

Using Collaborative Reading Groups to Accommodate Diverse Learning and Behavior Needs in the General Education Classroom

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For many special educators working in consulting or collaborative roles, the teaching styles of their general education colleagues can present a challenge to meeting the needs of the students for whom they are responsible. Content-area classes like social studies and science, particularly at middle and high school levels, emphasize content knowledge dependent on foundational mastery of reading, writing, and retention skills that are often lacking among diverse populations of students with comorbid emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) and academic difficulties.

Teaching philosophies in general education classrooms tend to range from highly reductionist and traditional to thoroughly constructivist. Many special educators have difficulty cohesively adapting their own focus on individualized and intensive instruction in classrooms of these kinds. Despite the philosophical emphasis on student-centered instruction, it may be especially challenging for special educators to work in very constructivist classrooms when so much of their role is to positively manipulate the learning environment to support struggling students. Additionally, teachers find they have to contend with the negative school and social outcomes that students with EBD experience as a result of their disability. These students tend to experience poor school outcomes at the secondary level, specifically significant absenteeism, grade point averages that are lower than their nondisabled peers, frequent course failure, and increased

levels of school drop-out (National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, 2003). As learning environments advance toward more stringent academic standards, teachers of students with EBD find that this diverse population lacks the skills necessary for academic success.

General education classes, particularly at middle and secondary levels, are not about basic skills—they are about acquisition of content knowledge. The job of the special educator is to ensure that students with disabilities have access to the secondary content comparable to their nondisabled peers. Ultimately, the question for special educators is how to provide instruction in general education classrooms that aligns well with instructional traditions

of secondary content teachers while accommodating academic diversity (i.e., the needs of students with learning and behavior problems).

Accommodating Diverse Abilities in Middle and Secondary Content Classes

As general education placements become an increasingly common standard of practice for the majority of students with high incidence disabilities (specifically, students with EBD and learning problems), the challenge to accommodate diverse abilities in these classrooms becomes even more urgent. Content teachers in subjects like social studies and science (particularly at middle and secondary levels) appear to be particularly burdened by the need to modify instruction for large sections of students with myriad unique needs, despite little or no preparation in working with academically diverse populations.

Passe and Beattie (1994) report the use of very traditional instruction, noting that secondary social studies teachers rarely have the ability to accommodate individual needs because of large classes and lack of support. The authors note a societal need for an informed citizenry to act as a critical thinking adult population capable of contributing to a participatory democracy. In light of the overwhelming emphasis on basic skills in reading and math, the education community may have lost sight of the traditionally espoused emphasis of social studies—a school-based effort to prepare civically

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engaged, thinking citizens. As much as typically performing students, students with learning and behavior problems benefit from the opportunity to engage in meaningful learning as well as increased interaction with their peers in order to discuss relevant social issues and global concerns. The question remains: How can we best support large groups of students in engaging in challenging content when that large group represents a cross section of abilities and academic weaknesses?

Cooperative Learning and Peer Support Strategies for Students With Disabilities

Formal cooperative learning strategies and simple peer support structures provide a potential means of accommodating diversity in ability through use of collaboration principles like group interdependence. The effectiveness of various peer tutoring and peer support strategies for students with comorbid learning and behavior problems has been well documented (Barton-Arwood, Wehby, & Falk, 2005; Locke & Fuchs, 1995). Any substantive discussion of cooperative learning, however, must delineate between true cooperative learning and what might be better described as *group work*.

The evidenced-based practice of cooperative learning is not easily operationalized as a specific set of procedures as might be seen in some other learning and instructional strategies. Instead, the term refers to a collection of structures and strategies for collaborative work with certain common threads. Johnson and Johnson (1994) identify five features of cooperative learning that promote greater productivity than other instructional approaches: (1) an explicit focus on positive interdependence; (2) extensive group member interaction; (3) a clear focus on individual work to contribute to the achievement of the whole group; (4) established use of interpersonal and small-group skills; and (5) open reflective discourse

regarding group functioning. In summary, the spirit of cooperative learning is related to students' individual efforts contributing to group accomplishments through considerable group processing and social interdependence.

In addition to formal versions of cooperative learning, numerous strategies effectively support student performance through peer support. Simple structures like Numbered Heads Together (Kagan, 1992) require very little preparation for students and have a strong track record for supporting student achievement in content classes (Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 2001; Maheady, Mallette, Harper, & Sacca, 1991). Classwide Peer Tutoring is another approach to peer support with an extensive record of success in promoting student achievement, including secondary social studies classrooms (Maheady, 1988).

Goor and Schwenn (1993) summarize research on the use of cooperative learning as a standard practice for accommodating diversity and disability in school. The authors highlight the need to implement cooperative learning procedures *with care* to create a learning environment that accommodates the needs of students with disabilities. Wood, Algozzine, and Avett (1993) also reinforce the use of cooperative learning, suggesting that there is sufficient evidence in the literature to move forward with cooperative learning as a strategy for inclusion of students with disabilities. Cooperative learning and peer supports may be most accurately viewed as highly effective methods for laying the groundwork for inclusion.

Cooperative learning has research to support its use in inclusive settings if "active ingredients" are incorporated. For true cooperative learning to exist, *individual accountability* and *group rewards* must be components of the strategy (McMaster & Fuchs, 2002). Cooperative learning works for students with learning disabilities when (1) it is implemented with

attention to the academic strengths and weakness of students, and (2) heterogeneous groups are established with emphasis on synching complementary talents and abilities so that all students contribute as individuals to the success of the whole group (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 1994).

Sapon-Shevin et al. (1994) defined the role of cooperative learning in inclusive schools and developed some preliminary guidelines for implementing cooperative learning as an inclusion strategy. The authors note the importance of establishing a classroom work ethic that supports cooperation, a community or classroom culture that embraces differences among students and emphasizes connections between students. Further, an open classroom dialogue is appropriate to create awareness of the differing needs and strengths of students in the class as a means of emphasizing the value of complementary, heterogeneous cooperation.

An excellent model of cooperative learning that can be adapted for students with disabilities in the general education setting is Literature Circles (Daniels, 2002b). The Literature Circles strategy, in contrast to skills-oriented strategies like Classwide Peer Tutoring, is an effective method for promoting positive affect toward reading and higher order thinking (Daniels, 2002b).

Background of Literature Circles— Overview of the Strategy

Literature Circles, like most cooperative learning in general, is not a clear-cut, easily defined reading strategy that can be summarized in a checklist of consistent and unambiguous directions. Rather, Literature Circles is a strategy that could generally be described as collaborative, group interaction related to reading texts—texts that are interesting and allow for discussion. Although there is some sense of a "true" Literature Circle based on the work of Daniels (2002b), there is

also considerable room for variation depending on the specific texts (i.e., fiction, nonfiction), grade level, ability level, and subject matter. Some general guidelines do, however, exist for the traditional approach to this strategy.

The key elements of traditional Literature Circles include (1) the ability for students to choose their own reading materials; (2) establishment of small groups that continue temporarily based on choice of reading materials; (3) different reading groups working with different reading materials; (4) establishment of a routine schedule for students to meet in their reading groups; (5) use of notes to guide further discussion either in writing or in drawings; (6) student led discussions, including student selection of topics; (7) focus on natural dialogue in open group discussions; (8) teacher as facilitator not dispenser of knowledge; (9) assessment performed through teacher observation and student self-evaluation; (10) positive atmosphere of *reading for enjoyment*; and (11) group conclusions that include a sharing session with classmates followed by establishment of new reading groups (Daniels, 2002b).

Students in Literature Circles begin by selecting roles associated with the various steps in analyzing literature, including the *Questioner*, the *Summarizer*, the *Clarifier*, the *Predictor*, and the *Artist*. The various roles are made clear to the students using role sheets to provide a starting point in the discussions. Each student completes a distinct, but critical task to promote the natural conversation about the text. Daniels (2002b) suggests that the role sheets be disregarded after students become more proficient with the strategy, allowing them to have a more authentic conversation.

According to Daniels (2002b), Literature Circles can vary in numerous ways and be adapted to more closely fit varied implementations, but educators should have at least a foundation in the original intent of this strategy. Clearly, the approach is highly constructivist in

its roots and represents an approach to instruction far more characteristic of the best practice literature in the reading and English language arts education communities than the special education research community. The varied implementations, however, clearly draw from the intended, original spirit of the cooperative learning literature as defined by Johnson and Johnson (1975).

Reconceptualizing Literature Circles as a Content-Area Reading Strategy

Daniels (2002b) articulates the potential for Literature Circles to extend into content-area classrooms such as social studies or science. Although Literature Circles could be added to content classrooms by incorporating actual literature into the social studies classroom, expository nonfiction texts are far more common in this setting. In fact, Daniels (2002b) laments the proliferation of the title Literature Circles for the strategy, suggesting it would have been more appropriately called Reading Circles. The current term, unfortunately, dissuades educators from using the strategy with nonfiction texts, assuming that the structure is specifically intended to be a form of book club.

Responding to concerns about the misdirection of this strategy, particularly in secondary content classrooms, Daniels (2002a) asserts that the structure has great potential for improving collaborative reading experiences for students providing that expository texts are not defined as textbooks. Rather, expository texts are perfect for the Literature Circles structure given that there is actually something for a group to discuss in the text. For example, a text structure that informs or persuades, an expository text that provokes meaningful discussion, disagreement, or controversy, will support strong implementation of nonfiction Literature Circles. According to Daniels (2002b), the student roles in

a nonfiction Literature Circle include *the Questioner*, *the Passage Master*, *the Vocabulary Enricher*, *the Connector*, and *the Illustrator* (see Figure 1 for a summary of these roles).

Daniels (2002b) promotes use of the strategy as a semistructured approach to collaborative reading that varies in roles and discussion dependent on the text structure and content. Thus, Literature Circles can be used for students in high school social studies to read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (nonfiction biography) to learn about the Holocaust, or Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* to discuss modern American culture and economics. Textbooks, however, are rarely appropriate for nonfiction Literature Circles because they lack the characteristics necessary for discussion—rather, a textbook is a compendium of *information* (Daniels, 2002a). Rarely do textbooks offer topics for discussion and debate, or compelling stories to explain historical events. Instead, history textbooks, for example, tend to offer a perspective, established as factual, and generally pare down engaging historical periods into “just the facts” reference materials (Daniels & Zemelman, 2003; Loewen, 1995).

Literature Circles and Students With Disabilities

Daniels (2005) in his recent work describes Literature Circles as best practice for inclusion of students with learning and other disabilities precisely because the strategy assumes that each student will bring to the group precisely whatever they do well. There is no assumption that each student will necessarily accomplish everything as an individual; rather, students are expected to be interdependent by emphasizing their strengths in their role. Establishing Literature Circles as inclusive practice is primarily based on the foundation of strong cooperative learning research. Daniels (2002b) notes that the essential

elements of group interdependence and individual responsibility (Stevens & Slavin, 1991) are fundamental in the implementation of effective Literature Circles.

Beyond this broader support, there is limited direct evidence of the effect of the Literature Circles strategy on students with learning disabilities. Blum, Lipsett, and Yokom (2002) describe the potential effect of Literature Circles as a strategy for increasing self-determination of students with disabilities, suggesting the approach requires development of metacognitive skills, including recognition of success and failures in reading. Primarily, though, Blum and colleagues offer Literature Circles as means for addressing the challenges of diverse inclusive classrooms, reporting that students experience

improved perception or confidence related to reading ability following use of Literature Circles. Blum et al. (2002) concluded that Literature Circles were effective for accommodating student diversity in inclusive classrooms.

Collaborative Reading Groups for Students With Learning and Behavior Needs

Whether they are used in English literature classrooms or content-oriented classrooms with concentrations in social studies or science curricula, the common conception of Literature Circles is an emphasis on students collaboratively reading and discussing texts in order to improve their comprehension and curriculum access. A struggle in using the more traditional approach to

Literature Circles from the perspective of a consulting or cooperatively teaching special educator is the extent to which the strategy can appear “free form.” Manipulating the learning environment in favor of positive outcomes for students with learning and behavior problems is one of the critical roles for special education teachers working in inclusive settings. Special educators attempting to support struggling students in using this strategy will quickly note the challenge of students selecting their own texts, their own roles, and their own groups.

Considering traditional metacognitive weaknesses of students with learning and behavior problems, a greater level of teacher facilitation and support may be needed for these students. For example, they may need more support in reviewing the text, selecting a role in their reading group that aligns well with their personal strengths, and selecting a group in which they can be successful. The role of the special education teacher is critical in this instance to determine how to support student strengths while synching students’ abilities and personalities with peers who provide positive models and perform tasks using strengths complementary to those of the students with learning and behavioral problems. In effect, a student identified for behavior disorder who is highly verbal and artistically talented may perform extremely well in the strategy but might benefit from being in a group of students with more traditional academic skills in order for the whole group to master the text-based content knowledge.

Another modification relates to the use of role sheets. In traditional Literature Circles, students rapidly abandon the formal role sheets in favor of journaling to promote natural conversation among group members. This, however, is a challenge to maintaining individual accountability. One of the greatest strengths of the Literature Circles format is the existence of an array of individual

Figure 1 OVERVIEW OF NONFICTION GROUP ROLES

Role Names	Individual Accountability/Role Specifics
Questioner	Student writes down a few questions that came up during the reading. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • asks questions to monitor his or her own reading comprehension • records questions about content elements he or she found challenging or confusing
Passage Master	Student picks a few special sections of the reading to share. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • helps people notice the most interesting, funny, puzzling, weird, or important sections of the text • summarizes significant elements
Vocabulary Enricher	Student selects and shares challenging words in the text. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • looks for words that are tough, confusing, or unfamiliar, and marks them while reading • writes down definitions, either from a dictionary or from group discussion
Connector	Student tries to make connections between what the group is reading and the world outside. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • highlights connections between text and personal interests and life experiences • shares any personal observations (no wrong answers)
Illustrator	Student draws a picture or graphic organizer related to the reading. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sketches a cartoon, diagram, flow chart, or scene • completes graphic representation based on personal connections to text or ability to summarize key points

responsibilities that each contribute to the whole group goal—discrete roles that offer each student an opportunity to find their strength, their niche. Departure from these individual roles to a less structured format sounds good on the surface, but presents a challenge to students with limited academic skills who may no longer feel they have anything to contribute.

O'Connor and Jenkins (1996) caution that cooperative learning strategies easily stray from their beneficial foundation for students with learning problems when group efforts become unstructured and distant from the focus on individual accountability. Too often students with learning and behavior problems become spectators to the group effort while their more academically talented peers take over. Maintenance of clear roles means that students who struggle academically continue to have a clear responsibility such that they can never be left out of the whole-group discussion and will always have something to offer their peers.

This is not to suggest that students should be limited to certain roles ad nauseam or even that they take on only one role at a time. Students could always take responsibility for multiple roles as they develop proficiency with integration of the multiple reading skills accounted for by the various roles. Ultimately, one would hope that students generalize the discrete skills in each role to a fluid coordination of reading comprehension strategies during daily reading activities.

Notably, this increase in teacher facilitation represents a notable departure from the traditional notion of Literature Circles. To maintain the integrity of the original concept, it may actually be more appropriate to refer to this strategy as *Collaborative Reading Groups*—a title that offers an umbrella description of varied implementations of interdependent reading groups rooted in the original spirit of Literature Circles. Collaborative Reading Groups would involve comparable Literature Circles activities in content-area classrooms

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with significant teacher facilitation and maintenance of the individual roles. Also, this more general term clearly allows either literature or expository texts as appropriate to the content goals.

Overview of the Roles in Collaborative Reading Groups

The typical content-oriented roles of Collaborative Reading Groups draw from Daniels' (2002b) description of nonfiction Literature Circles. In this process, there are typically four or five jobs (Questioner, Passage Master, Vocabulary Enricher, Connector, and Illustrator) associated with expository texts. First, the Questioner is responsible for writing down a few questions for the group to discuss. The questions could be written while students are reading or immediately after to be shared with the group members. Although the questions tend to focus on factual elements of the text during early trials, teachers should

encourage students to ask questions that promote natural conversation about the text and encourage self-monitoring of comprehension. Ultimately, the Questioner takes somewhat of a leadership role, promoting inferential thinking associated with the critical elements of the text.

The job of the Passage Master is to select sections of the reading that he or she wants to share with the group. Selections should ideally be funny, interesting, or controversial (i.e., the information that is memorable and promotes natural discourse). The role of the Passage Master highlights the importance of nonfiction texts being engrossing, discussable material—not just compilations of discrete facts. As students gain proficiency with this role, they should develop an ability to highlight the most significant ideas and passages from the text.

The next role is the Vocabulary Enricher, also known by some students as “The Word Guy.” The responsibilities of this role include continuously making notes of unknown words so the group can discuss and use context clues to understand the new vocabulary. This role requires students to identify those words they don't know. Some students are hesitant to admit they don't know something. In this case, students are encouraged to find the vocabulary words that might stump their friends.

The role assignments depend on the number of students. Three students could potentially complete this task, but typically four to five students constitute a highly effective Collaborative Reading Group. Enlarging the group to four would add either a Connector or an Illustrator, depending on the preferences of the teacher or the students in the group. The Connector's role is similar to the role of the Predictor (a common role in traditional Literature Circles) in the sense that this group member cannot be wrong in his/her contributions to the group. The duty of the Connector is to recognize connections with the text being examined and thoughts in the

outside world, other books, or previous classroom discussions. The student in the role of Connector is inspired by the text to further discussion related to ideas outside the text (e.g., referencing a show on the Discovery Channel about mummies while reading about Egyptian history, or remembering a previous lesson on Communism and Marxism while reading a current magazine article about Hong Kong's Free Trade Zone).

Finally, a highly creative and artistic role in the group is the role of the Illustrator. The underlying theory serves to support the classical idea of the artistic and creative student for whom reading and writing are somewhat elusive skills. The role can, however, be interpreted equally successfully by having the student create traditional graphic representations as well as more developed graphic organizers. For example, drawing a thinking map or chronological timeline that represents the events or ideas in the text would be helpful in the group discussion of the text (Daniels, 2002b).

Collaborative Reading Groups and Best Practice in Reading Comprehension Strategies

Although it may appear obvious that the roles of Literature Circles allow for differentiated demonstrations of comprehension of text-based assignments, notable is the explicit link between the individual responsibilities of the roles and the knowledge base associated with promoting effective reading comprehension. The role choices are not arbitrary; rather, they have significant basis in theory of reading instruction.

Robb (2000) summarizes key strategies for improving reading comprehension to include (1) activating prior knowledge; (2) deciding what is important in a text and synthesizing information; (3) drawing inferences during and after reading; (4) self-monitoring comprehension, repairing faulty comprehension; (5) asking

questions, and, finally, particularly in content classes; (6) using strategies for building vocabulary. Each of these distinct, but critical reading skills is employed in Collaborative Reading Groups. Students begin developing proficiency with these high-level tasks by explicitly focusing on a particular skill set. Collectively, the members of the group complete all the necessary tasks.

Robb (2000) summarizes the general framework of reading instruction in middle school as typically focusing on Round-Robin Reading, in which students take turns reading the story; Curriculum Read-Alouds, in which the teacher reads required books that are typically too difficult for students; and Prepared Skill Worksheets, which focus on vocabulary, main idea, predictions, and sequencing in ways that are unrelated to the texts students are actually reading. In contrast, Collaborative Reading Groups emphasize content acquisition through student-centered collaboration and use of specific roles that parallel effective reading strategies (see *Figure 2*).

Collaborative Reading Groups are also in line with research on adolescent development as a reading comprehension and content access strategy. In considering the needs of the adolescent brain, Sprenger (2005) suggests that students in adolescence are often in need of a little stress—something to inspire adrenaline flow. This stress does not have to be negative; rather, it could simply involve students interacting, role-playing, or discussing issues in their class. Students in adolescence experience real challenges with attending to tedious stimuli for long periods of time. They thrive on novelty and emotion. Further suggestive of the need for verbal interaction is what Sprenger describes as adolescents' intensity of feelings that causes them to feel a strong desire to express themselves. Tomlinson and Doubet (2005) describe adolescents as learners who crave group interaction—the ability to feel engaged in their learning activities, discussing issues or concepts that have obvious relevance to their lives.

Beyond the research on typical adolescent learning, students with

Figure 2 BRIEF SUMMARY OF COLLABORATIVE READING GROUP ROLES AND THEIR ASSOCIATION WITH EFFECTIVE READING COMPREHENSION

Role Names	Reading Comprehension Strategies and Skills
Questioner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-monitoring comprehension • Repairing faulty comprehension • Asking yourself questions
Passage Master	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deciding what's important in a text • Synthesizing information • Paraphrasing main idea
Vocabulary Enricher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyzing text for unknown vocabulary • Using context clues
Connector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activating prior knowledge • Making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections
Illustrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visualizing textual information/making mental pictures • Constructing visual representations of ideas • Creating graphic organizers of thinking

learning and behavior disorders are particularly in need of active student response—active engagement in learning activities. Special education research has established that student achievement is enhanced and behavior problems are reduced when students with learning and behavior problems have opportunities to actively participate in learning activities (Heward, 2003).

Setting Up Collaborative Reading Groups for Content Access

To begin using the strategy, teachers must determine how they want students to initially experience the text. Often content area teachers distribute texts and instruct students to independently read and review for later discussion. Clearly this presents tremendous obstacles for many students with limited reading proficiency. Traditional silent reading of content texts is probably not appropriate with most students in light of typical skill discrepancies and use of curricula often written on a reading level higher than the grade level of the students reading it. Certainly, common approaches like *shared reading* or *guided reading* would be more appropriate, with the teacher leading the entire group in reading the assigned text. This whole group approach at least guarantees that all students have had exposure to the content. Notable, though, is the fact that most secondary content instruction ends at the point that students receive exposure to the text.

Depending on the level of peer support established in the classroom and the existence of stronger academic models, a peer tutoring structure is another appropriate way for students to gain the initial exposure to the text. As is typical in peer tutoring, students with academic limitations would be assigned to read with students who have stronger reading skills. This requires a sense of mutual respect and interdependence that does not exist in every classroom. In some highly inclusive classrooms, students select a

group member to serve as the reader for the group. In this situation, one student takes a leadership role and quietly reads the text within the group as other group members follow along.

Either before or immediately after the reading, students are typically given permanent color-coded roles sheets (laminated or placed in paper protectors) representing each of the five roles possible in Collaborative Reading Groups. Each student receives an individual role sheet to remind him or her of the distinct responsibilities each student will assume to advance to the discussion of the whole group.

Once students have read the text initially, the roles require review of the text with their particular role responsibilities in mind. Each student completes his or her assigned task for a short period of preparation time before the formal conversation. For example, the Questioner rereads the text, skimming for important details and reviewing passages that may have caused problems. The Questioner then generates questions from the text that

promote natural conversation about the reading. Students write down their questions in their notes to share with group members once everyone is finished preparing. The Illustrator reflects on his or her personal connections with the reading and visualizes a graphic representation, completing some kind of illustration or graphic organizer to share with everyone. Students rarely spend more than 10 minutes on this phase, because it ultimately should become a natural response to the reading in class. Ultimately, the group discussion, a conversational sharing of perspectives leading to greater comprehension of the reading, is the critical component of the Collaborative Reading Groups.

Consideration of Learning and Behavior Needs in Facilitating Role Selection

The selection of roles can be a critical step for many students to be successful in Collaborative Reading Groups. Students will often select

Figure 3 COLLABORATIVE READING GROUPS LESSON OUTLINE

- Teacher selects content-based shorter text or supplementary text—preferably texts that are discussable or thought-provoking (e.g., primary sources, newspapers, magazine articles).
- Students review role sheets for potential duties in the reading groups.
- Teacher directs students to select roles in their groups—facilitates, encourages students to select roles in synch with their personal strengths (e.g., verbal ability, creativity).
- Teacher determines strategic approach to reading to promote comprehension—including guided reading approach, engaging teacher read-aloud, quiet reading within the group, and silent reading, as appropriate.
- Students concurrently mark up text (e.g., highlighters or sticky-notes) or complete reading log for later review.
- Students share completed tasks related to their role with group members in a conversational manner.
- Students collaborate to answer questions, understand vocabulary, and seek deeper understanding of the text through discussion.
- Teacher facilitates discussion closure—seeks themes of discussion from groups, highlights critical concepts and connections to core curriculum standards.

their role, in a frenzy of action, with no purposeful attention to the specific responsibilities of the role. Teachers facilitating Collaborative Reading Groups should attend to the selection of roles, particularly by students who typically struggle academically. Fortunately, several roles exist that synch well with common strengths of students who tend to struggle with reading comprehension and the general curriculum.

Although the roles of the Questioner and Passage Master may require substantial proficiency with reading comprehension and considerable metacognitive strengths (assuming no explicit preparation in associated learning strategies), other roles may have some notable advantages for students at risk. The Vocabulary Enricher is an important task that requires someone with strong collaboration skills. This student not only picks the words he or she does not know well but also encourages group members to discuss the reading and use resources until they have a sense of the meaning of the unknown words. In some respects, a student whose reading skills are limited may be preferable for this role, because academically talented students tend to be more reluctant to acknowledge they don't know certain words.

Certainly, the most effective roles for many students who struggle with learning and behavior problems in the general education classroom are the Connector and the Illustrator. The Connector is advantageous for students in need of moments of success. The Connector is less burdened by concerns about producing a "wrong answer." The Connector shares anything with their group that relates to the text. Although teachers might live for the moment that a student makes a connection between an expository text on the civil rights movement and a memory of an excerpt from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, any connection is accurate as long it is sincere. One example of the role the Connector has included a connection between a text summarizing the Katrina disaster and

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a previous viewing of the film *The Day After Tomorrow*. Although many educators might miss this reference, the adolescents in this reading group all nodded in knowing agreement that the text did in fact remind them of the blockbuster film about dramatic natural disasters destroying the American coastline. This role allows for students to emphasize their personal experiences, making the learning relevant to their lives, and further offers them a chance to excel through verbal ability and social interaction.

The Illustrator is another role that accesses often untapped abilities in the general education classroom. Often teachers mistakenly assess limitations in content acquisition due to students' inability to demonstrate their competence—a common problem for students with learning and behavior problems. The role of the Illustrator allows students to express their understanding of the reading graphically. The graphic representation can vary considerably depending on the student and the emphasis of the

teacher facilitating the discussions. For example, teachers who have fostered a consistent routine of using graphic organizers (e.g., chronologic timelines, character maps, Venn diagrams) may prepare students to follow suit in their role as Illustrator. Students who are innately talented in artistic expression are likely to thrive in this role—fortunate considering the number of students with academic deficits who rarely get the opportunity to share their sometimes substantial nonacademic strengths. This role is not a lowering of academic standards; rather students who perform this role effectively add considerably to the depth of conversation about the critical elements of the text and typically the elements that connect to them most personally.

Emerging Evidence of Effectiveness of Collaborative Reading Groups for Students With Learning and Behavior Problems

Five schools implemented Collaborative Reading Groups in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade social science classes (i.e., U.S. history, world geography, general social studies) including more than 1,000 students. Researchers collected data using an observation protocol based on both the skills associated with nonfiction Literature Circles and the overall skills of cooperative learning (i.e., interdependence, individual accountability, group interaction, cooperative skills) following structured preparation in the strategy (see O'Brien, Dieker, & Platt, 2006). Data suggest that, although students identified for learning and behavior disabilities required explicit instruction in the elements of their roles, there was no significant difference in the performance of students with and without disabilities in strategy implementation (O'Brien et al., 2006).

More research is required to determine the long-term effects of this collaborative strategy on students' individual reading comprehension and content knowledge. Taking

advantage of the most effective aspects of cooperative learning, Collaborative Reading Groups appear promising as a means of accommodating academic diversity in general education classrooms and providing a foundation for inclusive learning environments.

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