Reading for understanding and enjoyment is often difficult for children. When students hear we are reading a novel, they are often times intimidated and immediately assume it will be boring. I can sympathize with these students and their feelings. As a student, I struggled to enjoy reading. I would often scan through the pages but find little enjoyment in books. As a teacher, my goal is to create meaningful and fun learning experiences during reading instruction.

I currently teach in a sixth grade co-teaching classroom. I have twelve students with special needs that include Autism, OHI, and learning disabilities. Along with the twelve students, there are about twelve general education students in my classroom.

In order to make reading more meaningful for my students, I created a book club activity. I originally got the idea from my co-teacher and modified it to fit the needs of my students. We do the book clubs throughout an entire novel. To structure the activity, students are broken up into groups of five and each student receives a different role. According to Johnson and Johnson (1988), cooperative learning is more successful when students have a feeling of positive interdependence. One way to build this within a group is to assign each member a specific role and job. The roles for the book clubs are as follows:
**Discussion Director** → This student is responsible for creating well-constructed questions about the reading to ask his or her group. [Click here to see the Discussion Director worksheet.](#)

**Connector** → The connector’s job is to make connections to other texts, themselves, and the outside world. [Click here to see the connector worksheet.](#)

**Word Finder** → The job of the word finder is to find good vocabulary words from the reading and present them to the group. [Click here to see the Word Finder worksheet.](#)

**Illustrator** → The illustrator picks a scene from what was read and draws a picture. Then, they describe the picture using at least 3 complete sentences. [Click here to see the Illustrator worksheet.](#)

**Correspondent** → The correspondent writes a letter to either the author or a character from the book. [Click here to see the Correspondent worksheet.](#)

Once students have their roles, I assign a set of chapters to read and we do a combination of reading in class and at home. Each student must then do their book club job on the set of chapters assigned. Johnson and Johnson (1988), state that students benefit immensely from cooperative learning. According to the theorists, when students work collaboratively they have the ability to accomplish more and are often times are more positive about school. I have seen the positive effects group work has on students, and I wanted to make sure to add a collaborative component to reading instruction whenever possible. After independently completing their jobs, the students come together and share their findings. First, students are grouped homogeneously according to their jobs (all discussion directors meet together, all connectors meet, and so on). I want students to understand the value of sharing with their peers, so I give students about ten to fifteen minutes to share what they learned
from the chapters they read and possibly add new ideas to their work. Next, the students are broken up again, but this time heterogeneously so each group has one of each job (every group will have now have a discussion director, connector, word finder, illustrator, and correspondent). Then, I set a timer for five minutes and during this time, one group member will present his or her job. All group members are encouraged to ask questions and have meaningful conversation about the chapters read. After the five minutes are up, students switch roles and the next child presents. We rotate through until all five job roles have finished presenting.

Once we have rotated through all the jobs, each student does a self and peer evaluation sheet. According to Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956), the highest level of thinking is evaluation, which requires students to use metacognitive skills. By completing self and peer evaluation forms, students are evaluating themselves and their classmates and essentially thinking about their thinking. Reading these evaluations are extremely insightful for me as a teacher and from my experience, students are usually very honest. My hope is that students will start to become more aware of their abilities and look for ways to improve.

Reflection:

Whenever students get together in groups, it can be difficult to keep them focused and in control. Johnson and Johnson (1988) make a valid point when they say there is a difference between cooperative learning and group work. I can easily put my students in a group, ask hem to work together and call it group work. However, if they don’t have a common goal and a clear picture of what is expected, they will not truly work collaboratively. There will be no positive interdependence, but as the theorists state, this form of group work could be called,
“individualistic learning with talking” instead of cooperative learning. When I first began doing these book clubs, I had some of difficulty structuring this activity and making it flow smoothly. I think it was difficult to keep students on task because they did not always feel like they were working together for a common goal. To help students become more successful, I tried many different strategies to make my expectations clearer.

My first goal was to help students learn to work together more successfully. While I utilized jobs to help build interdependence, I realized that many students were not sure what their role should look like. Since Johnson and Johnson (1988) state that students learn from observing others, I thought it would be beneficial if I modeled the book club activity. My co-teacher and I modeled a typical conversation that would go on during book clubs. We demonstrated each job and showed the students the types of questions they should be asking each other. This did help the students because they were visually presented with very clear expectations.

The next thing I decided to do was utilize a timer. I did this because when students shared in their heterogeneous groups, they would often have difficulty using their time wisely. I felt that if they had a visual timer, they would stay on task and get the work done. I put the timer on the SMART Board so it was visible to all students. I set the timer for five minutes which gave each student enough time to present their job to their group. Of course, if I noticed some of the groups having great conversations about a particular topic, I added a minute or two and gave a lot of positive reinforcement and praise to keep them motivated.

To attempt to get students motivated to put more effort into their jobs, I used a few different methods. First, I decided to have students meet in homogeneous groups with others
who had the same job as them before they shared their jobs with others. Meaning, all word
finders, all connectors, etc. would meet first for about ten to fifteen minutes. Previously, I had
students go straight to the heterogeneous groups. I felt having all students with the same jobs
meet first would give them a chance to share ideas and give them more confidence to present
to the mixed, heterogeneous group; it would give them the chance to be more of an expert in
their area. This proved to be successful and provided students who may not have understood
the text fully a chance to hear different perspectives and gather new information. However, I
did have to make sure certain students would not try to take advantage and fail to complete
homework assignments adequately, and then expect to just get answers from other group
members. To monitor this, before we begin Book Clubs I checked each student’s homework for
completion. If it was evident that the student did not complete the assignment to his or her
best ability, I had them work quietly on their own for the ten or fifteen minutes while the first
group was meeting.

Johnson and Johnson (1988) make the point that students need to be individually
accountable when working in group situations. The theorists state that often times, one student
ends up doing substantially more work than the others, which is something I have seen happen
in my own experience as a teacher. To help students learn to become self-regulated learners
and put their best effort into their work, I decided to try having them do self and peer
evaluations. Students tend to do better when they have examples so I decided to give them
some guidance first. This is not the first time my students have done self and peer evaluations,
but I thought it would be beneficial for us to discuss examples in the context of the book club
assignment. As a class, we brainstormed what each a 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 would look like for each
category they were rating themselves on. For the peer evaluation, we discussed how to give constructive criticism and talked about examples of specific language they would use. For example, students could say things like, “I learned some interesting new vocabulary words from you,” or “You made a great connection when you said x, y, & z.” Students could also say things like, “Next time, maybe you could try to ask more questions that begin with why and how”. It took students some time, but as the year progressed they became better evaluators. Also, since students knew they were always going to do these evaluations, they did put more effort into their work. Additionally, the self and peer evaluations would become part of their participation grade, so students were motivated to show effort. To further help students grow, I would collect and share some of their exemplary evaluations with the rest of the class. Here are work samples that show the progress my students made with self and peer evaluations throughout the year.

After making many changes, I have found book clubs to be a meaningful and fun learning activity for students. I think it works well because rather than simply answering comprehension questions, students are applying what they have read and completing a variety of different assignments. Also, since students are getting a new job every few chapters, they do not get bored by doing the same thing over and over. Additionally, there is a lot of emphasis on cooperative learning and students learn to work together and value each other’s opinions and ideas. Moreover, students use self and peer evaluation to assess the effectiveness of both themselves and their peers. I believe this is useful in the classroom and helps create a more authentic and enjoyable learning experience for students.
Using book clubs in my classroom is going to continue to affect my future teaching. It has taught me how to be more reflective since I found myself constantly looking for ways to adapt this activity to the needs of my diverse learners. Also, I learned a great deal about social development because of the group work portion of the activity. I gained insight on the way in which sixth grade students work and interact with each other. I’ve also learned some classroom management strategies when I’ve had to deal with difficult situations that inevitably arise. For example, there were times when group members were unhappy with one another. I learned ways to mediate these situations, yet be firm and most of the time students rose to my expectations. Overall, I have found facilitating book clubs to be a wonderful experience and the activity has helped me to grow as an educator.

**Teaching Standards:**

Through the book club activity, I have met a variety of National Board Teaching Standards in the area of an exceptional needs generalist. I have met Standard 13: Reflective Practice. This standard states, “accomplished teachers of students with exceptional needs regularly analyze, evaluate, and strengthen the quality of their practice.” I’ve been using book clubs in my classroom for two years and find myself continuously analyzing its effectiveness and changing the activity to meet the needs of the students in my classroom. Even though I try to be proactive and anticipate everything that could possibly go wrong, there have been many instances where I simply had to learn from experience and make necessary changes afterwards. As soon as I sense the activity is not working as well as it could, I begin to think of ways in which I can improve it so it goes smoothly for the students and nothing interferes with their learning. Also, I have learned to look at student work samples to evaluate my effectiveness as a teacher. If it was evident that many students were not meeting my expectations, I knew I needed to reflect and make changes. In addition to attempting to fix a flaw in the activity myself, I seek
the advice of the co-teachers on my team. They often times have good ideas and insights that I may not have readily thought of.

By using the combination of self-reflection and advice from my colleagues, I have been able to make the book club activity work for myself and the population of students I have in my classroom. Additionally, I plan to use information I learn in graduate school and other professional development to continually chance and improve this activity. I understand the importance of being a life-long learner, and what works one year may not necessarily work with the next group of students. Part of being a teacher is understanding that there is new and ever-evolving research and I must make sure I am continually looking for the best methods to successfully teach every student.

Book clubs also meet Standard 8: Social Development. This standard says, “accomplished teachers of students with exceptional needs cultivate a sense of efficacy and independence in their students as they develop students’ character, sense of civic and social responsibility, respect for diverse individuals and groups, and ability to work constructively and collaboratively with others.” By doing this activity, students learn important social skills by observing each other, and they also get a chance to put their newly learned skills into practice in a structured environment. Also, it is my hope that my students will see unique strengths in their peers and learn to respect each other.

According to the research of Johnson and Johnson (1988) and my own classroom experience, students can gain an abundance of knowledge from each other when they work collaboratively and are interdependent on one another. Students need to have shared goals to work toward and be held accountable for their own work. I feel that by modeling expected behavior and giving students roles, this book club activity is fostering social development. Also, the self and peer evaluation component holds students accountable, and allows them to advocate for themselves if they feel they did an unfair amount of work or if they feel their work isn’t being recognized. I think that this activity will help students with exceptional needs learn important social skills that will help them become successful citizens and build healthy relationships in the future.
Conclusion

Book clubs have been a successful activity in my classroom. The structure of the activity has gone through, and will continue to go through many changes since I first began using them because I needed to constantly reflect and ensure it was meeting the needs of all my learners. I am thankful I’ve been able to find a way to make reading more meaningful and enjoyable for my students.

Discussion Director

Book Title: _____________________________

- Ask at least 5 questions about the story for your group to answer.
- You must answer the questions as well.
- Remember not to use yes or no questions. Always ask “why”. Below are some example questions you may ask:

- Why would a character do something?  
- What should the character do next?
- What would you do in this situation?  
- How would you describe _________?
- How would you change what happened?  
- Do you agree with the characters decision? Why or why not?
- What might happen next?  
- Could the character do anything else?

Q1: ____________________________________________

A1: ____________________________________________

Q2: ____________________________________________

A2: ____________________________________________

Q3: ____________________________________________

A3: ____________________________________________

Q4: ____________________________________________

A4: ____________________________________________

Q5: ____________________________________________

A5: ____________________________________________
Book Title: ___________________________  Chapters: ___________________________

You will be making 3 different types of connections:

- **Text to text** – relate events in the book to another book
- **Text to world** – relate events to the book to an event going on in the world or in history, tv shows, movies
- **Text to self** – relate events in the book to your own life

- Discuss these connections with your group. See what types of connections your group made while reading.

In the story, ____________________________________________

I can connect this to ____________________________________________

In the story, ____________________________________________

I can connect this to ____________________________________________

In the story, ____________________________________________

I can connect this to ____________________________________________
Correspondent

Book Title: ___________________________  Chapters: ______________________

Your assignment:

- Write a letter to the author or a character in the story.
- Include questions and/or comments about what happened.
- Tell the author or character how you feel about events or choices made in the book

In your group:

- Read your letter.
- Have your group members attempt to answer some of the questions you ask.
- Does your group agree with your comments and the way you feel about certain events?

Dear ____________________________.

_________________________________

_________________________________

_________________________________

_________________________________

_________________________________

From, ____________________________
Name _______________________________ Date ________________

**Illustrator**

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**Your assignment:**
- Draw a scene from what you have read.
- Write a caption of at least 3 sentences describing what is happening.
- Color your picture.

**In your group:**
- Show the picture.
- Ask your group to guess which scene it is a picture of.
- Describe your picture to the group.

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Name ___________________________    Date __________________

**Word Finder**

Book Title: ___________________________    Chapters: __________________

- Find at least 5 words you do not know the meaning of OR words that someone in your group may not know.
- Think of different ways to talk about your words. Examples:
  - Quiz your group and have them try to guess the meaning of the word.
  - Have your group open to the page number and reread the sentences around the word.
  - Have your group use a dictionary to figure it out.
  - Think of ways to use this word in a sentence.

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<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Page Number</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Write the sentence the word is in.</th>
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I will put these worksheets in later. They are on my work computer.