

Collaborative Strategic Reading: Fostering Success for All

Middle school is a time of change and struggle for many students. For those students who have been traditionally marginalized due to race, class, language, or (dis)ability, the challenges middle school poses can be even greater (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

Academic demands increase, as do social changes, such as adolescent identity development where identity markers become more salient. Common challenges include discrimination and/or cultural mismatch between schools, teachers, and students (Tatum, 1997). These heightened academic and social factors increase the risk of failure for many students from marginalized groups. Middle school, then, is an essential time to foster students' feelings of both success and social connection in the classroom.

We interviewed 17 middle school language arts and reading teachers who used Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), an evidence-based intervention (Klingner et al., 2010), in their classrooms.¹ In this article, we will use the resulting data to show that CSR has benefits for all students, but is especially effective in creating connections and success for those who traditionally have been marginalized and may be at risk of failure in middle school. The teachers we interviewed included four reading intervention specialists, two eighth-grade language arts teachers,

ten seventh-grade language arts teachers, and one teacher who taught language arts in both seventh and eighth grades. We asked them several questions, including whether they thought some students benefitted more from CSR than others and why, and which components of CSR they perceived to be most (or least) helpful. (For information about the interview, other data sources, and data analysis procedures, see Klingner et al., 2010.) The student examples were from observations audio-recorded during the school year.

The teachers were part of a larger study in Colorado and Texas on the effectiveness of CSR in ethnically and linguistically diverse schools with a range of socioeconomic levels (Vaughn et al., in press). Classes were randomly assigned to either CSR (intervention) or typical practice (TP). In CSR classes, teachers taught CSR 1–2 times per week throughout the school year; in TP classes, there was no CSR and teachers taught the language arts content as they chose (Vaughn et al., in press).

CSR has been shown to be effective in supporting growth in reading comprehension for culturally and linguistically diverse middle school and upper elementary students (Klingner, Vaughn, Argüelles, Hughes, & Leftwich, 2004; Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998; Klingner & Vaughn 2000; Vaughn et al., in press). In our reading comprehension preliminary analysis, we found differences in favor of the CSR-taught students on the comprehension portion of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests® (GMRT®) at a statistically significant level ($p = .05$). In Table 1, we present information about the students in the study.

1. This study was funded by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, Project #R305A080608: Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) Interventions for Struggling Adolescent and Adult Readers.

Table 1. Student demographics

	CSR		TP	
	N	%	N	%
Gender				
Male	199	53.9	188	53.1
Female	170	46.1	166	46.9
Ethnicity				
Anglo	172	37.6	136	33.3
African American	13	2.8	13	3.2
Hispanic	178	38.9	193	47.3
Asian	2	0.4	9	2.2
Native American	4	0.9	3	0.7
Unreported		19.4		13.3
Free or Reduced Lunch	194	42.4	189	46.3
English Language Learners	10	2.2	11	2.7
Special Education	56	12.2	28	6.9

The Intervention: Collaborative Strategic Reading

CSR is a multi-component reading instruction model that explicitly teaches reading strategies and develops routines to monitor and enhance comprehension through cooperative grouping and peer discussion. CSR has combined modified reciprocal teaching components (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and cooperative learning strategies (Johnson & Johnson, 1989) to form a unique reading comprehension model.

In implementing CSR, the teacher models procedures for the whole class using think-alouds and then explains the rationale for the strategies. Then students transition to working in cooperative, heterogeneous groups in which each student has the specific task of monitoring use of one of the strategies. The learning during group work is scaffolded using cue cards and teacher feedback.

The structure of CSR is divided into before-, during-, and after-reading activities. Before reading, the teacher and students engage in the *Preview* stage, in which they preview the text together to activate background knowledge, make predictions, and state the purpose of the reading. During this phase, the teacher guides students to brainstorm and connect the topic to their own experiences using visual cues, as well as to use headings, subheadings, and titles to predict what

will happen and set the purpose for the reading.

In the during-reading phases, students use a strategy called *click and clunk* to monitor comprehension. This is accomplished by identifying confusing words or concepts and then applying fix-up strategies. When the text makes sense, it clicks; when it doesn't, it clunks. The students then work through the fix-up strategies to understand the clunks:

1. Re-read the sentence containing the clunk and determine if you can find the meaning from the context clues.
2. Reread the sentence containing the clunk and the sentences before or after, looking for clues to help figure it out.
3. Break the word apart and look for a prefix, suffix, or root word.
4. Look for a cognate that makes sense.

During this during-reading phase, students also synthesize information by restating the main idea of a section in their own words, also called *Get the Gist*.

During *Wrap up*, students engage in summarizing and questioning strategies as they review main ideas and formulate questions about what they read. They are encouraged to use three types of questions that not only seek information, but also require more critical thinking beyond the text and tap their own background knowledge. Finally, students write down one or two of the most important ideas from the passage.

During group work, teachers communicate to their students that their responsibility in the group is to understand the text and to support peer comprehension (Boardman, Klingner, Boele, & Swanson, 2010). Students are assigned specific roles when working in their groups: Leader, Clunk Expert, Gist Expert, and Question Expert, and can use cue cards that specify the responsibilities for each role. All students implement each strategy and utilize individual learning logs to record their ideas before sharing with the group. The goal is for the strategies to help students engage in meaningful discussions about the content they are reading.

Teacher Perceptions of CSR

Overwhelmingly, teachers were satisfied with CSR, and all teachers stated that they wanted to continue to use CSR in the future. Overall, teachers reported being impressed with the flexibility and the increased engagement of all learners. Elle (all names are pseudonyms) stated, “. . . what I liked about it is it’s a great way to get all kids involved. Because I have kids who won’t do anything when you are doing a regular lesson, but all of a sudden [in CSR], they are engaged and doing it.” The teacher also claimed, “Of probably all of the things I have done, with Pre-AP or the differentiation or the other things the district has thrown at me in seven years, this is probably the only one I will keep. I’m hard to convince but this one has.”

We acknowledge, however, that implementing new teaching techniques also brings challenges as well. Obstacles that some teachers mentioned included managing student behavior during cooperative groups, identifying appropriate texts, and finding time to integrate CSR strategies into mandated curricula and preparation for high-stakes assessments. These concerns were addressed in subsequent professional development sessions and through support provided to individual teachers.

Students Who Benefited Most from CSR

Teachers reported that CSR is beneficial for all students, but especially for English Language Learners (ELLs), those designated with a special education label, and those who are considered struggling readers (Klingner et al., 2010). Teachers discussed a wide range of benefits that fell into two general categories: academic benefits and increased social connections for struggling readers.

English Language Learners

CSR provides increased academic benefits for ELLs. One is additional language exposure through peers. Instead of listening to one per-

son for the entire lesson, CSR provides a rich language experience for ELLs through comprehensible input in cooperative groups. Isobel explained these benefits: “Oral language is a big focus for us because 60% of our kids are second language learners So I think that oral emphasis of them having to sit and discuss has been really, really good.” The following script from a CSR class demonstrates this concept:

S4: I would like to share my clunk. What’s ‘weaving’?

S3: Oh, I know what that means . . .

S2: It’s like a type of knitting.

S3: Yes.

S2: Knitting, it’s like, you know, like *cociendo*, like, you know *cociendo ropa* (sewing with her hands to demonstrate).

S3: Yeah, but weaving is like when you weave things together, it’s like thread, weaving thread or something.

S4: Oh yeah.

Marta also noted these benefits of CSR structure for her ELL students, “My emergent learners who are brand new to the English language. . . . if they needed more structure, if they needed more language support, it helped them more.”

Students in Special Education

CSR increases access to different levels of text for students in special education. Isobel noted, “. . . I think it has been good because it gave [students in special education] a way to participate, and then you’re stopping and talking about the gist, and so they’re hearing it, they’re reading it together, so it’s made a lot of levels of text very accessible for them. . . . I’ve been really happy that I’ve done this.”

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CSR also provides opportunities for students in special education to become experts through scaffolding. Debra described how students labeled with a disability became leaders in her classroom: “. . . I made a lot of those kids leaders in my class and so they just did great. The strategies really seemed to be in their mind and they weren’t using the cards as much.”

Struggling Readers

CSR provides explicit comprehension strategy instruction in a way that is accessible to struggling or “low” readers. Bryan stated, “Certainly I think it benefits the low readers more, if for no other reason that it’s giving them strategies.” Teachers also felt that students who had traditionally struggled to find connections in the classroom benefitted from CSR. The collaborative learning structure allowed these students to open up in a way that was not possible in a teacher-centered classroom.

Elle discussed the academic and social benefits of cooperative groups for “the lower-end kids. Because it’s a non-threatening situation for them. And so they feel like what they do is ok, that it is valued. Especially when they realize that they’ve got it, then you can just see the blossom that comes.” Here is an example of a more advanced reader helping a struggling learner to use a questioning strategy:

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Collaborative Strategic Reading is further described in the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Scaffolding Comprehension Strategies Using Graphic Organizers.” In this lesson, collaborative strategic reading (CSR) is initially presented to students through modeling and whole-class instruction. To facilitate comprehension during and after reading, students apply four reading strategies: preview, click and clunk, get the gist, and wrap-up. Graphic organizers are used for scaffolding of these strategies while students work together in cooperative groups.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/scaffolding-comprehension-strategies-using-95.html>

T: Who’s the Question Expert?

S4: Me (reading from “Question Expert” cue card). OK, so, [reading from cue card] “Now let’s think of some questions to check that we really understood what we read. Write the questions and then answer completely in your log. Remember to answer different types of questions.” Like, the questions from Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3. You guys still know what those levels are?

S1,3: Yeah.

S4: Do you know, Raul?

S2: Uh-huh.

S4: Sabes estas cosas?
(all writing in logs)

S4: OK.

S3: OK, my Level 1.

S4: Yeah.

S3: Why is the ice melting?

S4: Well, I also put that for Number 1. I said, um, it’s . . . the ice is melting because of the climate changing.

S3: and the warm air . . .

The Classroom Community

Implementing CSR as a reading intervention in these middle school classrooms has demonstrated how a learning community can be positively transformed. As the ELLs, students in special education, and struggling readers increased academic and social engagement through CSR, all students benefitted. We found three main themes that resonated throughout the teachers’ statements regarding how students interacted with each other and with the learning process:

- CSR fosters cooperation.
- CSR builds students’ confidence and self-esteem.
- Students working with CSR are more engaged in their learning.

The structure of CSR groups fosters cooperation, as students are accountable to each other in coming to understand the reading—a dynamic

that differs from much other group work situations. The students are helping each other learn. In Katiana's words, "Yeah, they were able to help each other, and I think they were really able to see, 'Oh. How come [my response] doesn't sound like yours?'" Carlos talks about how peers can help each other learn differently than a teacher can: "I think it really does [benefit them] to hear that discussion . . . because they are paying attention to their peers in a lot of ways; . . . when they say something, they are engaged." Teachers attributed an increase in the quality of student discussion to CSR.

Additionally, teachers described how CSR helped build students' confidence and self-esteem. Debra commented that working in this type of grouping "gives them a better venue to share their ideas." Because of CSR's collaborative structure, each student has an opportunity to share and to take on each expert role. As Marta explained, "Students who are higher academic performers seemed more confident in being able to help struggling learners, as if it gave them a sense of purpose." Referring to struggling readers, Sarah noted, ". . . when other people in the class didn't understand it, either, . . . it kind of empowered them to have clunks." Noah pointed out that students' responses involved "getting it in their own words and sharing" in groups, which gave them confidence through practice in public speaking.

Teachers were satisfied with the way CSR encourages higher levels of student engagement, which in turn can help improve student behavior. In their cooperative groups, students engage in a think-write-share process for each strategy that combines individual accountability (thinking and writing first) with responsibility to the group (using roles, discussing, and negotiating). The use of each reading strategy is scaffolded through the combined use of the learning log that guides students through the CSR process and cue cards that prompt students to use their expert roles (e.g., clunk expert, gist expert).

Elle said, "The fact that they know they have this whole reading they have to get through

and it's broken into parts and so they have an objective and a directive and they are basically teaching themselves so they have to focus better." We know that just because a student reads fast doesn't mean the student is reading well (Horn, 2007), but all students—even students who perform higher academically—were engaged with the text and in high-level discussions with their peers. CSR's process of slowing down and approaching the reading process more thoughtfully provides benefits to all levels of learners.

Conclusion

Teachers felt that CSR had benefits for all students and particularly for those who are designated as ELLs, struggling readers, or those with a disability. CSR also provides a way to intervene for students at risk for failure due to other types of marginalization or academic challenges. Academic benefits for these middle school students included increased access to comprehensible input, varying levels of text, and explicit strategies to improve comprehension. Socially, students were able to feel their contributions were valued, took risks in nonthreatening situations, and even took on leadership roles. CSR provided increased positive interactions for students who have traditionally been marginalized, which in turn led to a transformation of the learning community where all students benefitted. Teachers felt CSR fostered cooperation, built students' confidence, and increased student engagement in learning in their classrooms. Overall, the teachers in this study reflected the belief of many that have worked with CSR, that by teaching reading comprehension explicitly, along with teaching students to engage in high-quality discussions about text, we can provide the tools for students to access the curriculum as well as the social connections needed to be successful in middle school and beyond.

Because of CSR's collaborative structure, each student has an opportunity to share and to take on each expert role.

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