

**Teachers Network Leadership Institute
Executive Summary**

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The Questions:

- How do reading journals guide instruction to improve student learning?
- How do readers with varying abilities respond to literature?

Rationale:

These questions originated from a desire to better understand what students think about while they read. With great pressure on teachers to ensure that students perform well on standardized tests, teachers must be able to understand how different kinds of readers comprehend what they read. Formal assessments often lack the insight into student thinking that teachers need to tailor their instruction to improve learning. By gaining a deeper understanding of how different students process what they read, teachers can design instruction to better meet diverse needs.

Data Collection Tools:

- Student reading journals
- Teacher reflections and observations
- Student questionnaires

The Process:

Reading journals were used as the primary response and assessment tool in a 5th and 7th grade classroom during novel studies. Students were expected to respond several times a week to the novel. Responses alternated between teacher prompts and student-selected prompts. Journals were collected from six students per class including two lower level readers, two average readers, and two high level readers. Student responses were divided into categories that commonly emerged and then analyzed accordingly. Both teachers kept a journal documenting their observations and reflections during novel studies. Students also completed a questionnaire indicating their understanding and preferences when using the reading journal.

Data Analysis:

Reading journals

Entries were analyzed using six categories including summary, interpretation, personal connection, literary elements, opinions, and wonderings/predictions. Low-level reader entries were simple with few details to support ideas. These entries lacked structure and were often unclear. Student entries typically fell into the summary or opinion categories. Average reader entries became longer, but repeated the same structure. These entries reflected specific examples from the text to support their ideas and opinions. The entries included each of the categories, but students generally repeated the same categories in

their journals. High-level reader entries provided ample literary analysis that included each of the categories with almost every entry. These student entries reflected a high engagement with the text and always provided text support for their ideas.

Teacher reflections

Teacher journals elicited two main themes. First, teachers noticed the higher level thinking skills that high-level readers regularly exhibited. They wondered, how can we get all students to reach that same goal? How do we raise the bar for all our students? Second, students' entries were inconsistent with their previously shown capacity. Teachers questioned student motivation and their ability to increase the quality of student entries.

Student Questionnaires

Student responses to the questionnaires reflected a general understanding of the purpose of the journals. High-level readers demonstrated a deeper understanding of the teacher's goals for the journals. When asked whether students preferred student-directed prompts versus teacher-directed prompts, the student responses varied. Low-level readers and average level readers indicated a mixed preference for both teacher and student-directed prompts. High-level readers demonstrated confidence in their ability to respond freely and preferred to direct their own journal responses.

Limitations:

This study was limited by time. Data samples were collected over a short period of time determined by the novel study. In addition, the data pool was limited to a small sample of students from each grade level.

Policy Recommendations:

On a school-wide level, we recommend teachers at every grade level implement the use of reading journals. We advocate that reading instruction reflect a differentiated small group approach in contrast to a whole group approach using the reading basal series. On a district and state level, we recommend all teachers use written response to literature regularly in classrooms. This prepares students for the extended response sections of the state tests with meaningful experience rather than test preparation without context. Teachers would need ample professional development to successfully implement the reading journals into their classrooms.

Next Steps:

We will present our findings to the faculty at our school. We can also provide professional development to support teachers who would use the reading journals. Ideally, as a faculty we could collaborate regularly to discuss the implementation of reading journals throughout the school year. Individually, we will continue to use and improve the reading journals within our own classrooms with a specific focus on assessment. On a broader scale, we hope to collaborate with teachers in CPS to continue the discussion of making meaning from written response.