

The Impact of High-Stakes Assessments on Beliefs about Reading, Perceptions of Self-as-Reader, and Reading Proficiency of Two Urban Students Retained in Third Grade

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This yearlong study explores the perceptions of self-as-reader, beliefs about reading, and reading proficiency of two urban students retained in third grade on the basis of high-stakes assessment scores. The data presented focus on four individual reading and retrospective miscue analysis (RMA) sessions each student had with the researcher across one school year. When the study began, the students were less focused on reading for meaning and did not perceive themselves as good readers. In RMA sessions the students read and retold stories and then analyzed high quality miscues with the researcher facilitating their reevaluation of reading as a process of constructing meaning and themselves as capable readers. Findings show that while the students grew in their understanding of the reading process and in their reading proficiency, they did not fully change their perceptions of themselves as readers. Thus the impact of the high-stakes assessment superseded the understanding the students gained while participating in more authentic reading experiences.

Introduction

This study explores the beliefs about reading, perceptions of self-as-reader, and reading proficiency of two urban students retained in third grade because of their performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Hoover, Dunbar, & Frisbie, 2001). This test was administered while they were experiencing best practices in literacy instruction in their classroom. The increasing pressures students and teachers are under to show growth and proficiency make understanding the effects of these assessments important and timely.

Theoretical Perspective

To ground this study the author examined research related to the reading process, perceptions of self-as-reader, and the relationship between these two factors relative to reading proficiency.

The Reading Process

Reading is a process of making sense of text (Braunger & Lewis, 2006; Goodman, 1996; National Reading Panel, 2000; RAND, 2002). From a transactional socio-psycholinguistic perspective, readers make sense of text by using socio-cultural, cognitive, and linguistic knowledge and experiences as cues to construct meaning (see studies in Brown, Goodman & Marek, 1996; Clay, 1998; Goodman, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1994). They integrate three language cueing systems – the semantic system (meaning cues), the syntactic system (grammar cues), and the graphophonic system (print and sound cues) – with their knowledge of the world to infer and predict meaning (Goodman, 1996). When readers' predictions differ from the author's meaning represented in the published text, miscues occur. If the personal text that the reader is constructing makes sense (semantic acceptability) and sounds like language (syntactic acceptability), the

reader confirms and continues reading; if it doesn't, the reader disconfirms and self-corrects. By analyzing miscues, teacher-researchers learn how proficiently readers are integrating strategies and language cues with a focus on predicting and constructing meaning (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005). A teacher-researcher analyzes both the miscues as well as the retelling, as evidence of the reader's comprehension.

Miscues are not random or evidence of carelessness, but are rather, *windows on the reading process* resulting from readers' understandings about how language works and from their experiences and knowledge of the world (Goodman, 1973). What distinguishes proficient and less proficient readers is not the reading process itself, but the readers' experiences with reading and how flexibly and proficiently readers control the process (Goodman, 2003).

Perceptions of Self-as-Reader

Studies document that, while the literacy resources and the ways families interact with literacy vary, from birth, children, regardless of ethnicity and language, are immersed in a constant stream of rich and diverse literacy and language practices that are seamlessly woven into various daily cultural and social contexts (Barratt-Pugh, 2000; Paratore, 2002; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). As children engage in these practices, they are socialized and develop a sense of who they are as literate beings (Barratt-Pugh). They interpret themselves in relationship to literacy and their world (Sumara, 1996) and develop perceptions of themselves (Bloome & Dail, 1997; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Martens, Flurkey, Meyer, & Udell, 1999) that reflect the influence of their particular cultural (Gee, 1990) and social practices (Luke & Freebody, 1997; Taylor, 1998). By the time they begin formal schooling, students have personal beliefs about reading and writing and themselves as readers and writers (Heath, 1983). As students participate in classroom literacy events, their perceptions are validated or challenged (Jenkins, 1994; Schooley, 1994).

High-stakes assessment is one classroom event that impacts students' perceptions of themselves as test-takers and as readers and writers. Students who score well on these assessments develop efficacy, believing that they possess the skills to be successful (Bandura, 1997). Those who receive low scores may develop learned helplessness, feeling that there is little hope for them to improve their performance (McCabe, 2003). Paris, Lawton, Turner, & Roth (1991) found that testing has a cumulative, negative impact on these students as reflected in students' growing disillusionment about tests, decreased motivation to excel, and increased use of inappropriate test-taking strategies. They also found that standardized tests become increasingly less valid for low-achieving students. These students may have "a self-fulfilling prophecy of low scores...In their efforts to decrease personal anxiety and increase the protection of their own self-esteem, they relinquish effort and appropriate strategies on standardized achievement tests" (p. 16). The effect of high-stakes assessments on students' perceptions is compounded when grade retention/promotion depends on the scores. Research shows that grade retention, whether connected to

high-stakes testing or not, decreases students' sense of efficacy (Madaus & Clarke, 2001) and has significant negative emotional effects (Bracey, 2003).

Perceptions of Reading, Perceptions of Self-as-Reader, and Reading Proficiency

Students' perceptions of reading and writing and of themselves as readers and writers are critical influences on their literacy learning. Studies show that when students experience best practices in literacy instruction and perceive literacy as purposeful, meaningful, and something they *can* do and come to identify themselves as capable and successful readers, they engage in literacy and learning events more readily (Cambourne, 2002; McCarthy, 2002; Young & Beach, 1997).

Research in retrospective miscue analysis (RMA) reveals a relationship among students' beliefs about reading, beliefs about themselves as readers, and their reading proficiency (Goodman & Marek, 1996). RMA is a strategy that invites readers to reflect on the reading process by analyzing and evaluating their oral reading miscues in collaboration with a teacher-researcher. The teacher-researcher and the student discuss particular miscues (frequently the teacher-researcher selects miscues that demonstrate the student's strengths), the language cues and strategies the student drew on to make the miscues, and what strengths the miscues reveal about the student. The teacher-researcher makes the point that good readers use these same strategies during reading. The teacher-researcher indicates that the student already knows how to use these strategies and encourages the student to use them more often. Studies show that through RMA readers learn to appreciate their strengths, revalue themselves as competent capable readers, revalue reading as a meaningful constructive process, and as a result, read more proficiently (Goodman & Marek; Moore & Gilles, 2005; Paulson, 2001).

Michael, for example, was a third grader diagnosed by his school as having a learning disability (Martens, 1998). He believed that reading was a process of getting the words right and read words that in varying degrees resembled the text. He frequently continued to read even if his reading did not make sense. Michael lacked confidence and did not perceive himself positively as a reader. In RMA sessions over several months, Michael and the researcher in this study discussed high quality miscues selected to reveal his strengths as a reader. Gradually, Michael began to see himself as a capable reader, use strategies flexibly with a focus on constructing meaning, and read more proficiently. He corrected when his reading didn't make sense; omitted problem text and continued reading to gain information to help him make sense of the difficulty; and made high quality substitutions, sometimes verbalizing that his substitution was better than the author's language.

Research, thus, documents that reading is a process of constructing meaning and that when students understand reading as a meaning making process and perceive themselves as readers through purposeful literacy events, they read more readily and more proficiently. Studies also document the negative influence of high-stakes assessments on students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. Lacking are

studies of the impact of RMA as best practice in literacy instruction with urban students being retained in school due to high-stakes assessment scores. This study fills that void by addressing the following question: What are the beliefs about reading, perceptions of self-as-readers, and reading proficiency gained from September to May by two urban students who experienced best practice literacy instruction, including RMA, but were retained in third grade due to their scores on high-stakes assessments?

Method

For this study I was a participant-observer in a third grade classroom over the 1999-2000 school year. While I worked with all of the students, in this article I focus on two, Christy and Valerie (pseudonyms are used throughout), and construct profiles of them as readers using data drawn from our individual reading and RMA sessions. Though Christy and Valerie were regularly experiencing best practices instruction in the classroom (which I describe below) and had limited individual reading and RMA sessions with me over the school year, these individual sessions provided time and space for one-on-one in-depth conversations about reading and who these students were as readers, allowing me to learn the impact of the high-stakes assessments. The privacy of these individual sessions allowed me to collect data that I could not collect in the same way in the classroom.

Situating the Study

The School. The site for this study was Harrison Elementary School, an urban pre-K to eighth grade school in a large midwestern city. All of Harrison's 1000 students received free lunch. The student body was 85% Hispanic, 12% African American, and 3% other ethnic groups. Due to the number of Spanish-speaking students, the school had a large bilingual/English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

The school district for Harrison Elementary had a policy endorsing no social promotion. In grades three, six, and eight, students took the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) (Hoover et al., 2001) and were required to reach a minimum grade-level score in both reading *and* math in May in order to be promoted to the next grade in September. The tests were scored and results were returned to the school within a three-week time period. Students who did not achieve *both* minimum scores were required to attend summer school. In July, when summer school ended, the students took the test again and were promoted if they attained minimum scores. If they did not attain minimum scores during the summer, they were retained, retested in January, and were promoted mid-year once they earned the necessary scores. The district placed on probation schools with a large number of students who failed to pass the ITBS. If a school's test scores did not improve over three years, the district could take over managing the school, including hiring a new principal and teachers. Harrison Elementary School was placed on district probation at the time of the study.

The district provided schools on probation with additional funds. Ms. Baker, the principal, decided to use a portion of her funds to create a third grade classroom with only

15 students, allowing the teacher to provide students with more individualized attention. The 15 students in this classroom were repeating third grade for the second or third year. It was in this classroom that I met and worked with Valerie and Christy.

The classroom. Harrison's Reading Improvement Plan mandated 120 uninterrupted minutes of reading and writing instruction for all students at the beginning of each day. During this time teachers used textbooks and a variety of strategies and best practices to support their students' literacy development. Approved strategies and best practices included flexible grouping, portfolios, cooperative learning, guided reading and writing, literature circles, response journals, and silent reading (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005).

Mrs. Conway, an African American classroom teacher, interacted in loving, caring, but firm ways with her students. For language arts instruction Mrs. Conway followed the mandated curriculum requirements. Since her students were repeating third grade and had read the basal readers and completed the accompanying workbooks at least once during the previous year, she selected some of these materials and assigned them as homework. In the classroom she organized literacy instruction around contextualized skills lessons, spelling lessons, reading aloud from literature books, reading and discussing literature with the students, independent silent reading time, and writing in reading logs and dialogue journals.

During the study, I made 24 visits to this classroom, each two to three hours in length. I worked with the class as a whole and also with individual or small groups of students. Mrs. Conway invited me to teach each week as she was interested in learning other ways to support her students. The experiences I provided included strategy lessons, read alouds and discussions, literature circles, reader's theater, author studies, dialogue journals (to which I responded), and writing experiences (class books, responses to literature, etc.). I also led retrospective miscue analysis sessions in which the class collaborated to analyze one student's miscues (with the student's permission). In small groups, the students and I met in literature circles and discussed the book they had read, participated in strategy lessons based on their needs, worked on a reader's theater, or wrote stories. Christy and Valerie were always present when I was there; however, due to absences and suspensions, most other students were not consistently present. Christy and Valerie participated in the whole class experiences and small groups as appropriate and were more open about their feelings and perceptions than some other students. Thus, these students were chosen as the focus of this study.

Across the school year I met individually with Christy and Valerie four times each. During individual meetings I asked the students to read and retell a story, according to standard miscue analysis procedures. I also administered the Burke Reading Interview (Goodman et al., 2005) during our first and last session. The stories I selected were unfamiliar to the students and on the challenging end of their instructional levels. These sessions ended with a brief strategy lesson and retrospective miscue analysis, based on each student's needs.

Data Sources and Analysis

The data sources used to construct the reading profiles of Christy and Valerie included their interviews, reading samples and retellings, and RMA discussions. These were audiotaped and transcribed. I coded reading samples according to the Classroom Procedure of miscue analysis (Goodman et al., 2005). In the Classroom Procedure each sentence is analyzed as the reader last read it, reading self-corrections as corrected and leaving uncorrected miscues as they were read. The sentences are analyzed for syntactic acceptability and semantic acceptability. Sentences that are fully syntactically and semantically acceptable are then analyzed for any change in the meaning of the sentence (none, some, or major) as the reader produced it, compared to the printed text. Substitution miscues are analyzed to determine the degree (high, some, or none) of their graphic similarity to the text word. The analysis through the Classroom Procedure provided quantitative data for the study. In addition, I read and qualitatively analyzed the typescripts with the miscues marked to learn more specifically the types of strategies each reader used.

To analyze the retellings I used retelling guides that I prepared for each story. Each retelling guide included key events and details in the story. I scored the retellings on a 5-point holistic scale (Irwin & Mitchell, 1983). A score of 5 indicated that the student summarized the story with a high level of coherence and completeness, including all of the major points and appropriate supporting details. A score of 3 indicated the student retold the major ideas with some supporting details and adequate coherence and completeness while a 1 indicated the student's retelling was incomplete, including only assorted details with little coherence. Retellings that fell between these scores received a 2 or 4.

For Christy and Valerie, I created individual case records to better understand each of them in depth over time. These case records included their reading interviews, miscue analyses and retelling data, and data from our RMA sessions. I arranged the content of each case record and read first by type (i.e., reading and retellings, interviews, etc.) in chronological order and coded for patterns (Patton, 1990), then intermixed the different types of data in each case record chronologically and read to discover any additional relationships.

Findings

I present a reading profile of Valerie first, followed by Christy. Both students had attended Harrison Elementary since first grade and were eager to spend time with me whenever possible.

Valerie

Valerie, a Hispanic student, lived with her parents and her younger sister. Though Spanish was her first language, she no longer received ESL support. She had an outgoing personality and generally got along well with her classmates. She confided that

she received an “F” in first grade and was almost sent to special education because she “couldn’t read and write.” But, she told me, “Now I can read.” At bedtime her mother told her to, “Get that book down and go to sleep,” but when her mother fell asleep, she said, “I take the book out from under my pillow and start reading.” Valerie had previously passed the reading portion of the ITBS but not the math section.

In my initial reading interview with Valerie, I learned that she was concerned with reading words accurately, saw herself as sometimes dependent on others to solve her problems, but also wanted her reading to make sense (see Table 1). For example, the strategies she identified for using when she came to something she did not know while reading included guessing, asking her mom, and going back if she read it wrong. When asked if she was a good reader, she replied, “No...I can’t get into chapter books and know what they mean,” revealing her conception of the materials good readers read, but also that she needed to understand her reading.

Table 1: Responses to Two Reading Interview Questions in September and May

Valerie		
	What do you do when you come to something you don’t know?	Are you a good reader now? Why or why not?
September	“Guess it real fast and don’t skip, ask my mom, read the words first and if it’s wrong go back to it.”	“No, I can’t get into chapter books and know what they mean.”
May	“Read the sentence then look back to say the right word and make sense.”	“A little bit, I can read some chapter book pages but sometimes I have trouble making sense.”
Christy		
	What do you do when you come to something you don’t know?	Are you a good reader now? Why or why not?
September	“Try sounding it out...ask ‘What does this say?’ ”	“No, I’m still in third grade and I don’t know that much words.”
May	“If you don’t know the words, you can put words in... and make sense...skip them or sound them out.”	“No, I still have trouble with the words.”

Following this interview Valerie read aloud the “Mrs. Jewls” chapter (Sachar, 1998). The chapter was somewhat difficult for her and she read about half of it.

Nevertheless, Valerie demonstrated numerous strengths as a reader, such as making many self-corrections when her predictions were not making sense, making high quality substitutions, and using her own language for the text's language (i.e., substituted "taught" for "taught"). Her laughter at appropriate places also indicated she was comprehending the story.

The challenging aspects of the story were evident in Valerie's numerous pauses, omissions, and non-words. At one point, she came to the sentence, "'This is ridiculous,' said Mrs. Jewls." Valerie read, "This is [pause for 'ridiculous']." After a few seconds she said, "See, this is what I'm saying. I can't get the words!" I responded that she was using many good strategies and I hoped she could finish the page. I asked what she could do if she was having trouble. She answered that she could skip it, which she then did and continued, omitting "ridiculous" and reading "said Mrs. Jewls." Several lines later she came to the sentence, "It is just that I was expecting children." After she read it, she excitedly said:

- Valerie: I got it. I got that word! [referring to "expecting"]
Prisca: I know! How about that? How did you get it?
Valerie: (reading from text) "It's just that I was expecting children."
Prisca: And how did you know?
Valerie: I looked at it and I went back to it and I got it.
Prisca: You see! That's what good readers do! They make sense. So don't tell me you can't read chapter books!
Valerie: But some I can't.
Prisca: You're doing it now. You're using wonderful strategies. I'll tell you more about it later. Let's finish the page.

Valerie continued reading the last half of the page. She read more confidently, with fewer and shorter pauses and three omissions. Following her retelling, I went back into the text to show her some of the other positive strategies she used. For example, for the sentence "The children could tell just by looking at her," Valerie read, "The kids could tell just by looking at her," substituting "kids" for "children." I commented, "You were thinking. When somebody reads, 'The kids' and the text says, 'The children,' wow! You're not saying exactly what the text says, but something that means the same thing...that's a strategy good readers use. And you did it!" My intention was not to ignore her difficulties but to address them by helping her see and value her strengths.

As Valerie's miscue analysis scores in Table 2 show, 74% of her sentences were syntactically acceptable, 58% semantically were acceptable with no meaning change, and 98% of her substitution miscues showed high or some graphic similarity to the text. In other words, three-fourths of her sentences were fully grammatical with a little more than half of those making sense, while retaining the meaning of the text. The general effect of her omissions was to make the sentence ungrammatical and, therefore, unacceptable. She also made substitutions that didn't make sense, including non-words, which decreased her semantically acceptable score. Nevertheless, Valerie's retelling was

adequate (holistic score of 3 out of 5). She related the major ideas of what she read with some completeness, but didn't share the details and subtle twists.

Table 2: Selected Classroom Procedure Miscue Analysis Scores for Valerie and Christy in September and May

	Syntactic Acceptability ¹	Semantic Acceptability ²	Meaning Change ³	Graphic Similarity ⁴	Retelling Score ⁵
Valerie					
September	74%	58%	0%	98%	3/5
May	78%	68%	0%	96%	5/5
Christy					
September	56%	47%	0%	93%	4/5
May	87%	76%	0%	97%	4/5

My other three individual meetings with Valerie were similar to the first one. We began by talking more generally about school, family, etc., and then talked about reading more specifically. (At the end of the school year I gave the formal reading interview again.) I also asked Valerie to read and retell a story and ended the session by pointing out some of the positive strategies and strengths that I noticed in her reading. While Valerie generally seemed to accept her strengths as I shared them, there was occasional evidence that she struggled with perceiving herself positively. In a session in December, for example, in the midst of our discussion about one of her high quality miscues (she substituted “shouted” for “cried” in the sentence “ ‘Frog,’ cried the thing.”) Valerie said, “I must have a real tiny brain...I just be a bad person.” When I questioned her about that, she talked about the school wanting to fail her in first grade as well as third. My responses always went back to the strengths she showed when she read. In that instance, I responded,

Oh, Valerie! To be able to [substitute “shouted” for “cried”] you can't have a little tiny brain. You have an incredible brain! You know that when you're reading it has to make sense to you. If it doesn't, there's no sense in reading. You thought, “I'm going to read something that makes sense to me here!”

While she seemed to accept that at the time, she struggled with the reality of positive self-perceptions.

¹ Sentences that are grammatically acceptable.

² Sentences that have an acceptable meaning within the story.

³ Sentences in which the reader's miscues create a major change in the story's meaning.

⁴ Substitution miscues with at least one letter in common with the text word.

⁵ Holistic Scoring, with a score of 5 indicating a retelling that is fully coherent and complete.

Valerie took the *complete* ITBS again in January, even though she had already passed the reading portion. Her math score was still not high enough, so she was not promoted to fourth grade (five of her classmates did pass).

In our final session in May, Valerie's reading interview indicated that when she comes to something she does not know while reading, she would "Read the sentence then look back to say the right word and make sense" (see Table 1), revealing her stronger focus on using context and meaning as a more independent reader (i.e., she didn't mention asking someone else). Though she wasn't fully positive, she stated she was "a little bit" of a good reader because, "I can read some chapter book pages but sometimes I have trouble making sense."

The final story Valerie read was *The Man Who Kept House* (McInnes, 1962). As indicated in Table 2, the syntactic (78%) and semantic (68%) acceptability of her sentences had improved since September, with no loss of meaning. In her reading she had some pauses, omissions, and non-words, but also made many self-corrections, high quality substitutions, and read more confidently and with more expression than she had in September. Several times, after omitting something difficult and continuing to read, she read the word when it appeared later in the text, demonstrating that she was thinking across the text and understanding what she was reading. Though her graphic similarity scores decreased, her retelling score increased, possibly indicating that she was more focused on understanding meaning and less on graphic cues.

In our discussion following the retelling, I discussed the strengths that I observed. When I asked whether there was anything that she was proud of in her reading, she responded, "I was proud of the word 'clean' because I wasn't getting it and then when I went to the next page I found out it was clean," indicating she knew that she omitted it earlier in the text, but read it later. We talked about other examples of how she solved those problems herself. Toward the end of our session, though, Valerie sadly commented, "But on my reading test score I got 3.0," indicating her score on a district test. Test scores and their effects were never far from her thinking. How she defined herself was at least in part based on those scores.

Over the school year, Valerie grew as a reader. She understood in more depth that reading is a process of constructing meaning and her reading proficiency increased. However, that was not measured or valued on the ITBS. While her perception of herself as a reader was growing, it was still not positive, despite the strengths and understandings we discussed in our RMA sessions and the positive support that she was receiving in her classroom from Mrs. Conway. She placed more value on what test scores said about her (even though she had even passed the reading portion of the ITBS) than she placed on her learning about reading and herself as a reader. When Valerie took the ITBS in May, she did not pass (two more classmates did) and was mandated to attend summer school. She would be promoted to fourth grade in the fall only if she passed the test when she took the test again in July.

Christy

Christy was biracial (Hispanic and African American) and lived with her mother, stepfather, older sister, and younger brother and sister. Her first language was English. She was well-liked by others, friendly, and cooperative but quiet and reserved, offering little elaboration to basic answers to questions. She identified her mother as the person who helped her learn to read and talked about reading at home with her mother and other members of her family. On the ITBS Christy had not met the minimum required score in either reading or math.

In my first interview with Christy, I learned that she had limited awareness of strategies for solving problems. She only articulated, "Try sounding it out...and ask 'What does this say?'", also indicating a dependence on others for help (see Table 1). Christy also did not have positive perceptions of herself. When asked if she was a good reader, she responded, "No, I'm still in third grade and I don't know that much words," accepting the ITBS's assessment of her.

Christy also read "Mrs. Jewls" (Sachar, 1998) in this first session. The chapter was challenging for her but she demonstrated many strengths, including self-correcting predictions that did not make sense, using the naming strategy when she was unsure of a pronunciation (we discussed this initially and she applied it during her reading), and making high quality substitutions (i.e., "a whole bunch" for "a whole bushel"). Christy's miscue analysis scores (see Table 2) showed that 56% of her sentences were syntactically acceptable, 47% semantically acceptable with no meaning change, and 93% of her miscues showed high or some graphic similarity to the text. The 56% syntactic acceptability was due to her numerous omissions when she was unsure of the text item, which rendered the sentence grammatically unacceptable. Other inefficient strategies included long pauses and continuing when her reading was not making sense (the latter affected the semantically acceptable score). Despite these difficulties, Christy's retelling was strong (holistic score of 4 out of 5) indicating that she was constructing meaning across the text as she read. She included the major points and supporting details, with a high degree of completeness.

In our RMA discussion following the retelling, Christy indicated that she did not think she had read well because she "skipped some of it." I pointed out that she did the most important thing readers do and that was understand their reading, that she was making sense even though she was having difficulty. I also noted her efficient strategies, such as correcting predictions that didn't make sense.

In all of our sessions when I asked Christy how she thought that she read, she responded, "Not good" because she "didn't know the words" and she "made some mistakes." I then showed her the strengths that she demonstrated as a reader, explaining how she was making sense as she was reading which is what all good readers do. For example, in December, following her retelling of the chapter "Ice Cream" (Lobel, 1976), we discussed some of her miscues.

- Prisca: I don't know how you can say you didn't do a good job! You just told me the whole story and you understood! That's what's important and that's what good readers do. You made some incredible miscues! Like here [pointing to the text] ...This says, "It dripped down on Toad's jacket." You know what you said?
- Christy: (shakes her head 'no')
- Prisca: You said, "It dropped". "More and more of the ice cream was melting. It dropped down on Toad's jacket. Does that make sense?"
- Christy: (shakes her head 'yes')
- Prisca: Yes! If it's dripping it's dropping. You didn't self-correct that because you didn't have to. It made good sense. And here [pointing to the text] you said, "I just was," and then you went back and corrected it to, "I just saw." Why do you think you went back and corrected that time?
- Christy: Because it wasn't going to make sense.
- Prisca: That's right. And that shows you're thinking and that's what good readers do. Who told you to do it?
- Christy: My brain.
- Prisca: Your brain because your brain knows all those good strategies.

Despite discussions like this where Christy seemed to understand that she had strengths all good readers have, she persisted in believing she did not read well. When Christy took the ITBS again in January, she did not pass either the math or the reading portion and was retained in third grade.

In our final interview in May, Christy's responses documented an understanding of reading as a process of constructing meaning and her growing independence as a reader (see Table 1). When asked what she does when she comes to something she doesn't know, she stated, "If you don't know the words, you can put words in...and make sense...skip them or sound them out." She was more articulate about the strategies she had available to her as a reader than she had been in September. Her perception of herself as a reader had not changed, however. She did not believe she was a good reader because, "I still have trouble with the words."

The story Christy read in that last session was *The Man Who Kept House* (McInnes, 1962). Her miscue analysis scores showed definite growth in her reading proficiency (see Table 2). Her syntactic (87%) and semantic (76%) acceptability with no meaning change increased from September, indicating that she was reading more efficiently and effectively, and her retelling remained strong. In the RMA discussion, since Christy again didn't think that she had read well, I played portions of the audiotape for her so she could hear herself reading, using such positive strategies as self-correcting. In one portion, for example, the text read, "Never again did the woodman say to his wife..." Christy substituted "stay" for "say", then self-corrected. After listening to the audiotape, I asked:

Prisca: Did you hear what you did?
Christy: I put “stay to his wife.”
Prisca: Yes, then what did you do?
Christy: I went back and corrected it...because it didn’t make sense.
Prisca: It didn’t make sense. Now, who told you to do that?
Christy: My brain.
Prisca: And who does that sort of thing?
Christy: A good reader.
Prisca: A good reader. You know how to use the same strategies when you’re reading. That’s what you have to remember to keep doing. And you understood when you finished the story. You have so many strengths!

But later she again said she wasn’t a good reader.

Through the support she received in her classroom and in our RMA sessions over the school year, Christy grew as a reader. She was more articulate about the reading process, understanding that reading needed to make sense. Her reading proficiency also increased. Despite these positive indicators of growth, however, Christy did not recognize the strengths that she had and continued to have a negative view of herself as a reader. She did not pass the ITBS test in May and would only be promoted to fourth grade if she passed it in July when she took the test again after attending summer school.

Discussion and Closing Thoughts

Scores on high-stakes assessments had a major impact on Valerie’s and Christy’s perceptions of themselves as readers. During this study, both students deepened their understandings of reading as a process of constructing meaning, increased their ability to talk about reading strategies, and improved in reading proficiency. They were in a classroom and homes with cultural and social practices that supported them as they interpreted and perceived themselves as readers (Bloome & Dail, 1997; Gee, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1997). But, who they were as readers, their reading growth, and subsequent learning were not measured by the ITBS. Rather than highlight their strengths and help them see reading as something they *can* do (Cambourne, 2002), the ITBS defined them as failures. While other factors may have contributed to their perceptions of themselves, it was the ITBS alone, according to Mrs. Conway and Ms. Baker, that retained Christy and Valerie in third grade.

In contrast to the high-stakes assessments, the RMA discussions invited Valerie and Christy to conceive of reading and themselves as readers in terms of their strengths. I highlighted the strengths that they had and shared with good readers and encouraged them to recognize and build on these. Studies have shown that through RMA readers revalue reading as a meaning making process and themselves as capable readers (Goodman & Marek, 1996). However, Valerie and Christy were clearly revaluing reading, revaluing themselves as readers was more difficult to do. Valerie was beginning to view herself more positively by May, but neither she nor Christy perceived themselves as good readers.

It is quite possible that high-stakes assessment is in reality working to the detriment of the struggling readers it was meant to help and, thus, is counter productive to its purposes. Given the research documenting the relationship between students' beliefs about reading, their perceptions of themselves as readers, and their reading proficiency (Goodman & Marek, 1996; Martens, 1998; Moore & Gilles, 2005; Paulson, 2001), we can only speculate how much stronger readers Valerie, Christy, and others would be if they were in a broader cultural and political environment that supported them and built on their strengths, rather than emphasized their weaknesses.

The RMA experiences Valerie and Christy shared with me were admittedly few, due to other circumstances in the study. Perhaps more frequent discussions around their reading highlighting specific strengths would have made a greater impact on their self-perception. Additional research in this area studying students affected by high-stakes assessments is needed.

Epilogue

When the study ended at the conclusion of the school year, 12 of the original 15 students in this class who had repeated third grade for the second or third time were still in the classroom providing the setting for the research. In either the January or the May ITBS testings, 5 of these 12 had "passed" and moved to fourth grade. Valerie and Christy and five classmates had not scored a mark designating their worthiness in this era of high-stakes testing. They were mandated to attend summer school and take the ITBS again in July, with the possibility of repeating third grade again if their testing attempt was not successful.

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