: No!

Teacher: Not yet, what happened after the kids laughed at her?

Student 2: She had to go to the doctor and she had to get pills, but she kept changing into something else!

Student 1: She even changed into a pill!

Teacher: Finally, after all that, what happened?

Student 3: The kids at school still were bullies to her.

Teacher: What happened when the doctors still couldn't fix her?

Lana: The old woman fixed her.

Teacher: How?

Lana: With some lima beans

The above conversation shows evidence of students adding details from the story to answer questions and retell parts. The details they included were relevant and specific and their answers included accurate information gathered from the story. The qualitative data I have provided shows evidence that as students engage in conversations with their peers before class discussions, they build confidence in willingness to answer. The conversations also provide opportunities to use a wider selection of vocabulary and use language more often throughout the read aloud. As students develop more confidence in their answers and engage in more in depth conversations, the student responses become more accurate and detailed.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation I found in conducting this research study is that students in kindergarten do not have a tremendous ability to sit for long periods of time. I needed to select texts very carefully so that the interactive read aloud did not get too long - so long, that students were fidgety and antsy on the rug when trying to engage in the retells and comprehension discussions. Some texts chosen (ie: *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*) got lengthy and the students were ready to move around after the initial read aloud. I could tell they needed to have a movement break before engaging in an in-depth conversation about the story. I also had to make sure I myself did not get too into analyzing the story and take away from the time the kids needed to talk about it afterward.

I also would like to expand my research and data collection to more than just a few students. I could increase the reliability of my study by using a larger sample size of participants. Having a class of eleven students is very small to begin with and I should not have troubles incorporating my data collection to include more students in the room.

I will definitely continue using these discussions and interactive read alouds several times per week in my literacy instruction. Read alouds are so critical in a kindergarten classroom because of all the benefits I found in my research and review of the literature. I want to expand on my classroom read alouds even more by introducing specific vocabulary to use while discussing such as phrases for purposeful talk mentioned by Maria Nichols (2006). I want my students to continue to use complete sentences but try beginning them with:

- I agree with you...
- I disagree with you because...
- I can add on to _____...
- I have evidence that...

The limitation I had with adding this in, was time. The time I had to conduct my research was not nearly enough time to incorporate this aspect. Especially with kindergarten students who needed a lot more explanation and scaffolding with creating a conversation centered around text with their peers.

Implications

To conclude, I began this study in search of the ways in which student-to-student talk after an interactive read aloud impacted kindergarten students' comprehension. I explored the ways to keep my students engaged in a read aloud, while also learning to help students build confidence in comprehension through discussions with others. My study focused on engagement of students, language and collaboration of students, and depth and accuracy of student responses to questions.

My findings support literacy research which shows that using conversation in conjunction with read alouds in a kindergarten classroom could impact learner comprehension. After analysis of my observational notes, transcriptions of audio recordings, and findings from this research study I found comprehension to be impacted in three main areas: 1) Student engagement with peer discussion and interaction; 2) Depth of student responses and vocabulary use; 3) Accuracy of student retells and responses to comprehension questions. In all of these main areas, I observed increases and positive growth.

It was evident to me that students' conversations with their own peers in the classroom had immense benefits for young learners when it comes to comprehension. They need a lot of scaffolding and modeling to get comfortable with the process and be able to have more responsibilities with discussing, but overall they stayed engaged and enjoyed learning in

collaboration with others. They built confidence in themselves and showed growth in vocabulary use, retelling skills, predicting and inferencing, all big parts of comprehending text.

This action research study includes anecdotal findings that using conversation after an interactive read aloud can impact student engagement, as well as the depth and accuracy of student responses. My findings revealed that read alouds impact comprehension in a positive way as students discussed text and retold details, while also diving deeper into it. I am proud that my students developed such great communication strategies that will help them when they are outside of school as well. They learned a new way to respect their peers and listen in a way they had not done before. Although they are so young, they were able to learn how to effectively converse with others and engage in purposeful talk. This conversational approach to aiding students in comprehension can be used with learners of all ages, including some of our youngest school-age children. Student-to-student conversations, linked with interactive read alouds has proved to me a recipe for comprehension success in my kindergarten classroom!

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Appendix A

Classroom Read Aloud Texts and Reason for Being Chosen

Book Title	Book Author	Reason for Choosing
The Very Hungry Caterpillar	Eric Carle	Storyline provided good structure for retelling and easy to follow process of a butterfly's life cycle. Eric Carle is also a popular author in my classroom this year.
The Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale	Mo Willems	Students this year have really enjoyed the "Elephant and Piggie" series as well as the "pigeon" books by Mo Willems. I wanted to introduce this story to them because I knew they loved the author and it was something that kindergarten kids could make connections with easily.
The Knuffle Bunny Too	Mo Willems	Students were already familiar with the characters, and would enjoy reading about another event in that character's life.
The Very Busy Spider	Eric Carle	Story provided good sequence and a bit of repetitiveness for students to grasp with discussion and practice. They also enjoy the Eric Carle texts.
A Bad Case of the Stripes	David Shannon	This story has a longer plot, but is written by another of this class' favorite authors. I wanted the students to discuss more in-depth questions with this story and discuss bullying, or being different.
Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs	Judi Barrett	Students would like the humor involved in the story as well as making connections to the movie if they had seen it. The students would be able to practice discussing and retelling this make-believe story that could never happen in real life.
I Will Take a Nap!	Mo Willems	Story provided opportunities to talk about feelings, dialogue, and chances to practice predicting and inferring what is about to happen using illustrations. This book is part of the "Elephant and Piggie" series, a series which my students are so engaged with. They characters talk to one another with

		lots of expression (shown in size/way text is printed) and go through a lot of the same crises as younger students.
Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day	Judith Viorst	This story is another one that students could identify with, when they have had a bad day. A great opportunity is provided for students to support someone in their bad days at school.