

2008 Alpha Upsilon Alpha Action Research Award Finalist

The Effects of Co-Teaching on Reading Engagement of
5th Grade Special Education Students

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Alpha Upsilon Alpha is the honor society of the International Reading Association. The Alpha Iota chapter at Buffalo State College presents an award each year to the outstanding action research project completed in EDU 655, Seminar in Reading, by a graduating candidate in the Literacy Specialist Program.

Question/Rationale

Working in the field of special education, questions are often raised as to what the best model is for meeting the needs of all students. Should special education students be placed in separate classrooms from their peers? Should they receive some instruction in a general education classroom and the rest in a resource room setting? Or should these students be completely included in general education classrooms with extra support? There are arguments that support each of these ideas.

In the particular district that I work in, it is expected that all identified special education students will be fully included in classrooms where they are serviced by a consultant teacher. It is also expected that I, as the consultant teacher, plan and co-teach with the general education teachers to provide the appropriate support for all students in the classroom. Although I enjoy my work and feel that co-teaching has great benefits, I often wonder if this is the best answer for all students that I service. Since many of them have differing needs, often below the level of instruction that they receive in the classroom, I wonder if they would be more engaged in the material presented to them in a different setting throughout the school day.

This study will focus on the effects of co-teaching in an inclusion setting on special education students. Although I feel that such instruction will have an impact on all aspects of the students' education, this particular study will be on the reading engagement of special education students. I hope to answer the question, 'Does having two teachers help students to be engaged in their learning, especially in the area of reading?'

Literature Review

According to Cook, Cameron, and Tankersley (2007), the frequency of students with disabilities being educated alongside their nondisabled peers in general education classrooms has increased in recent years, which in turn affects every aspect of schooling today. This particular model for education is known as inclusion. Bender (2004) defines inclusion as students with disabilities being placed in general education classes in the school nearest to their home, and modifying those general education classes so that these students would receive an appropriate education. Although different school districts across the country implement the inclusion model differently in their schools, one of the most popular models involves co-teaching. Co-teaching can be defined as the general education teacher and the special education teacher teaching in the classroom simultaneously (Bronson & Dentith, 2005). Furthermore, this partnership includes models of consulting or teaming with the whole class or small groups to solve problems, facilitate differentiated learning of diverse students and offer more teacher support for learning.

Although the idea of co-teaching sounds like a great solution to meeting the needs of special education students, teachers in such classrooms face many challenges. First, a wide variety of students with special needs can be placed in an inclusion classroom. According to Wilson (2006), students in co-taught classes can have severe learning difficulties and skill deficiencies, which can make the learning of the standard curriculum very challenging. For such students to develop their literacy skills can be even more challenging. Depending on the specific disabilities of the students, they may struggle to focus on the lessons presented in class, they may require additional instruction or re-teaching to help them retain information, or they may even need reading materials provided that are at their instructional level, which may be below the level of the rest of the class. In addition, all of the components of reading need to frequently be

addressed with students in order for them to become effective readers. The teachers need to provide activities to develop students' word recognition, vocabulary development, fluency, reading comprehension, and writing. As students enter 5th grade, they are already expected to be proficient in all of these areas. Students with special needs are often significantly delayed in one or more of these areas, so they need consistent support and practice. Students need to be engaged in the material and motivated to succeed in order to improve in their areas of need.

In addition to challenging students in inclusion classrooms, the relationship between the general education teacher and the special education teacher can play a large role in the success of the students in the classroom. Teachers need to build a rapport with one another before the students even enter the classroom. When the two teachers have a comfortable relationship and rapport with one another, the children will feel more comfortable in the classroom (Marston, 2007). As teachers build such rapport, they must also collaborate and discuss their own roles and responsibilities in the classroom (Hammeken, 2000). According to Bos and Vaughn (2002), special education teachers need to assist the classroom teachers in adapting materials, instruction, and the instructional environment to facilitate the students' needs. If they work together as a team to meet the needs of their students, chances are that the students in their classroom will be more successful.

Within this special education model of co-teaching, a major point of concern may be whether or not the special education students in the classroom are engaged in the material being presented, even if it is difficult for them. Although several researchers have defined engagement from different viewpoints, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) provide a comprehensive definition of engaged reading:

A point of agreement among diverse depictions of engaged reading is that the reader has wants and intentions that enable reading processes to occur. That is, a person reads a word or comprehends a text not only because she can do it, but because she is motivated to do it. (p.404)

In other words, students not only need to be presented with information, but they need to want to learn it to be successful.

Other research also implies that engagement refers to students feeling a sense of belonging. Engaged students value their relationships with their peers and their teachers, and they see school as an important part of their life (Ainley, 2004). For special education students in inclusion classrooms, this definition of engagement holds true. When they are included with peers their own age, they are more likely to feel that they belong in a school than if they were secluded in a self-contained environment.

In considering the reading achievement of struggling readers, research shows that engagement plays a large role. Marinak (2006) argues that without the intrinsic motivation to read, students may never reach their full potential as literacy learners. In the classroom, it is often the teacher's role to encourage such intrinsic motivation and to model a love for reading. When students see that their teacher is involved in their learning and interested in their progress as readers, they are more likely to be engaged in the classroom (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Research shows that there are several means to engage students in instruction and motivate them to read. According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) one of these techniques is developing learning goals with students. If goals are co-developed by the students and the teacher(s), students are more likely to believe in their own capacity to do their hardest work and are motivated to use strategies presented in class effectively.

Another classroom teaching strategy that helps to motivate students is providing the students with real-world interactions (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Students need to make connections between the academic curriculum being presented and their own personal experiences as learners. Student should know that learning and reading are a lot like eating and sleeping, and they are integral parts of our lives (Gerzon-Kessler, 2006). According to Brophy (1998), these real-world interactions can provide motivation for reading and learning from text. Such activities can include anything from role-playing to manipulating materials to learn a new concept.

In addition, students' engagement is also positively affected by strategy instruction (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Students need to be effectively taught reading strategies through direct instruction, scaffolding, and guided practice. Even very small increases in the amount of daily teacher demonstration can produce improved reading achievement (Allington, 2001). According to Anderson and Guthrie (1996), in today's information age, higher order literacy strategies such as problem solving, searching for information, applying prior knowledge to text, and generating inferences are particularly important. If students gain confidence in their ability to utilize these strategies during reading, they will be able to complete reading tasks in the classroom, and in turn they will be more motivated than if they were less capable or aware (Harter, 1982).

Although there are more ideas about how students can be motivated to read, a final classroom strategy that will be discussed is student collaboration. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) define collaboration as the social discourse among students in a learning community that enables them to see perspectives and to socially construct knowledge from text. Collaboration can be used to activate and maintain intrinsic motivation in students. If students can take an active role

in a group of their peers to demonstrate their knowledge, they will be more motivated to read and use the strategies presented to them in the future.

After considering all of the research regarding inclusion, co-teaching, and reading engagement, it can be hypothesized that there is a link between a student's reading engagement and the type of instruction that they are receiving. If students with reading difficulties are provided with strategies in a general education setting by more than one teacher, will they be engaged in the material and motivated to read?

Project Design

Context and Participants

This particular study was conducted in a suburban school outside of the Niagara Falls area. The school is made up of approximately 650 students ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade. There are 18-20 students in each class, and all special education students are included into general education classrooms with the support of a consultant teacher. Typically, the special education teachers service 2-3 classes throughout their school days, each class with 3-5 identified students in it.

The class that was focused on for this study is Miss May's fifth grade class. This class is composed of 19 students with a range of abilities in reading. Three of the students in this class are identified with learning disabilities, two boys and one girl. Although each of these students has different strengths and weaknesses in reading, each of them is significantly delayed in their ability to comprehend material at the fifth grade level. This particular class was chosen because of the great differences in these students' abilities.

The first student, Tom, is the most significantly delayed student of the three. According to the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver & Carter, 2006) that was given at the end of his fourth grade year, he is reading at a mid-first grade level. He struggles with decoding words and has little ability to self-monitor when he makes errors in his reading. This in turn affects his fluency and comprehension of texts. Being such a low-ability student, he appears to still have a positive attitude toward school and his own learning. He is very social, and at times, can be too social when he should be focused on learning.

The second student, Gus, also has delays in his reading performance. In looking at the same reading assessment, he is reading at a mid-second grade reading level. He does struggle with decoding new vocabulary and multi-syllabic words, but does some self-monitoring and can identify when something doesn't make sense. He does demonstrate the ability to comprehend literal information, but then struggles when he needs to make inferences. Gus is extremely enthused to be at school, but is often excited by the students around him rather than the material being presented. He is also easily distracted and lacks focus even when he is in a small group instructional setting.

The third student, Ann, is different from the other two students in that when listening to her oral reading fluency, you would suspect that she is an on-grade level reader. She reads accurately with great expression when reading aloud. Her abilities falter when she is asked to comprehend what is read. Even when presented with literal comprehension questions, she struggles to identify key points from what she read, and even struggles to sequence important events. Because of this struggle with comprehension, she tests at a mid-second grade reading level. Ann is a quiet and more introverted student than the other two identified students in the class.

To service the special needs of these students, Miss May and I co-teach for the literacy block each day. In addition to our teaching, a classroom aid is in the room to support them through the lessons. Miss May and I taught an inclusion classroom together last year, and this is our second year together. We have a great working and planning rapport, and we generally teach together or take turns leading while the other supports those in need. Our styles depend on the nature and content of the lessons being presented.

Engagement Strategies and Materials

For this study, the focus was on our co-teaching reading strategies during Readers' Workshop each day. The Workshop is designed so that students are taught a mini-lesson about various reading strategies for the first 10-15 minutes of the workshop. These mini-lessons were co-taught by Miss May and I using read-alouds and examples to help students focus when they read books at their level. Then, the students worked either independently or with their guided groups to practice the given strategy for the day. Finally, all of the students met back at the end of the workshop to share or report any work that they did on the strategy presented for the day.

Strategies from the research that have proven to engage students in their learning were also incorporated in the classroom during this study. First, students were provided with direct strategy instruction. The teachers co-taught this portion of each session of Readers' Workshop, and the strategies were re-taught as needed in small groups. Class learning goals were also developed with the teacher as each mini-lesson was presented on each strategy. This defined what the students needed to know and helped them to feel confident as they worked to improve their reading abilities. Students were also provided with opportunities for collaboration both in whole-group and small-group settings throughout the study. This collaboration usually occurred when students had opportunities to discuss what they were reading or when they incorporated

new strategies. For example, after modeling through read-alouds, students were provided with the opportunities to practice the strategies presented in small groups of peers before they were asked to implement the strategy independently or in guided reading groups. This allowed the students to work in heterogeneous groups based on abilities.

The focus students for this study were grouped in their guided reading group with other struggling students in the classroom. The book that they read from is called 26 Fairmount Avenue, and it is written by Tomie DePoala (1999). The reading level of this book is an N, which is either at or above the instructional level for the students in the group (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

Since this was the first guided book that was read by the students this school year, the strategies that were presented to the students remained basic. Such strategies were locating main ideas and supporting details, making connections, asking questions during reading, and beginning to make inferences using context clues and background knowledge. These strategies remained the focus throughout the entire study.

Data Collection

During Readers' Workshop, data was collected through observations made by myself and Miss May. A log was used consistently to track the students' engagement during the mini-lessons presented by both teachers and during guided reading groups. We looked at the target students to see that they were focused on the material being presented, that they participated when asked to give reflections or feedback, and that they were aware of the strategy and could use it during their time in guided reading. This was also tracked when they were asked to report out at the end of the workshop.

In addition to the observations, the target students were interviewed at the end of the study. This interview gave additional information as to whether they were interested in the information being presented to them during the co-teaching, if they understood the material, and if they would prefer a different model of being taught during Readers' Workshop. The information from the survey contributed to the conclusions made at the end of the study.

Data Analysis

During the analysis of the data, I read the anecdotal records that were recorded during reading mini-lessons that were co-taught and reflected back on observations of the students during the whole class and guided group instruction. I then reduced my data by only focusing on the information that best addressed my research question, grouping my findings by similarities. I then inductively coded my data into major categories: students' engagement during co-taught mini-lessons, students' engagement during guided reading groups, and the evidence that students were transferring reading strategies that were co-taught into their guided reading. Within each of these categories, I discovered various results. Last, I compared the findings within each category to determine if the data sources supported one another.

Results

As I analyzed my data and began to develop the results, it was helpful to refer back to the original research question, which was whether or not having two teachers in the classroom to co-teach reading lessons had a positive effect on the engagement of special education students. Overall, I have found the outcomes to be favorable. Based on the data collected, three assertions can be made:

- Special education students are typically engaged during co-taught reading lessons.

- Several factors influence the engagement of special education students during Readers' Workshop.
- Special education students appear to benefit from co-taught reading lessons when they are asked to transfer new information into guided reading situations.

Through class observations during mini-lessons, it was evident that the target students were engaged during co-taught lessons. As I analyzed the anecdotal records that were kept throughout the study, I noticed that students were motivated and engaged in the lessons being presented, and that they enjoyed being a part of the whole group. Whenever students were observed during the lesson, their body language and eye contact showed that they were focused on the actual lessons. Occasionally, one focus student, Gus, needed redirection or prompting to stay focused during the whole group lessons, but he also needed similar prompting during small group work in our guided reading group. Throughout the study, the focus students were observed raising their hands frequently to share their insights on the reading strategies being taught, and their thoughts were typically relevant to the information being presented.

Data was also analyzed from the student interviews at the completion of the study. The interview consisted of several questions that asked the students to give their opinions about how reading is taught in their classroom, their preferences about how reading is taught, and some questions were included that asked the students to recall information about what they learned through Readers' Workshop. When asked how the students felt about having two teachers in the classroom to teach reading strategies, all three students responded that they felt that it was more fun than if they had one teacher. This proved that the students had a favorable attitude toward the inclusion model that we were using. When asked if having two teachers helped them to

focus better on the lessons being presented, two out of the three responded that it did help them to focus. Ann in particular said that it sometimes helps when one teacher is teaching and the other is there to help them when they don't understand. I found it interesting that she didn't specify which of us was the one helping her, which shows me that our model of inclusion does not single out the special education students, and that they feel that they can be helped by either teacher.

Of all of the interview questions, the answers to the final question were the most interesting to me. I asked the students whether they prefer learning reading strategies with the whole class, or whether they prefer learning in their small guided reading groups. I received mixed reactions to this question. Even though the students reacted so positively to having more than one teacher in the classroom, all three focus students said that they prefer their small guided reading groups. Ann said that she liked our group because it is a smaller number of people and it was easier for her to learn that way. Gus said that he liked it better because it is more fun reading our chapter book together. Tom initially said that he liked small groups better, but could not give a reason why, but then changed his mind and said that he was not sure which he liked better. Based on these results, students are engaged in co-taught lessons, but whole group may not necessarily be the only engaging setting in the Readers' Workshop for my students.

Also, I believe that there were several factors that contributed to the students' engagement during the co-taught lessons. First, I feel that the material that was presented to the students during whole-class lessons may have been more motivating to students than the materials used in their guided groups. Mini-lessons were typically taught incorporating read-alouds and poems, which appear to be highly motivating for students. The students enjoyed the exposure to such texts, and overall, these texts provided more teaching opportunities for the

strategies presented than the books used in guided reading. For example, the text Two Bad Ants by Chris Van Allsburg was used to teach students about making inferences. We modeled, through a co-taught lesson, how to use clues from the text and background knowledge to make an inference. Since the book is designed for students to be able to make inferences on each page, we were able to model the first half of the book, and to allow students to practice in small groups to make inferences for the second half of the book. In observing the focus students during this lesson, they were highly engaged in the lesson. Tom, one of the focus students, was especially motivated. One of the modeled pages in the book required students to infer what liquid the ants were in. Tom not only volunteered in front of the entire class, but also gave insightful clues that helped him to infer that it was coffee. He knew that the word bitter helped him to infer that it was coffee instead of hot chocolate or tea.

Another text that was used during a mini-lesson on questioning was the poem “Dreams” by Langston Hughes. We co-taught a lesson showing students how to ask different types of questions, including questions that can be answered in the text, questions that can be answered using inferences, and questions that can be answered using an outside source. We asked students to record their own questions on post-it notes as we modeled our own questions after reading the poem. Since the focus students in this study were still working on literal comprehension, they would have struggled in the past to think of questions beyond the literal level. After seeing the modeled questions and other questions asked by their peers, they were able to produce their own deeper level questions. For example, Ann asked the question, “What does the poet mean when he says that when dreams die, life is like a broken-winged bird?” This question stemmed great conversation from the entire class, and she could see the value in asking inferential questions.

Unlike these engaging texts and poems, the book used for guided reading for the focus students in this study did not lend itself as well to the strategies that were presented in whole group lessons. The text that was used, 26 Fairmount Avenue, was a much lower level text than the materials used during mini-lessons. Although students attempted to apply the strategies presented, it was difficult for them to think beyond the literal level in the book. For example, when we read a chapter, we tried as a group to make inferences about the main character, Tomie. Although there were opportunities to do so, they were not as easily accessible for the students as the inferences that we modeled and practiced before.

Beyond the engaging materials being used, I also found that posting the learning goal for each lesson helped to engage and motivate the students in the reading strategies being presented. Especially for the focus students in this study, it gave them a purpose and an understanding of what was being asked of them during each lesson. To assess whether the students understood the learning goal in each lesson, we often had the students reflect after the mini-lessons to see whether or not they understood what we taught them. After one particular lesson on inferring using The Wretched Stone by Chris Van Allsburg, we asked the students to reflect on what they learned for the day. We left the assignment pretty open as students were asked to reflect through a narrative in their readers' notebooks. When studying the focus students' responses, it was interesting to see that all three students expressed some sort of knowledge about inferring. Tom even referred to the inferring math problem that we gave them, which was "Clues + Schema = Inference." Knowing this particular student and his struggles with reading comprehension, reflecting on a deeper level skill like inferring showed that he did retain some of the knowledge and that he was motivated to do so.

Students were also interviewed and asked if they thought it helped when their teachers post the learning goals during reading lessons. All three of the focus students responded that they did like having the learning goals posted. Ann responded that she liked it because it told her what she was supposed to be working at. Gus said that it helped him because he could look back at it and know what to do. Tom's answer was the most interesting to me because he said that posting the learning goals helps him to get the right answers. This demonstrated the idea that he is conscious of whether he responds correctly or incorrectly in front of his peers, and that he could use the learning goal to help him when he was unsure. Knowing that students are more motivated when they feel confident, this showed me that Tom really was more engaged when the learning goals were there for him to refer to.

Finally, data was collected to determine whether or not the students were benefiting from the whole-group lessons and transferring their knowledge when reading their guided reading books in groups. In most instances, the data showed that the students were using what they learned from the co-taught lessons in their own reading. One example is the strategy that we taught the students to use to ask questions when they are reading to help them better understand and talk about the text. During the co-taught lesson, we asked students to use post-it notes to record their questions during reading and to stick them in the text so that they could refer back to them. When the focus students came back to me in guided reading, all three of the students demonstrated the ability to do so. Using the post-its was motivating for them, and they enjoyed stopping to share their questions. They also liked to tell me what type of questions they were asking based on the types that we taught them during the mini-lesson, which showed me that they were retaining the information presented. Ann even coded her post-it notes with a T, I, or OS, which told me whether she thought the question could be answered in the text, using an

inference, or using an outside source. She exuded confidence when she successfully identified which type of questions she was asking.

Even though the students showed me that they could apply the strategies presented to them in our small groups, the outcomes were discrepant when the students were interviewed at the end of the study. The students were asked to recall the reading strategies that they had learned so far this year and whether or not they felt comfortable using the strategies when they read every day. None of the focus students could recall any of the strategies that we had worked on so far. Even when prompted with the stories and poems that we used to teach the strategies, the students still couldn't remember. Both Tom and Gus responded that they learned about being fluent readers and how to decode words. This was interesting to me because those were focused on during our guided reading groups in addition to the reading strategies that were co-taught. This information implies that even though my students could apply the strategies in isolation after being taught, the long-term retention wasn't necessarily strong for them. The consistent reinforcement of other strategies in our small group appeared to be better retained.

Conclusions

Overall, the results of this study help me to reflect on my own teaching in the classroom. All of the factors that were considered in this study on how to engage students are examples of good teaching practice, and this study has helped me to realize that I have been implementing these teaching practices without even thinking about it. Even though I do not have the choice as to whether or not I co-teach lessons in my school, this study helped me to realize both the benefits and limitations of the inclusion model of special education. In my particular case, I do feel that co-teaching helps to engage the students in the reading instruction in the classroom, but

I am not convinced that this would always be the case. Seeing how many factors can actually affect motivation and engagement, I feel that co-teaching is just one of the many elements that help special education students to be motivated to achieve in the classroom.

The data collected in this study imply that students are engaged when they are included in co-taught lessons with their peers in a general education setting. I do, however, believe that it was not only the co-teaching that engaged the students in their learning. Because of all of the elements that I took into consideration, the students were engaged. I do feel that the outcomes would have been different if less engaging materials had been used, if the learning goals were not posted during lessons, and if students were not allowed to discuss their learning with their peers. All of these elements are considered to be good teaching practice, and I would use them in the classroom whether I co-taught lessons with a general education teacher or if I taught lessons to my students in a self-contained environment. Therefore, it is difficult to make the actual conclusion that co-teaching in itself is engaging.

I especially feel that the outcomes may have been different if the study had been conducted in a different classroom. In my particular case, I co-teach with a teacher who is open and willing to let me be a part of the instruction to the whole class. She has a special education background and understands the needs of all of the students in her classroom. We do have a great relationship and we work well together to develop lessons that are engaging to the students. We also model positive attitudes toward reading together, and we have fun teaching together in the classroom. I feel that this relationship between us does have an influence on the students' motivation and engagement, and if my relationship with the teacher was not positive, the students may react differently to co-taught reading lessons.

One aspect of my research that may have accounted for some of my discrepant results is the variety of limitations that I was faced with. One of the major limitations that I found was that there was not enough time. I found the instruction to be less consistent than originally planned. When this study was designed, I was optimistic in thinking that we would be able to co-teach a mini-lesson every day and that our lessons could then be implemented in our small guided reading groups. This, however, was not realistic. On average, we were able to teach such mini-lessons two to three times a week, as on other days we continued to implement the same strategies that were co-taught earlier in the week. As we were constrained with time, it was difficult to take the time to model as a whole class every day. Because of this, it was more difficult than anticipated to collect data as frequently as I expected.

One other major limitation that I had was a new student entering the focus classroom in the middle of the study. The student was a special education student, so it was my responsibility to assess the student in every academic area, and I had to complete this assessment during the school day. This often meant that time had to be taken away from my other students in the classroom, or time was taken from the time that I usually spent co-teaching with the general education teacher. Also, when I was finished with assessment, I found that this particular student was at a much lower level than any of the other students in the classroom. This meant that I had to use time that was typically spent with my other students for this new student, as she needs an entirely different curriculum than the others. This hindered my ability to collect data as regularly as planned.

These initial outcomes then raise some additional questions that may be factors in this study. One particular question that I have considered quite a bit is how the relationship of the teachers affects the engagement of students. Seeing how students are engaged by observing the

positive interactions between Miss May and I, would they still be engaged if their teachers did not have a great working rapport? Another area that I question is how the material being used for mini-lessons affects the students' motivation and engagement. What if we were using a whole-class book as a shared reading activity to model reading strategies? Would the engagement be different than what we are seeing as we use a variety of texts to model?

Beyond my research, I would be interested to see what the outcomes would be in other inclusion classrooms. Being that I have such favorable surroundings to create an engaging and motivating environment, what would the outcomes be like for someone who does not have such favorable factors? It would also be interesting for someone who has more flexibility with how they teach to conduct a similar study. What if a teacher could implement both the co-teaching model and the resource room approach of pulling students out of the classroom for instruction? I would like to see how the students' engagement would be in these situations comparatively.

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Interview Questions
Qualitative Research Study

1. How do you feel about having two teachers teaching you during Readers' Workshop? Does it make learning reading strategies more fun, or would you prefer having only one teacher?

2. Is it easier for you to focus during reading lessons when you have two teachers teaching you the lessons? Explain.

3. Do you think that your teachers work well together when they are teaching reading? Explain your answer.

4. What strategies have you learned about in reading so far this year? Do you feel comfortable using these strategies when you read on your own?

5. Does it help when your teachers post the learning goal during a reading lesson? Explain your answer.

6. Do you like discussing what you have read with your peers in a small group? Explain your answer.

7. Do you like learning about reading strategies with the whole class, or would you rather learn just in your small guided reading group?