

Repeated Reading in Readers Theatre for Developing Reading Fluency

by

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### **Abstract**

This Master's Project explores how a program of Readers Theatre (RT) can be a successful approach to improving oral reading fluency. Practicing RT involves the research-based strategy of Repeated Reading (RR), which appears to be a major contributor in the success of many reading instruction approaches. Observations about RT are presented from the perspective of both a review of the literature, and by way of my experience of implementing RT into my Grade 3/4 classroom for three months. After a wide read of scholarly articles and research on each of three sub-topics, oral reading fluency, RR, and RT, it is apparent that RT has been successful in classes from Grade 2 through Grade 8 as a means of engaging struggling and unmotivated readers to read more and read more fluently. Because RT lines are repeatedly read over several days to prepare for performance readers gain in automaticity and prosody, both essential elements of fluency that have a research-based correlation with increased reading comprehension. My classroom observations concur with findings in the literature suggesting that students, including poor readers, students with special needs and English Language Learners, find performance reading, such as in RT to be highly motivating. RT provides an authentic purpose for young readers to find meaning in text thereby increasing engagement and overall reading achievement.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this project to my Mom who didn't live to see its completion.

She used to think that I might write a book someday,

so I hope this project will suffice.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of Purpose**

Helping children learn to read is one of the greatest rewards of teaching and I am fascinated by the role that the development of fluency plays in this process. Proficient reading fluency is demonstrated when a reader shows comfort while reading aloud with expression at a good speaking pace. According to Rasinski & Samuels (2011), fluency is comprised of three main components: pace, automaticity (the automatic recognition of words), and prosody or expressiveness. While these elements are often the focus of fluency instruction and assessment, it is of equal importance to recognize “the ability to decode and comprehend text at the same time” (Samuels, 2012, p. 5). As Chard, Pikulski & McDonagh (2012) said, it is instructive to consider “fluency broadly as part of a developmental process of building oral language and decoding skills that form a bridge to reading comprehension” leading to “a reciprocal, causal relationship with reading comprehension” (p. 91).

After many years of teaching, it is apparent to me that good reading fluency enhances engagement and meaning making, as well as contributing to thinking and learning. To nurture and stimulate the joy of reading is very important to me. In this project, I investigate the affordances of repeated reading (RR), as found in Readers Theatre (RT), for developing oral reading fluency.

Having taught at many levels in public and private education in this province, I have landed back in elementary school where I am drawn to the smiles and openness of young children. For me, Grade 3/4 is an ideal level to teach as 8- and 9-year olds are still young enough to bring the innocence and curiosity of childhood, yet experienced enough to be metacognitively aware and

work independently. Readers at this age and stage, in my experience, are gaining momentum in independence and joy in reading. The struggling reader is also more apparent and increasingly a cause for concern at this age. RR is one research-based approach for helping students who struggle with automatic word recognition to improve reading fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000).

As an elementary school teacher, I assume that one of the most important contributions I can make to children's education is to maximize their learning potential by focusing on literacy instruction. To be literate is to have access to the world. Literacy skills are the foundation for lifelong learning, communication and work. The significance of literacy learning is highlighted in the British Columbia (BC) English Language Arts K to 7 Curriculum (2006). This curriculum offers a framework for helping students to develop the skills required to become informed citizens, prepared for further education, and the changing workplace (BC Ministry of Education, 2006). It is possibly the biggest responsibility of elementary schools: to help launch a lifelong journey to think, learn and communicate.

### **Literacy Learning**

The BC English Language Arts K to 7 Curriculum (2006) presents literacy learning outcomes under three curriculum organizers. The first is Oral Language (Speaking and Listening). "Oral Language is the foundation of literacy learning" (p. 4) and it is how the language functions of communication and comprehension begin. By providing students with opportunities to "present materials orally, and to listen with... purpose" (p. 5), the use of RT meets many of the recommended Oral Language learning outcomes (see Table 1). As Rasinski suggests (2006), RT "texts are the perfect fit for fluency instruction" (p. 705).

Table 1: A sampling of Grade 3 Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLO) for Oral Language found in Readers Theatre

B.C. English Language Arts (2006), Oral Language PLOs	Characteristics of Readers Theatre
A1 use speaking and listening to interact with others, for the purpose of contributing to a class goal	- students must communicate so they can rehearse together and create performances
A2 use speaking to explore, express, and present ideas for different purposes	- students practice giving feedback and explaining content to each other - students write their own scripts
A3 listen purposefully to understand...	- students listen to each other reading to derive meaning, clarify content and track their lines
A7 demonstrate enhanced vocabulary...	- challenging vocabulary can be introduced by more advanced readers
A8 engage in speaking and listening activities to develop deeper understanding of texts	- repeated reading means more practice and deeper connection

The purpose of reading is comprehension. For readers to benefit from reading, words need to be accessible beyond the mechanisms of decoding and reading fast. For many teachers, especially in the context of high-stakes testing, the goal of improving fluency has become to help children read faster (Young & Rasinski, 2009), not deeper. With this emphasis on rate, prosody and comprehension are lost in favour of a high number of words correct per minute (WCPM) (Young & Rasinski). When Samuels and LaBerge (1974) published their work on automaticity theory, they postulated that for readers word-recognition needs to become automatic before the important job of comprehending could take place (Samuels, 2012). Over the years I have learned that reading is more than saying the words quickly and pausing at punctuation; it is about making meaning, having a relationship with and an understanding of what is being read. We want students to have reading experiences that give them “fresh perspectives, vital information, and new ideas” (Block & Pressley, 2007 as cited in Block & Lacina, 2009, p. 498).

The overarching instructional goal of the second curriculum organizer in the BC English Language Arts curriculum (2006), Reading and Viewing, is the “development of purposeful,

engaged, and ultimately independent comprehenders” (p. 4). At every level of literacy learning, the “goal is to improve students’ comprehension and understanding” (Rasinski et al., 2000 as cited in BC Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 5). Good comprehension is dependent on many factors, one of which is reading fluency.

When the NRP (2000) published results of their meta-analysis of reading instruction, they identified five components of literacy instruction recommended for students on the road to independent reading: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary building, fluency and comprehension (Rasinski & Samuels, 2011). It is generally expected that instruction in and the integration of these five components begins in Kindergarten and continues through much of elementary school. From a developmental point of view, learners must acquire word recognition and decoding skills before they can begin to read fluently. Fluency has been described as “the bridge from phonics to comprehension” (Pikulsi & Chard, 2005 as cited in Rasinski & Samuels, 2011, p. 94), because in order to understand what one is reading, the task of word recognition must be automatic (Rasinski & Samuels, 2011). After Grade 2, more time may be devoted to a broader complex of comprehension skills. Thus, it is significant, as a Grade 3/4 teacher, that I focus my professional studies in literacy instruction on oral reading fluency.

As a follow-up to automaticity theory, Samuels (1979) developed the method of RR defining it as the practice of rereading a passage a number of times with the goal of reducing word recognition errors and increasing reading rate (Samuels, 2012). Many types of RR instructional approaches exist, for example paired reading and text segmenting, yet RT with decades of research-based support (e.g. Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Young & Rasinski, 2009 as cited in Young & Nageldinger, 2014), remains one of the more enjoyable and effective choices.

## Readers Theatre

Throughout the literature, Readers Theatre has various spellings, e.g. with and without capitals and with and without an apostrophe. I have chosen to follow the lead of one of RT's biggest proponents, Timothy Rasinski, by using initial capital letters but no apostrophe.

Theatre and performance can be traced back to ancient times. In 15<sup>th</sup> Century Greece, "first and foremost there was the time honoured narration of epic poetry" (Brown, 2001, p. 16). Oral tradition has always been an important part of life as a "means of exploration, affirmation, and persuasion" (Brown, 2001, p. 3). Group performance of literature in the 1950s was the beginning of modern RT (Shaffer, Allison, & Pelias, 2015). In RT actors read their lines and present without props or stage action. Readers stand or sit together on the 'stage' to 'perform', making the story come alive with expressive oral reading.

During the 1960s, RT gained popularity in United States (US) college theatre programs, and by the late seventies was being used in secondary schools (Shaffer et al., 2015). It was in the early eighties that elementary educators also began to recognize value in using RT in classrooms. Because readers practice reading lines many times in RT, they experience the benefits of RR.

Readers Theatre, as an instructional approach to RR, appeals to me pedagogically for many reasons. It is easy to differentiate the length and level of readings with found and created material; for example, a single script may include lines appropriate for readers ranging from emergent to independent. A teacher can be responsive to students' interests while addressing levels of difficulty. Curriculum content can be taught through RT, such as a science play about the water cycle, or characters from history telling their story. Assessment *for* learning is quick as reading fluency or disfluency is immediately apparent during rehearsal, and fluency mini-lessons can be applied on the spot. Assessment *of* learning is equally discernable as initial and final

readings predictably show increased fluency and confidence. Young and Rasinski (2009) reported in their study on classroom fluency instruction that implementing RT was an “academic avenue that leads to increased reading fluency, regardless of whether students are striving or thriving” (p. 4).

For students, it has been my experience that RT is an enjoyable, engaging and effective way to interact with each other and with text. It requires rehearsal, and an end performance gives it authentic purpose. In-class rehearsal allows for group and individual practice, and encourages student-to-student feedback. Students are motivated to reread text in order to perfect prosody and presentation skills, knowing they will be in front of an audience.

I decided to introduce RT to my class this year as a weekly activity over a period of three months. The enthusiasm they showed for it convinced me further of its effectiveness in developing reading fluency and comprehension. As a result of my experience with RT in the classroom, and the support I found in the literature for RT as a method of RR, I decided to investigate the following question. In what ways does the practice of Repeated Reading in Readers Theatre contribute to oral fluency and therefore comprehension?

In Chapter 2, I review the literature on fluency beginning with its grounding in the theoretical frameworks of constructivism, social constructivism and dialogic learning. Then, I describe salient research on three sub-topics of oral fluency, RR, and RT. Following each sub-topic I describe a recent study, summarizing with my conclusions about how each study relates to the primary question of this project.

Chapter 3 is a retrospective reflection on my classroom practice of using RT over a three-month period. I review my RT implementation month by month considering the sub-sections of fluency instruction, scripts, groups, rehearsal, performance and feedback. Throughout my

reflections, I integrate connections between my experience of RT and what I learned in my literature review and courses taken through this program. Following this, I identify several implications for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

In order to pursue my interest in oral reading fluency and Readers Theatre I review studies and articles from the last eight years, as well as a number of scholarly articles from previous decades. After introducing the theoretical frameworks in which this project is situated, I organize my literature review into three subsections, namely oral fluency, repeated reading and Readers Theatre.

#### Theoretical Frameworks

This project will be informed by a number of theoretical frameworks, namely constructivism, social constructivism, and dialogic learning. I will describe each framework as generated by influential scholars and educators of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

#### **Constructivism.**

Constructivism may have started to gain recognition in the philosophical and practical stance of John Dewey, a forefather in the progressive education movement of the early 1900s (Hall, 2009). Dewey (1938/1998) insisted that the “child’s own experience must be acknowledged as the heart of both the content and the process of education” (as cited in Ültanir, 2012, p. 206). In constructivism, learning is seen as an active process in which students construct knowledge from experiences (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Students are in the centre of their own learning, “practic[ing] active education instead of passive learning from teachers and texts” (Dewey, 1938/1998 as cited in Ültanir, 2012, p. 200). Clearly, learning is a personal endeavour, one of self-direction and discovery and the role of the teacher is to facilitate this (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

The intention of teacher as guide is to meet each student with appropriate learning tasks. Taking the constructivist view “incorporates the importance of understanding what each individual needs to [...] learn at his or her own pace” (Powell & Kalina, 2009, p. 243). The constructivist approach of teaching

takes away “the intensive power of the teacher [...] illuminating the learner as a significant part of the learning process” (Ültanir, 2012, p. 199).

Jean Piaget, another important constructivist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theorized that intelligence developed in four stages (Powell & Kalina, 2009) and that children begin learning based on logical development of constructed knowledge (Ültanir, 2012). Piaget explained how children made sense of the world by piecing together hypotheses of how objects and humans and nature interact (Gardner, 2011, p. 19). For example, a baby begins to accumulate learning by “calculat[ing] that by reversing his steps he can return to the origin” of something familiar (p. 20), rather than starting from scratch each time. Jerome Bruner (1960) believed something similar, proposing that we experience a ‘spiral curriculum’ in which concepts are learned at an initial level and revisited as readiness increases (p 33). Accordingly, he claimed that “learning should not only take us somewhere; it should allow us later to go further more easily” (p. 17). Bruner emphasized the role of the teacher, language and instruction in learning and developed the concept of scaffolding which takes us into the realm of social constructivism.

### **Social constructivism.**

Social constructivism is similar to constructivism in that it is based on inquiry and discovery learning in which learners activate prior knowledge and formulate questions (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Social constructivism is different, however, because learning takes place in the social context where students are “creating relationships that will directly affect what [is] learn[ed]” (Powell & Kalina, p. 246).

Lev Vygotsky, arguably one of the most influential and cited educational theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is thought to be the “founding father of social constructivism” (Powell & Kalina, 2009, p.

244). Vygotsky believed that learning is constructed based on personal experiences, and that teachers' role is to facilitate this process through questioning and guiding (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

There is general agreement that child development and learning takes place through dialogue, and that dialogue acts as the principal tool of scaffolding (Mercer & Littleton, 2007 as cited in Rojas-Drummond, Torreblanca, Pedraza, Vélez, & Guzmán, 2013). Scaffolding is dependent on the interaction of a learner with an adult, or more capable other, and is therefore grounded in socio-cultural theory (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2013). The process of scaffolding allows learners to negotiate a problem or goal "which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 90), moving them from dependence to independence. Vygotsky promoted the use of scaffolding of children in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where their potential for learning is greatest. He described ZPD as that place where "the child is able to do in collaboration today [what] he will be able to do independently tomorrow" (1987 as cited in Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 199).

Social constructivists see the human experience as mediated through social and cultural influences with language being the mechanism whereby people express their identity (Smagorinsky, 2013). Indeed, Vygotsky (1934) called speech the primary "tool" (as cited in Smagorinsky, p. 64) in the construction of culture because not only do we think to speak, but in the act of speaking "new thoughts emerge" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 64). Over time, students gain insights from "purposeful linguistic interactions" (Lyle, 2008, p. 224) not only by hearing others but also by discovering the opportunity to think critically and be metacognitively aware. If "talk is the key to learning" (Lyle, p. 223) and children actively contribute to their own learning then it is necessary to heed the assertion by Douglas Barnes who said as educators "we must allow space for exploratory talk in the classrooms" (1976, as cited in Simpson, Mercer, & Majors, 2010, p. 1).

**Dialogic learning.**

Exploratory talk, Barnes emphasized, makes use of open questions in order to develop “dialogic forms of discourse” in the classroom (Simpson, Mercer, & Majors, 2010, p. 2). Dialogic learning is evident when there is meaningful conversation between learners and teachers, and among learners, particularly those conversations that promote critical and higher order thinking skills. Inquiry is a dominant stance in the dialogic learning setting. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, it is “through a process of dialogic interchange” (1990 as cited in Lyle, 2008, p. 225) that learners “play an active role in developing a personally constructed understanding” (Lyle, p. 224). For Bakhtin (1986), meaning in discourse is generated by both parties and found in “the spaces that open up within or outside of the structure” (as cited in Yang, 2014, p. 911) of a lesson.

In their analysis of classroom discourse, Boyd & Markarian (2011) claim that it is not whether talk is ‘open’ or ‘closed’ that makes a discussion dialogic, it is whether “teacher talk is in service of a dialogic stance” (p. 516). Teachers can signal a dialogic stance even as they ask a ‘closed’ question, by using uptake, and by asking authentic questions that provoke high-level thinking (517). This approach is reinforced in Freire’s list (Shor & Freire, 1987) for “liberated teaching in a dialogical class” (as cited in Boyd & Markarian, p. 518) which includes recommendations for the dialogic teacher such as, “does not begin a reply after the student ends her or his first sentence” and Alexander’s (2006) list which cites descriptors such as, “children articulate their ideas freely” (as cited in Boyd & Markarian, p. 518).

Both Freire and Alexander believed a dialogic setting was essential for promoting communication where the needs of children were concerned (Boyd & Markarian, 2011). The inner voices of students, whether spoken or unspoken, can be ‘heard’ when there is less of a power differential between students and teacher (Lyle, 2008). In a monologic classroom the focus is on the teacher, and interactions and dialogues between pupils is stifled (Lyle). Children need time to hear their inner voices in order to

know what they are thinking and whether they are making meaning from their daily experiences, let alone to develop higher order thinking skills. Seen from a Vygotskian perspective, “what goes on within a person [...] cannot be so neatly isolated from what goes on outside a person” (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 194). In the dialogic classroom students learn from talking to one another, from being inclusive, because we “learn not only words, but ways of thinking through our engagement with the people who surround us” (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 197).

### **Oral Reading Fluency**

A focus on oral language development, especially in Kindergarten to Grade 3, is essential for learning to read, understand, and think about text in the different curriculum areas (BC Ministry of Education, 2006). Good oral reading fluency provides the foundation for future reading success. In the 2000 National Reading Panel (NRP) report, fluency was named one of the five essential components of good reading instruction along with phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary and comprehension.

#### **Definition.**

Fluency may well be the most complex of the five essential components to learn and to teach, especially as there is discrepancy in its actual definition. The NRP define fluency as “the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression” (2000, p. 193). Rasinski defines reading fluency as “the ability to read words in a text with sufficient accuracy, automaticity and prosody to lead to good comprehension” (2009, p. 4). Samuels (2012) agrees with the emphasis on comprehension suggesting that the “essential characteristic of fluency is the ability to decode and comprehend at the same time” (p. 14). Furthermore, Samuels believed that “rate, accuracy and prosody were indicators” (as cited in Hudson et al., 2008, p. 5) that fluency was happening. Fluency is sometimes described as the “bridge from phonics to comprehension” (Pikulski &

Chard, 2005 as cited in Rasinski & Samuels, 2011, p. 94). In other words, accuracy and speed in word recognition leads to automatic decoding and phrasing (fluency) which in turn leads to comprehension (Rasinski, 2012). It seems clear that “fluency has two major components that are associated with adequate levels of reading comprehension” (Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011 as cited in Rasinski & Samuels, 2011, p. 95): “automaticity in word recognition” (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974 as cited in Rasinski & Samuels, p. 95) and “prosody or expressiveness in oral reading” (Rasinski & Samuels, p. 95).

### *Automaticity.*

A beginning or struggling reader’s attention is on decoding, “thus making the process of deriving meaning more difficult and slower” (Samuels, 1979/1997, p. 379). A fluent reader, on the other hand, decodes text automatically, “thus leaving attention free to be used for comprehension” (p. 379). Automaticity (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) is important because readers have limited cognitive energy (Rasinski, 2012) so the more energy required to “get the words off the page” (Deeney, 2010, p. 441) the less “working memory” space (Perfetti, 1985 as cited in Hudson et al., 2009, p. 8) is available for deriving meaning. Over a century ago reading fluency was summed up this way, “... reading is now by letters, now by groups of letters, or by syllables, now by word-wholes... as the reader may most quickly attain his purpose” (Huey, 1908/1968 as cited in Samuels, 2012, p. 6).

### *Prosody.*

Prosody in speaking captures the melody of a language and is related to good reading, oral and silent (Rasinski, 2012). “Prosody refers to a reader’s ability to read smoothly, with appropriate phrasing and expression” (Deeney, 2010, p. 441). Prosodic oral reading includes such features as “intonation, stress, phrasing, appropriate pausing, and phrase lengthening”

(Dowhower, 1987, 1991; Schrauben, 2010; Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004 as cited in Rasinski, Yildirim, & Nageldinger, 2012, p. 252). Miller and Schwanenflugel (2006) found that prosody was a “strong indicator of whether or not a student is comprehending the text being read” (as cited in Hudson et al. 2008, p. 25), for a reader must monitor the “meaning of a passage to know when to pause or when to raise or lower their voice” (Rasinski & Samuels, 2011, p. 96).

Disfluency in reading may manifest as slow, laborious, word-by-word reading lacking in phrasing and expression (Rasinski, Yildirim, & Neldinger, 2012). It can also appear as overly rapid reading, and when it does it too is “characterized by a lack of phrasing and expression” (p. 253). Fluent oral reading should sound like natural speech (Young & Rasinski, 2009).

### **Fluency and comprehension.**

If children cannot accurately read the words, they cannot understand them. “Fluency seems to be a contributor to comprehension” (Briggs & Forbes, 2002 as cited in Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008, p. 337) once the bridge of automatic and accurate word recognition has been crossed, “but fluency also seems to be an outcome of comprehension as effective oral reading involves preliminary interpretation and understanding” (Briggs & Forbes, 2002 as cited in Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008, p. 338). Research shows “a strong connection between prosodic oral reading and proficient silent reading comprehension” (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005 as cited in Young & Rasinski, 2009, p. 4).

Reading comprehension requires active, prosodic engagement with words. Specifically, Rasinski, Yildirim & Neldinger (2012) believe “it is the phrase and not the word that is the essential unit of meaning” (p. 253). They assert that “the tasks of identifying the gist and structure of text, of summarizing and drawing inferences, and of determining the importance of

events and characters from the story” are tied to proper phrasing of texts (p. 253). Deeney (2010) agrees with this deeper view of fluency citing Pikulski & Chard (2005) who delved into “a long line of component processes” (Deeney, 442) underlying the development of accuracy, rate, and prosody. Deeney furthers a deep view of fluency in her discussion of one-minute measures (2010), by proposing that endurance for reading should also be seen as a necessary component of fluency so that readers can “read and understand a variety of texts of a variety of lengths for a variety of purposes” (p. 443).

Although most fluency research has focussed on the primary grades (e.g. Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005; Stahl & Heubach, 2005) many students who experience difficulties with comprehension at the high school level “have yet to achieve appropriate levels of fluency in their reading” (as cited in Rasinski, Samuels, Hiebert, Petscher, & Feller, 2011b, p. 4). In fact, it was noted by Duke, Pressley, & Hilden (2004) that “upwards of 90% of children with significant problems in comprehension have difficulties with word recognition and reading fluency” (as cited in Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2008, p. 196). Therefore, “the most compelling reason to focus instructional efforts on [fluency] is the strong correlation between fluency and comprehension” (Allington, 1983; Samuels, 1988 as cited in Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008, p. 337).

Despite our understanding of the importance that reading fluency plays in developing reading comprehension, and despite best advice from fluency experts (e.g. Allington, 1983; Samuels, 1988) fluency has moved in and out of importance in the professional literature several times. However, with the NRP report and other key research reviews (e.g. Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000, 2003; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Strecker, Martinez & Roser, 1998), fluency is once again being recognized as a necessary component of literacy instruction (e.g.

Rasinski, 2010; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard & Linan-Thompson, 2011; Cahill & Gregory, 2011; Murray, Munger, & Clonan, 2012).

### **A study of fluency and comprehension.**

In this study the researchers' (Wise, Sevcik, Morris, Lovett, Wolf, Kuhn, Meisinger & Schwanenflugel, 2010) purpose was twofold: to evaluate separate relationships between automaticity and accuracy with comprehension, and to evaluate whether these two relationships of fluency and comprehension differed between two samples of Grade 2 students with different degrees of oral reading fluency skills. Based on their literature review the authors established that prosody, which is commonly considered the third component of fluency, did not contribute enough to reading comprehension to be part of this study.

Two groups of students, recruited for separate reading interventions, were drawn from a number of cities in eastern United States and Canada. In the first group, ORFD (oral reading fluency difficulty), 305 students were at the stage of "struggling to accurately and automatically recognize words and non-words" (p. 342), therefore were being recruited to focus on increasing phonological awareness, decoding and word recognition. The second group, CTD (connected text difficulty), consisted of 949 students who exhibited mastery at the decoding level and were "now establishing fluency with connected text" (p. 342). A primary goal of the study was to facilitate more efficient identification of problems in students who struggle with reading comprehension.

To determine word recognition and phonemic decoding, subtests of the Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE; Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotee, 1999) were applied (p. 342). Accuracy and reading rate were measured with the Gray Oral Reading Test(4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (GORT—IV; Wiederholt & Bryant, 2001) (p. 343). Finally, the Reading Comprehension subtest of the

Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT; Weschler, 1992) was administered (p. 343).

Results demonstrated a unique relationship between the measures of oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. For both the ORFD and CTD groups, real-word oral reading fluency (accuracy) was more strongly related to reading comprehension than oral reading fluency of connected text (automaticity) and both conditions had a stronger effect on comprehension than nonsense-word oral reading fluency. Not incidentally, a developmental trend was observed. The ORFD group, who was still learning to decode, revealed a stronger connection between nonsense-word oral reading fluency and real-word fluency with reading comprehension, with almost no connection between connected-text oral reading fluency and comprehension. For the CTD group, who were already proficient decoders, real-word and connected-text oral reading fluency had a connection with reading comprehension, whereas there was little relationship between nonsense-word oral reading fluency and comprehension.

Evidence suggested that for readers struggling with fluency who are at the decoding stage, interventions should include an emphasis on phonemic and real-word oral reading exercises. Students struggling with fluency without decoding challenges would benefit more from interventions including real-word and connected-text activities. This study is important because it demonstrates a distinction in the effects on reading comprehension between automaticity and accuracy depending on skill levels of the reader.

### **Summary.**

Learning to read fluently is clearly a complex process which starts early in children's literacy learning, and continues through most of their schooling. Growth in facets of fluency, such as accuracy, rate, and prosody contributes to the development of comprehension, which in turn contributes to reading fluency. As with any of the reading processes, it seems best to teach oral

reading fluency through systematic, explicit instruction, including modeling and corrective feedback, in combination with providing extensive amounts of meaningful practice.

### **Repeated Reading**

Learning to read is similar to learning to play a sport or instrument, in that there are many elements to understand and a number of interdependent skills to learn separately and in symphony in order to be accomplished. It is through practice over time, as well as supportive instruction, that learners move from beginner to advanced through the experience of meeting and passing performance criteria. Recent history in reading instruction has shown that “RR is the most universally used remedial reading technique to help poor readers achieve reading skill” (Samuels, 1997, p. 381), and that “classroom practices that encourage repeated oral reading with feedback and guidance leads [sic] to meaningful improvements in reading expertise for students—for good readers as well as those who are experiencing difficulties” (NRP, 2000, p. 191). Indeed, Conderman and Strobel (2010) affirmed that “30 years of research has supported the use of the RR strategy to increase oral reading fluency” (p. 15) and Therrien (2004) confirmed in his meta-analysis that RR was also an “effective strategy for improving [...] comprehension” (p. 257).

#### **Definition.**

RR is a remedial intervention whereby a student is asked to read a “short, meaningful passage” (Samuels, 1979/1997, p. 377) several times until a certain level of fluency is attained (Young & Rasinski, 2009). “What RR does is to give the student the opportunity to master the material before moving on” (p. 380), by providing the “practice needed to become automatic” (Samuels, 1979/1997, p. 379).

**Method.**

Most research shows that readers should read each passage from three to five times (e.g. Armbruster et al., 2001; Samuels, 2006; Sindelar et al.; Stoddard et al., 1993 as cited in Conderman & Strobel, 2010; Rasinski, 2009), before progressing to a new passage. In their research in second language settings, Taguchi & Gorsuch (2012) supported this noting that “six or more repetitions may discourage” engagement (p. 271). Weinstein and Cooke (1992) agreed, adding a qualitative factor to their recommendation that students “advance to a new passage after three successive improvements” (as cited in Conderman & Strobel, 2010, p. 16), in order to encourage wide reading, as well as mitigate boredom. Other researchers have established goals of words per minute (e.g. Begeny, Krouse, Ross & Mitchell, 2009; Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008), which may not be appropriate for struggling or disinterested readers because too much repetition runs the risk of being “less than engaging and not self-sustaining” (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2008, p. 10).

Samuels (1979) found that “the number of re-readings required [...] decreased as the student continued the technique” (p. 377). In other words, in his studies, when Samuels moved students on to passages within the same text that hadn’t been read before “the new passage was done with greater fluency and comprehension than the initial reading of the previous passage” (Rasinski & Samuels, 2011, p. 105). Rasinski (2012) calls this a transfer of learning, which demonstrates “improvement in overall reading achievement” as a result of reading more (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Stahl & Kuhn, 2002 as cited in Cahill & Gregory, 2011, p. 128). After all, “it is not ‘practice that makes perfect’ but rather, *successful* practice at an *appropriate level of difficulty* that yields wider automaticity” (Topping, 2012, p. 189, italics in original).

**Reading material.**

It is important when using RR that appropriate reading material be selected. Therrien et al. (2006) suggest relatively short passages, which “contain a complete idea or narrative” (as cited in Conderman & Strobel, 2008, p. 16). Deeney (2010) however, put forth an argument that “many reading tasks also necessitate endurance” (p. 447), therefore, she suggests that students “reread longer texts” (p. 448), including books such as those they have heard being read aloud. Cahill & Gregory (2011) recommend that repeated readings be provided for students “at their independent reading level (at least 95% word accuracy) if they will be practicing alone” (p. 128), yet it seems preferred to practice RR with adult assistance. In their study, Young, Mohr & Rasinski (2015) looked at a close reading program which featured RR and found that readers could be “stretched” (p. 69) with text beyond instructional level (Heckleman, 1969 as cited in Young, Mohr, & Rasinski) as long as they had the assistance of “a knowledgeable other” (p. 69). It is different in the ELL context where word recognition challenges are heightened, so “it is important to choose texts that do not have more than a few unknown words” (Taguchi & Gorsuch, 2012, p. 270). Another important consideration is that many struggling readers are not at grade level, so material “at instructional level, rather than grade level” is most beneficial (O’Conner et al., 2002 as cited in Therrien, 2004, p. 258) for promoting growth in reading fluency.

**Instruction in repeated reading.**

Ideally RR takes place “under the guidance of a teacher or coach” (Rasinski, Homan & Biggs, 2008, p. 194). Struggling and developing readers benefit from direct instruction in RR, such as when a coach “select[s] appropriate material and model[s] fluent reading” (p. 198). It may be appropriate at times to use peers as practice reading partners (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, &

Sturtevant, 1994 as cited in Conderman & Strobel, 2008). Meyer & Felton (1999) suggested assisted RR in which students are paired and read in unison can help when there is a less fluent and a more fluent reader (as cited in Faver, 2009). However, Therrien (2004) concluded that “adult implementation is recommended” because in his overview he found that fluency and comprehension improvement results were “far greater” with adult interventions rather than simply with peers (p. 257).

Adult interventions in RR are most useful for “helping all children become fluent readers” when they include “explicit, systematic explanations and instructions about the elements of fluency” (Reutzel, 2012, p. 123). Before and during practice, “rich and varied modeling” of fluent reading by others is valuable (p. 123) especially for hearing and practicing prosodic features. In their study of RR and prosody, Ardoin, Morena, Binder & Foster (2013) found that students in the assisted RR condition “read with fewer pausal intrusions and fewer inappropriate phrases in reading [...] as compared with students in the unassisted RR condition” (p. 393). Assistance was also a contributing factor in the Young, Mohr, & Rasinski (2015) study of Reading Together, “a hybrid of the Neurological Impress Method (Heckleman, 1969 as cited in Young, Mohr & Rasinski, p. 71) and RR” (p. 71). Students in the study group who were tutored with Reading Together individually for 20 minutes per day “grew significantly on multiple measures of reading over students in the control group” (p. 77). In this case and others it is instrumental in the success of RR to give instructive feedback consisting of “evaluat[ing] progress within and between passages, giving encouragement, and celebrat[ing] successes” because it makes “practice as valuable as possible” for students to improve their reading fluency (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2008, p. 194).

**Student motivation.**

If students have a choice of reading material it can “increase their motivation to read” (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997; Turner & Paris, 1995 as cited in Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008, p. 196). Even when teachers choose the material, students can be motivated to reread by the use of performance texts (Rasinski, Homan & Biggs, 2008), because to be performed a text “has to be rehearsed or practiced repeatedly” (p. 197). There are many sources available for suitable material. Poetry is especially suited to being performed “because of its playful language” (Faver, 2009, p. 351), and authentic texts such as “monologues and dialogues, songs, jokes and riddles” (Cahill & Gregory, 2011, p. 129) are easily transferred to the stage. One of the most popular types of performance text is RT scripts because they easily “lend themselves to oral interpretation where the reader uses [...] voice to convey meaning and emotion” (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2008, p. 129).

RR is useful for skilled and unskilled readers at different stages and different ages. The NRP (2000) executive summary suggested that the use of RR with poor readers resulted in “increased word recognition” and with skilled readers, “improved prosody and reading rate” (as cited in Ardoin et al., 2013, p. 394). Furthermore, that RR is beneficial “for good readers [through fourth grade] as well as those who are experiencing difficulties [through 10th grade]” (NICHD, 2000, n.p. as cited in Ardoin et al., 2013, p. 394).

**A study of repeated reading.**

The purpose of this study (Begeny, Krouse, Ross, & Mitchell, 2009) was to compare the effects of three types of small-group interventions on reading fluency. In particular, RR was compared to Listening Passage Preview (LPP) and reading aloud or Listening Only (LO). The primary goal for evaluating these practices was to make recommendations based on the

immediate and retained efficacy of each to improve reading rate. Other important aspects of fluency, such as prosody and comprehension, were not a focus of this study.

Participants included four Grade 2 students with average to below average reading skills from a rural school in southeast United States. An alternating-treatments design was used so that students, who were grouped together, experienced each of the conditions three times. A fourth condition, the control (CL), assessed students on reading passages without previous practice or instruction.

Assessment of students' oral reading fluency took place immediately after each condition and again two days later. WCPM scores were derived for each participant in each of the conditions, for both immediate and retention based. Data show the RR condition "was more effective than the other conditions when evaluating students' immediate WCPM gains" (p. 223). For retained WCPM gains, both the RR and LPP were found to be effective. The LO condition, while better than the CL, did not contribute significantly to increases in reading fluency. Overall the CL condition resulted in the least improvement.

From this research it is clear that small group interventions such as RR (and LPP) are effective strategies for improving reading fluency as measured by WCPM. Where students engage in learning strategies "allowing for direct auditory and visual contact" (p. 225) with text, there are considerable advantages over the LO procedure (p. 224). Results also suggest that the immediate effects of RR and LPP did not dissipate after two days. This study is important because of the high number of children who struggle with reading fluency, and the need to maximize teacher intervention time. Findings suggest both RR and LPP can be effectively practiced with small groups of up to four children, and are beneficial to teachers with limitations on time and resources.

**Summary.**

From the readings and research we can see that RR's apparent benefits are wide ranging including increasing accurate and automatic word recognition, improving prosody in oral reading, bolstering comprehension, and encouraging enthusiasm and motivation for reading. As discussed, there are a number of proven instructional methods for practicing RR, one of the most engaging being Readers Theatre.

**Readers Theatre**

RT is an engaging research-based activity that benefits from the affordances of RR, thereby improving reading abilities and creating enthusiasm for reading for the whole class. Since the goal of reading is comprehension, and reading fluency is foundational in developing comprehension (Young & Nageldinger, 2014), it makes sense to attend to the components of fluency in delivering reading instruction. In proficient oral reading it is both "important for students to read at an appropriate pace" (Young & Nageldinger, p. 48) and "to read with adult-like prosody" (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008 as cited in Young & Nageldinger, p. 49). It is highly relevant then to combine the advantages of RR with "a performance element in reading fluency instruction" (p. 49) such as in the use of RT.

**Definition.**

RT involves the oral presentation of written texts and can be used as a principal or supplementary activity in a balanced literacy program. Typically, students start with a script one day, rehearse it for a number of days, and perform it to a real audience on the final day. RT does not require memorization, just a "dramatized reading" (McKay, 2008, p. 133) of a found or made-up script. Because RT does not involve acting, props, costumes or scenery, "readers must use their voices to carry the meaning" (Young & Rasinski, 2009, p. 5). It is the repeated reading

of their lines in rehearsal that helps students to build the important elements of automaticity and prosody (Young & Rasinski, 2009), and the connection between fluency and comprehension that gives RT its potency (Kariuki, & Rhymer, 2012).

### **Readers theatre and fluency.**

RT is well researched as an instructional activity for increasing oral reading fluency (e.g. Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000; Vadasy & Sanders, 2008; Vaughn, Chard, Bryant, Coleman, & Kouzekanani, 2000 as cited in Young & Nageldinger, 2014). For example, Young & Rasinski (2009) measured “close to double normal gains” (pp. 10-11) in automaticity, and “20% overall improvement in student’s ability to read with expression” (p. 11) after a year of implementing RT. Similar results were found in a six-week study by Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho (2008) where “growth in reading level” (p. 350) was “statistically significant” (p. 350) for the RT intervention group, as were results in fluidity and expression.

RT can contribute to increases in word recognition, vocabulary building and comprehension all of which contribute to improved fluency, due to an increase in exposure to text (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Because students tend to remain on task in RT, they read and hear more language (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008); they might reread and rehear scripts 15 or more times (Keehn, 2010). Keehn also noted that sufficient practice of manageable texts resulted in equal gains in fluency as compared to fluency instruction.

Many studies show that gains made in fluency following a program of RT may carry over to other reading activities (e.g. Grant, 2011; Mraz et al., 2013; Young & Rasinski, 2009). For example, in the Keehn (2010) study, “records revealed that transfer of fluency from practiced text to unrehearsed text occurred” (p. 53) after six or seven weeks of RT.

**Student motivation.**

RT encourages children to read, and student motivation is one reason that RT has such success in the classroom. Young & Nageldinger (2014) noted that rehearsing a scene many times was “akin to what is known as ‘close reading’ ” (p. 48), a “more focussed form of repeated reading” (p. 48) that results in a deeper connection with characters and meaning, and increased motivation for readers. In study after study, qualitative data show positive results in students’ interest in reading after participation in a program of RT (e.g. Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008; Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2008; Young & Nageldinger, 2014; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Students in the Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho (2008) study expressed “growth in confidence, and an awareness of their ability as readers” (p. 352), specifically celebrating their “improvement in expression and voice projection” (p. 352). From the struggling readers’ perspective, RT affords a type of oral reading that is interactive, where “scripts don’t appear as daunting” (Mraz et al., 2013, p. 171) as other reading materials might, and there are breaks while another person reads.

Rehearsing with their peers gives students a meaningful and authentic reason for doing RR as they practice for their RT performances. In fact, it seems that RT bridges the gap in reading ability with both low- and high-ability readers expressing enthusiasm and showing success in reading achievement (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008). Young and Rasinski (2009) observed this also noting that “every performance day the struggling readers were in step and virtually indiscernible from the rest of the class” (p. 12).

“Creating their own materials” (Rasinski, 2012, p. 521) is another motivating feature of RT for students. In addition to or instead of using teacher material, students can write simple scripts about their favourite story, or turn “content from science, social studies and math” (p. 521) into

performance scripts, thereby linking their interests from other content areas with written and oral expression.

### ***Performance.***

Simply put, most “students enjoy performing for other students” (Faver, 2009). Kabilan & Kamaruddin (2010) found students in their study “very much enjoying learning literature” (p. 149) wanting to “impress others with the most interesting presentations” (p. 150). Performing for real audiences, “for real purposes” (Rasinski & Samuels, 2011, p. 106) gives even reluctant readers an authentic reason to engage in RT (Rasinski, 2012). Finding an audience can be as simple as performing for their class, or students can present to other classes and staff in the school or to parents. The internet and technology can provide new avenues for procuring audiences (Young & Nageldinger, 2014). Vasinda & McLeod (2011) studied a “careful match of research-based strategy, [RT], and well-suited technology [podcast]” (p. 495). Beyond experiencing the benefits expected for traditional RT, students and teachers in this study reported that podcasting added “[a] wider audience and permanency” to the experience (p. 496). In other words, rehearsals were enhanced because students could do as many recordings as they liked until “they got it right” (p. 494) and performances became a “lasting record” (p. 494) that could be used for teacher and self-evaluation, as well as shared with new audiences.

### **Instruction in Readers Theatre.**

Preparation to teach with RT is uncomplicated. There is no equipment to prepare, there simply needs to be the room for a number of small groups reading out loud, as well as text in the form of scripts. Because RT includes many of the components of literacy instruction, namely speaking, reading, listening, and writing, teachers can feel justified in making RT a part of the daily program. The BC Ministry of Education (2006) document confirms that “facility in one

[element of language arts] strengthens and supports the others” (p. 15). Students benefit from integrating speaking with reading and reading with writing, for example, as they perform and write their own RT scripts. Teachers can encourage thinking and making connections by providing a wide variety of rich texts, and opportunities for students to create their own interpretations.

The role of the teacher in RT is also straightforward. To start with, “mentors must motivate and inspire apprentices”, by making “reading the centre of the learning universe” (Shaw, 2008, p. 216). As with any good fluency intervention, mentor teachers using RT need to model fluent reading while introducing scripts. Coaching and mini-lessons especially for prosodic elements worthy of live or recorded performance can be delivered by reading coaches and teachers. For two or three days after scripts are introduced, students practice reading individually, as well as in small groups and even at home. The practice week is a regular feature of the RT routine providing daily opportunities for group lessons and for students to listen to each other and offer and incorporate feedback.

### ***Assessment.***

Good instruction includes assessment *as* learning (AaL) and *for* learning (AfL) (Drake, Reid, & Kolohon, 2014, p. 16) as well as corrective feedback in order to help readers become competent with their scripts. It has been found that corrective feedback can “reduce the number of subsequent errors” (Conderman & Strobel, 2010, p. 16). Students and teachers can identify and ameliorate disfluency on an ongoing basis. Where more formal evaluation is desired, fluency, including expression, phrasing, smoothness, and pace can be evaluated using a scale such as the Fluency Rubric created by Zutell & Rasinski (1991) (see Appendix A). Improvements in accuracy and rate, both contributors to automaticity, can be evaluated using a

pre- and post- words correct per minute (WCPM) measurement, (Deeney, 2010), in combination with “oral reading fluency norms” (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006 as cited in Deeney, 2010, p. 446). Applying such scales and measures at the beginning and end of an RT program provides useful quantitative values, but the real “key to improving fluency” (Deeney, p. 446) is in “continual monitoring” (p. 446) during instruction.

### ***Scripts.***

Scripts are generally easy to find or create especially in the areas of poetry, songs, narratives, and fiction (Rasinski, 2012). See Appendix B for a list of resources. Material that is “meant to be performed” (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2008, p. 9) especially “material that [is] written with voice” (Rasinski, 2012, p. 520) is optimal for encouraging readers to practice “reading with meaningful expression” (p. 520), but “any text can potentially become a script” (Young & Nageldinger, 2014, p. 50). Differentiation to include the range of reading levels can be applied so that scripts “are well within [students’] easy or slightly challenging range” (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Rasinski, 2004 as cited in Mraz et al., 2013, p. 170). Consequently, heterogeneous groups can be formed based on interests rather than ability (Mraz et al.). Young & Nageldinger (2014) tell us that “all scripts are dialogic in nature” (p. 48) so it makes sense that understanding and interpreting scripts is based on “interaction with other actors and the audience” (p. 48). As one parent in Young & Rasinski’s (2009) study reported, “RT was great because [... my son] enjoyed having a different character and a new story weekly to read with his classmates” (p. 11).

### **A study of Readers Theatre.**

In a study by Young and Rasinski (2009), the effects of an RT program on fluency and reading achievement in a primary classroom were assessed. As the classroom teacher, Young

made RT an integral part of his Grade 2 reading curriculum for the 2007-2008 school year. Situated in a lower-income, suburban elementary school, the research class consisted of 29 students in Grade 2, nine of whom were ELL, with a wide array of reading abilities.

RT was selected as the approach for fluency instruction because of the RR component. A daily RT routine was immersed into a preexisting literacy program; by the end of the year students had participated in 34 performances. An average week included 45-60 minutes of classroom instruction and rehearsal, as well as required home practice. Instruction consisted of mini-lessons, such as “identifying difficulties with meaning, word recognition and prosodic features” (p. 9), as well as “guided reading groups” (p. 7) and working individually “with students who struggled” (p. 9). To help less proficient readers, Young also made use of the neurological-impress method (NIM) with more proficient readers “taking the lead in choral reading” (p. 9). At the outset, Young found it important to “model the process of choosing roles” (p. 8) and teach conflict resolution, but after the first month, students took care of resolving issues themselves.

Pre- and post-tests were administered to quantitatively measure aspects of fluency and comprehension. Using the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to measure word recognition accuracy and comprehension, Young found the average score of his students at the end of the year was well above the benchmark for second grade. Similarly, the class showed twice the average growth in reading rate and prosody between autumn and spring testing on the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) (p. 10). Results using words read correctly per minute (WCPM) also showed huge gains: from an average of 29.1 WCPM the year before to 127.6 WCPM for the year with RT (p. 10).

Young also collected qualitative data about increased confidence and enjoyment of reading from the students, parents and other school staff. For example, the school guidance counselor was “impressed by the high level of engagement of struggling readers, as well as the enthusiasm” (p. 11) shown by all the participants. At the end of a year-long program of RT, it was evident that students in Young’s class made “substantially greater gains than would normally have been expected” (p. 11) in reading fluency. This research is significant because the findings demonstrated that RT is an effective and enjoyable strategy for practicing RR with results for students of improved oral reading fluency, confidence and enthusiasm for reading.

### **Summary.**

The research shows how successful RT can be as a classroom-based instructional approach to improving oral reading fluency, comprehension and overall reading achievement. Results from many studies in different grades, with readers at grade level and readers who struggle, show similar affective results at the end of a minimum of six weeks in an RT intervention, such as gains in enthusiasm for reading, confidence in reading aloud, and more willingness to engage in other reading tasks. Readers Theatre is an engaging method for practicing RR with positive results in the areas of oral reading fluency and comprehension.

## Chapter 3

### Retrospective

Twenty-four Grade 3 and 4 students in a jumble at the front of the room try to line up side-by-side. Shy students attempt to disappear behind their more courageous peers who elbow one another into position, and many are rustling or dropping papers. Finally, all students are visible holding their papers in front of them and someone whispers, “1...2...3”. At this command, six students step forward from the middle and proudly announce, “The Boy Who Cried Wolf”. Thus begins our first Readers Theatre performance of the year. As I think back on my experience of teaching Readers Theatre (RT) for three months, I recall many presentations beginning as described above, yet progressing into orderly, entertaining performances. RT was a very positive experience for my students and me.

What follows is a retrospective discussion of my thoughts, choices, and experiences with teaching RT as a program for improving oral reading fluency. After I describe my inspiration for beginning this project I detail in a chronological fashion my class experience of RT. Since it was a 12-week intervention I decided to recount it in three one-month segments though there was likely some over-lap in timing of events. In each segment I portray our RT experience under the following sub-sections: approach, fluency instruction, scripts, group work, rehearsals, performance and feedback. Throughout this retrospective I integrate connections to the theoretical framework, literature review and courses taken during the Master of Education program. I finish with some key learnings about myself in this program, and a list of implications for future research.

## **Inspiration**

The inspiration to try RT with my students came while preparing a presentation for my first Master of Education course on reading. I introduced my classmates, all fellow teachers, to an article by Rasinski & Samuels (2011) in which we discussed the five pillars of good reading instruction, namely phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (p. 95). Shortly after, I was puzzling about what I had been teaching in literacy for years. I realized that my background was weakest in strategic, comprehensive instruction in fluency.

Researching oral reading fluency became a focus and it was not long before I was reading article after article about the efficacy of RT as a method of practicing Repeated Reading (RR) for improving reading. I remembered playing with RT in my years as a private school teacher where class size was a maximum of 12, and theatre was already a focal point for the whole school. I had not thought of trying it with my class of 24 students. It was after reading another report (Young & Rasinski, 2009) about the joys and merits of a yearlong RT intervention, that I was convinced and decided to try it in my class. I began a plan to pursue RT as an instructional approach for helping my students improve their reading fluency and thereafter my pursuit grew into this project. My hope in initiating this project was to increase oral reading fluency for low readers and reading comprehension for all my students: both are key to life-long success with reading (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2008).

## **My experience of Readers Theatre**

While planning for school start up in September 2014, I was most excited about introducing RT to my class. I thought that starting the year with a program of fluency practice would help to build skills for the rest of the year. Specifically, I wanted to help my non fluent readers transition to fluent reading of connected text, and my more accomplished readers to go beyond the level of

simply reading text to a deeper connection with and understanding of text. I was looking forward to experiencing first-hand the boost that RT can offer to skill, engagement and confidence in reading.

### **The first month of Readers Theatre.**

We began RT during the second week of school, which was late in 2014 due to the British Columbia teachers' job action (BC Education Report, 2014) and we continued through to Winter Break which begins in mid-December. While I had decided to teach RT primarily to assist unmotivated and poor readers I expected it to appeal to and benefit everyone. From an initial read of other classroom experiences reported in the professional literature (Cahill & Gregory, 2011; Keehn, 2010; McKay, 2008; Vasinda & McLeod, 2011; Young & Nageldinger, 2014; Young & Rasinski, 2009) with RT I found many other affordances that made this an easy decision: with RT overall reading achievement and attitudes were predicted to improve (Keehn), RT would be engaging for everyone (McKay, Young & Rasinski), students love working in groups (Vasinda & McLeod), theatrical group performance is motivating to do and watch (McKay; Young & Rasinski), and RT easily involves non teacher-centric, experiential learning (Young & Rasinski, 2009).

### ***Approach.***

On the first Monday of RT I sat with my class in a circle around the carpet. As I did every morning after check-in I read them a piece of literature. This time, it was a humorous, picture-book rendition of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* (Hennessy, 2006). When I asked if it would be entertaining to perform a play about this story there were plenty of cheers. Then I explained how they could perform it by reading scripts and there was instant enthusiasm from the I-love-reading camp and from the rest a few worried looks and moans.

For our first RT performance I chose Worthy's (2005) script of *The Boy who Cried Wolf* derived from one of Aesop's classic fables, because it was humorous yet dramatic and it could accommodate the whole class. I felt this was a good place to begin as a whole class play could generate enthusiasm and engagement. It would also give students their first taste of RT without the need for them to manage group work that I planned for later in the unit.

To get started, I distributed scripts to everyone, making sure to strategically match students that I suspected were in need of extra support with their more fluent friends. Because students were not breaking off into groups, I could also minimize how often the low readers were called upon to read aloud in front of their peers. For the less fluent readers repeated readings at the start of the first weeks actually meant listening to their more fluent peers while they read along. As research indicates, an essential element in supporting fluency is to model fluent oral reading (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). Though some studies suggest reading scripts to students before handing them out (e.g., Young & Nageldinger, 2014) I chose to pass out scripts before reading them aloud so my students could benefit from the experience of paired reading (Mraz et al., 2013). Next, I invited the whole class to read along with me silently as I read the script aloud. Three days and close to a dozen rereads later we had our first RT performance, as portrayed in the opening of this retrospective.

### ***Fluency instruction.***

For the whole class, oral reading fluency would be the main thrust of reading instruction during RT. In addition to planning special lessons for the less skilled readers I anticipated that all students would benefit from experiencing a "deeper view" (Deeney, 2010, p. 442) of fluency. Fluency is defined as "smooth, effortless reading" (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003 as cited in Young & Nageldinger, 2014, p. 48) at an adequate pace, with appropriate expression (Young &

Nageldinger, 2014). Further, as indicated by Harris and Hodges (1995), fluency includes “freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension” (as cited in Pikulski & Chard, 2005, p. 510).

Because reading fluency is multidimensional with many components contributing to its development (Young & Nageldinger, 2014) I thought it sensible to have a focus for each month. To begin with, I chose to introduce and practice pace and prosodic features of the voice such as intonation, modulation, and stress. These were each taught in whole class format using the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) as shown in figure 1, before being reviewed and practiced in groups.

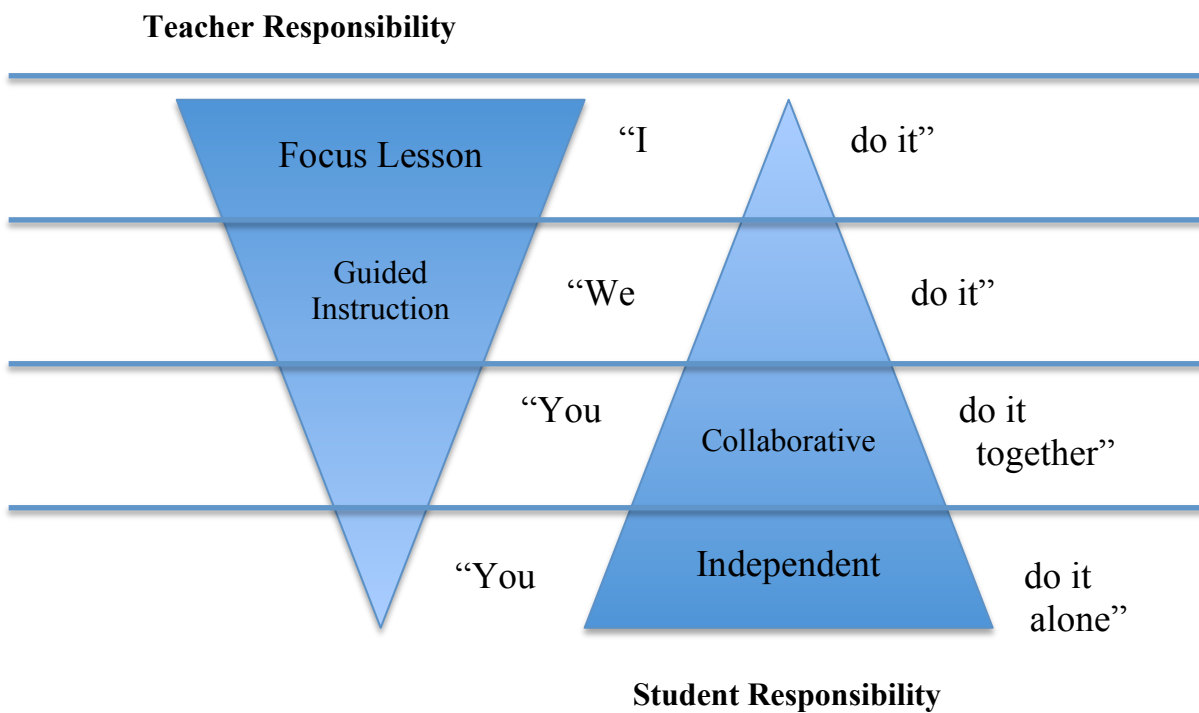


Figure 1.

Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (adapted from Pearson & Gallagher, 1983)

After each initial whole class lesson, I used a mini-lesson format for instruction in small groups, especially those with non fluent readers. Since expression, or prosody has been identified by many reading scholars (e.g., Allington, 1983; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003) as “an essential component of reading fluency” I also took advantage of impromptu moments at other points in the day to reinforce these same fluency lessons so that over time students became very familiar with expectations for oral fluency as well as related terminology. Reutzel (2012) suggests that explicitly teaching children the metalanguage of fluency, called “metafluency [...] is important in developing their ability to talk and think about fluency” (p. 122) so they can monitor and fix up their own reading.

See Appendix C, a Vocal Colouring Exercise, for an example of an activity that we used in order to practice expression.

*Helping less skilled readers.*

When we started RT, I was particularly concerned about four struggling readers, another who was ELL, as well as two who were reticent about reading aloud. For the latter, I hoped that time and repetition would help to alleviate some of their nervousness. I did not know at the outset the needs of the ELL student, as he was new to the school. As for the struggling readers I was counting on aspects of the RT experience, such as repeated reading of manageable text and performance for an authentic audience (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2008) as well as explicit fluency modelling and instruction (Mraz et al., 2013), to meet their needs.

Similar to those participants in the study by Wise et al., (2010) described in chapter two, my non-fluent readers “represented two different levels of oral reading fluency” (p. 342). Two of the four, Denver and Brent (all names are pseudonyms) were more at the stage of “struggling to fluently and automatically recognize words” (p. 342) and the other two, Amy and Heather, were

just “establishing fluency with connected text” (p. 342). For Denver and Brent it was helpful to support them towards reading in phrases, so they could hear the flow and look for meaning. Likewise, meeting Amy and Heather at the level of joining phrases to look for details and complete ideas, helped them develop mental pictures and understanding, which led to more fluent reading of connected text.

RT began for the struggling and reticent readers with extra support each time they received their scripts. Often we would pre-read and/or choral read until a point when these students felt comfortable to join their groups.

### *Scripts.*

We found scripts everywhere. In particular I sourced many from web sites and books, as there are so many pre-written scripts available. See Appendix B for a list of script resources. We discussed as a class near the beginning of RT what we would do with all the paper that it generated. We decided that students would be responsible for carrying scripts back and forth to home rather than photocopying every script twice!

For the first month all the scripts fell into the genres of fiction and fantasy. Scripts with varied reading levels were readily available and easily modified or created. I assigned some plays for the emergent readers alone, and chose for others those scripts that had both easy and more challenging lines. There were always students who wanted to read the parts with the greatest number of lines, so during the first couple of weeks there was a fair bit of chaos at script and role choosing time. I often chose parts for students ahead of time to alleviate this problem and so that I could strategically pair readers within groups. Many scripts included lines to be read by several players at once. It was helpful to assign the same role to multiple children, especially at the beginning, when even some of the fluent readers felt nervous about performing. When there was

a part where two or three players could read together it seemed to provide a relief for struggling readers and shy performers alike. Assigning parts to a chorus or team of narrators was a way to meet these nervous readers in their comfort zone.

### ***Groups.***

After the first week and a very successful whole class performance of *The Boy who Cried Wolf*, I decided to organize students into smaller groups, as the whole class play required me to be the director. Smaller groups meant students could be more independent in their discussions, choices and rehearsals, and I could move among separate groups listening and giving guidance as needed.

Generally I organized the groups according to differing criteria each week, for example a balance of common interests, boys and girls, friendships, or high- and low-achievers. Being in groups with the purpose of reading together gave students the chance to learn experientially while activating their prior knowledge (Powell & Kalina, 2009) about taking turns, staying on task, and helping the group, for example. I discuss instruction in group dynamics in the second month section.

Composition of groups affected RT rehearsals in several ways. At first, while I was careful to place a number of trustworthy students into each group, I also organized practice locations so my biggest behaviour-challenged students were close by. They tended to distract more than contribute, and needed several repetitions of instructions for rehearsal procedures before I could let them have some independence.

Most students embraced RT from the first day, organizing themselves into practice circles and discussing how they would proceed. Some started getting involved in helping me to create the program. What I mean is, some students saw the informal learning structure as an opportunity to

express their ideas about how to carry out RT, and wanted to help me with organizing scripts and rehearsals.

As students became more independent after the first couple of weeks of RT I introduced strategies for choosing parts also using GRR model. I began the process of GRR for choosing scripts with whole class discussions about group dynamics, the virtues of justice and consideration, and lists of ways to proceed in groups. Discussions were followed by role-playing and practicing in pairs and small groups. Then, students practiced with choosing things unrelated to RT, such as whose desk to sit at for buddy reading, or who would be note-taker in a discussion. Next, we transferred learning to choosing roles in front of the whole class, then progressed to choosing without supervision. As the GRR model suggests, students moved from complete dependence to relative independence, with the proviso that they could ask for help at any time from me or another classmate not in their group. With few exceptions groups became more relaxed and fair about choosing parts; that is there seemed to be more dialogue and less argument among those vying for parts.

### ***Rehearsals.***

After an initial whole class read of scripts each week, students would divide into rehearsal groups and locations. To minimize distraction it was best with no more than two groups at a time practicing in the classroom. Besides the classroom, we had a number of rehearsal spots available, including the Sunshine Room (a small room which could accommodate one group, and had a door) and various alcoves in the hallway.

Noise and a little chaos were constant factors during RT rehearsal. I have found this issue to be a given with any class of students this age when divided into smaller groups in order to accomplish a task, especially at the beginning when directions might not be well understood. To

begin with I managed this simply with logical consequences; that is, noisy groups had to prove they could be orderly before they were allowed to rehearse in the hallway.

*Schedule.*

An appealing feature of RT is that it comes with an obvious routine and that fact appeals to my sense of order. As much as possible I like to create a foreseeable schedule. In Table 2 I share my schedule for RT. The total time per week spent in RT at school was between 60 and 90 minutes.

Table 2: Readers Theatre Weekly Schedule: 8 – 12 rereads per week

Place & Time	Weekend	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
School	~ teacher preview, select, write, organize, and photocopy scripts	~ students receive new scripts ~ read scripts aloud ~ vocabulary ~ paired reading	~ in groups, read-around ~choose and highlight parts ~ prosody ~ paired reading	~ in pairs or triads practice with expression ~ whole group rehearsal	~ run through, if time ~performance
Home		~ read with someone, the entire script	~ read with someone, focus on chosen part	~ rehearse part with someone reading the other parts	

Mondays were for introducing new scripts. Either I, or a combination of student readers and I, would read the script(s) aloud to the class. The whole class might then reread with a partner, trying on different voices. Usually we would discuss tricky and interesting vocabulary to help with understanding. We would study pronunciation and decoding, definitions, and sometimes add words to personal dictionaries and writing. Monday night's homework was to read the entire script with someone at home.

On Tuesdays, students divided into performance groups, by my choice or theirs, and did what we called round-reading. Sitting in a circle one person would start with the first line of the script,

the next person would read the next line, and so on through the whole script. I discussed with the class more than once the possible disadvantages of round-robin reading knowing that it has been criticized for being ineffective for developing fluency (Kuhn, Ash & Gregory, 2012), and because it can be interruptive (Allington, 1980 as cited in Kuhn, Ash & Gregory). Since text in RT is not continuous, is separated into parts, it naturally allows for non-continuous reading. Furthermore, to allay concerns about possibly “damaging [the] social and emotional growth” (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998 as cited in Kuhn, Ash & Gregory) of struggling readers, I assured my students that they always had the choice to say “pass” when it came to their turn to read, and that it was not fair to put anyone on the spot.

After the first read through in groups players would select their parts and go through the script colouring their lines with a highlighter pen. On this day I also tried to meet with groups to include a mini-lesson on strategies for building fluency or comprehension. Tuesday was a good day to monitor my struggling readers. Sometimes I would read with them, and other times just give them verbal encouragement. Whenever there was extra time, or students said the proverbial “I’m done”, they were encouraged to read again in pairs or triads. On Tuesday nights students practiced their lines with someone at home.

Wednesday was usually the first day for groups to read through their lines together. I tried to listen to each group that day. At home students were to practice their lines with someone, focussing on expression, volume, and pace.

Thursday was performance day. Occasionally there was time to rehearse once in the morning before recess, especially if an outside audience was expected, then after recess began the process of being both a performer and an audience member.

*Homework.*

Students were asked to read their scripts at home three nights per week for 20 minutes each night. I have shifted in and out of believing in homework for this age. At points in my career I thought it was important that children start getting accustomed to it early. In recent years, I have let that go in favour of family time, just encouraging a nightly home-reading program. With the introduction of RT, I initiated a home practice schedule that was repeated every week, as seen in Table 2 above. I anticipated that if parents and students had a predictable routine, that assisted home reading might take place more readily.

Practicing scripts at home seemed to be an important contributor to reading fluency and comprehension. Some children said it was when they finally read their lines quietly with a parent that they understood the overall meaning of a script. At school, they reported, they were often too distracted and by the time they read their scripts at home, they had heard or read it two or three times.

*Performance.*

The first play performance only took about 10 minutes to perform. We had not invited or expected an audience so readers performed to me alone, yet there was still so much excitement and pride of accomplishment. After the first week, in addition to fluency instruction we began to discuss performance reading by learning about projection, emphasis and exaggeration in expression.

*Feedback.*

At the beginning of our RT experience we discussed, as a class, the merits and weaknesses of each performance, making sure to comment generally rather than criticize individual students.

Comments such as “I saw people holding their scripts in the low position”, or “I heard clear reading” were encouraged, and mentioning names was not.

Parents also embraced RT from the start. I heard from many that it was easy to keep up regular reading practice because their children were motivated to read the scripts to and with them.

### **The second month of Readers Theatre.**

#### ***Approach.***

By the fourth week, there was a flow in the RT routine. Instead of handing out extra copies of every script, I began to use the overhead projector for the initial read along. Also after a month, I chose to pre-read for some scripts and some students only as not all groups needed me to do the modelling. Many members of the class were able to demonstrate beautiful fluent reading in their groups.

As soon as I introduced new scripts and groups on Mondays, there began an organized bustle. Most students found their fellow group members, staked out a practice spot and started their ‘round-reading’ right away. Students were encouraged to scan their scripts before beginning ‘round-reading’ to try to get the gist of each part as well as the number of lines and reading difficulty per part.

RT was embedded into my literacy program by now. Like Young & Rasinski (2009), I found more reading was happening because students were rereading lines, even outside of rehearsal times. Not only were scripts being reread each day, but many organized and spontaneous speaking, listening, vocabulary and writing activities stemmed from the weeks’ scripts as well. For example, students chose to write stories in their free-write time that had parallels to their

scripts in use of characters, setting or story line, and new vocabulary was used in the making of announcements to lure in audiences.

### ***Fluency instruction***

Daily fluency instruction continued. The focus for the second month shifted to studying how to use punctuation and phrasing in order to correctly express meaning. Often I delivered fluency mini-lessons within groups so that practice was connected to their rehearsal. In other words, I would join a group during rehearsal, and introduce a mini-lesson. Then, I would use the script they were reading and each person's lines as material for them to practice my instructions. For example, while visiting each group I might bring coloured pencils for them to mark their scripts into phrase blocks, then listen for how proper phrasing improved their reading.

### ***Helping less skilled readers.***

The struggling readers were making noticeable improvements during RT. Improvement was particularly notable in their voices and body language as they became more comfortable with the progression from reading with hesitation at the beginning of the week to reading with clear, fluent presentational voices in performances at the end of the week. It also became apparent that confidence was rising in both the nervous and poor readers because I found them asking for more complex lines, practicing more immediately on their own, and welcoming the next week's script.

It was the shy readers, I observed, whose reading was the least influenced by participation in RT thus far. While their oral reading started out more fluent than that of the struggling readers, they were limited in presentational reading by elements of personality, as they did not feel comfortable. I adapted expectations for them according to their readiness to be 'on stage', by inviting them each to be the stage manager a few times, by practicing with them one-on-one, and by making sure to draw their attention to the slightest improvement in any oral reading or

responding activities. Meeting these students at their instructional level was important, so they could learn performance skills at their own pace (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

One exercise I found helpful with both the struggling and nervous readers was echo reading; that is, I would read a line or even just a phrase and they would repeat it. I liked to do this one-on-one as well as encouraging buddies to practice it while rehearsing their scripts.

### ***Scripts.***

After they had practiced the RT routine for the first month with provided scripts, I challenged students to help find and create scripts. Once, I asked them to find a picture book and make it into a script, which many seemed to love. In addition, some students adapted traditional fairy tales and plays, and one group turned scenes from our lunchtime read aloud into a scripted performance. every day while students eat their lunches I read a novel, one that was typically above the average reading level of the class. At the time, we were reading *Radio Fifth Grade*, by Gordon Korman (1991), which contained many humorous scenes that students wanted to enact in the RT format.

I also started to introduce scripts from different genres, including non-fiction narrative and expository text, such as a play about the solar system, which was our science theme at the time; and performance poetry. My group of particularly keen students regularly contributed ideas, books and their own stories for script ideas and even wanted to stay in at recess to complete the writing process. No matter which way we generated scripts, my students often commented that one of the best part of doing RT was being able to hold and read the script during performance.

### ***Groups.***

The practice of RT is ideal in the constructivist classroom, as individual learning is mediated through the social and cultural influences of the group (Smagorinsky, 2013). If learning takes

place in the relating of new learning to what is already known (Barnes, 2008) then my role as teacher was to enhance opportunities for groups to try on new ways of thinking and understanding. Vygotsky (1978) has shown that when students participate in group activities it gives them structure for developing their own independent thinking (as cited in McKay, 2008).

As a result and for the sake of their RT experience, we did have many meetings in which we discussed, evaluated, and set goals about group expectations. Everything from how to be inclusive, how to avoid dominating discussion, and to how to offer help and encouragement were pursued. Sometimes a discussion would turn into an opportunity to recognize one another's virtues and I would be reminded that encouraging the natural curiosity and cooperation of students at this age helped to create teachable moments. As Barnes (2008) pointed out, it is in "exploratory talking" (p. 5) that learners best "work on understanding" (p. 5). As groups progressed they learned to pay closer attention to individual group member's feelings, and also to become more considerate of other groups in their vicinity.

Depending on the balance of 'leaders' and 'followers', some groups functioned well, and others had more challenging dynamics to negotiate. Interestingly, we discovered that a group full of leaders could get pretty rowdy and non-functional, just as a group with four or five natural 'followers' did not progress very actively. Often the self-chosen groupings found more ease in working together than those I orchestrated. I did continue to try to orchestrate groups however, because I believed the varied experience would contribute more to learning. I tried selecting groups by criteria opposite from what I had used in the first month. For example, I organized groups with all boys and all girls, or all friends, or in a 'who-has not-worked-with-whom' fashion. I also occasionally rewarded students who had shown excellent effort the previous week with their preferred grouping or script.

After the thrill of the first month of group work, many students—especially the more fluent—were more inclined to practice their individual lines in pairs or triads as they found it more effective than trying to ‘manage’ their distracted peers—who were often the less fluent—in group format. Eventually our discussions about group dynamics seemed to make a difference in self-management as some of the behaviour-challenged students started to become more comfortable with reading aloud in practice groups and even tried to lead proper group rehearsals.

### ***Rehearsal.***

A routine schedule (as described in Table 2 above) provided necessary structure for practicing RT over an extended period of time. My students and I appreciated knowing that recess was preceded by rehearsal for the first three days of the week and that performances always took place after recess on the last day. (We have a four-day school week in our district.) In fact, some parents had RT in their schedule as well as evidenced by the frequently rushed, just-in-time delivery of scripts left at home.

Every week rehearsals involved a bit of jockeying as groups vied for practice locations. Of course, children could not work in the hall without their energy and noise spilling over to neighbouring classrooms, but we were fortunate that the teacher next to our class could adapt her schedule so that her students were elsewhere while we were rehearsing.

After a couple weeks of shuffling noisier groups out of public practice locations, I began to isolate individual students and work with them separately for short periods. This approach usually helped with overall noise levels. By the middle of the second month, noise was not so much an indicator of students who were off-task, as one usually expects, but a sign of groups in process and progress. After all, according to Vygotsky (1978), “language is first used for social communication” (as cited in Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 37) and the co-construction of working

conditions would have taken time for each group to re-establish from week to week. Groups did seem to become more efficient at the process of self-regulating as the weeks progressed. I noticed improvement expressly after our whole class discussions and exercises on turn taking, and how to choose parts, for example.

### *Performance.*

Every day of RT was enjoyable, but on Thursdays students arrived with a bit more bounce than usual, talking about and taking up their scripts hours before performance time. I do believe that RT performances levelled the playing field in that they were all just readers, not better or worse. This response is similar to the findings of Keehn, Harmon, and Shoho (2008) and also Young and Rasinski (2009) who found that struggling readers were “in step” (p. 12) with the rest of their class during RT performances.

No matter how the week’s rehearsals had gone, flowingly or chaotically, 23 of my 24 students always took performances seriously. It became apparent after several weeks, however, that one boy in class usually forgot to practice, and did not seem to care if he got his lines right in performance. He knew how to impede the flow, so we had on-going discussions together about how he could take more responsibility for his lines and posture during performance in order to continue being part of group work.

Most weeks, groups performed for the class alone, but in other weeks we had a variety of invited and unexpected guests. As Faver (2009) found, students liked performing for each other. They turned into performers as soon as ‘they took the stage’ generally using their best presentational voices in front of an audience. Barnes (2008) noted that in presentational talk “speakers’ attention is primarily focused on adjusting the language, content, and manner to the needs of an audience” (p. 4). Many parents made a point of being in the audience on occasional

Thursdays. In addition to our neighbour class who enjoyed coming to several performances, we had school administrators, itinerant teachers, and even the lunch-duty parents supply us with the bonus of an audience. As Rasinski and Samuels (2011) pointed out an authentic audience gives students a real purpose to perform.

Depending on the number of groups and length of plays, performances usually took 20-30 minutes, and longer when we started to regularly include student feedback.

### ***Feedback.***

As students learned more about what oral fluency sounded like, about individual and group performance expectations, and most importantly about how to give feedback, we started to incorporate oral feedback as an element after each performance. After weeks of practice with giving feedback, we heard comments like, “I could hear your proper phrasing”, and “sometimes the script was in front of your face”. For individuals who felt ready and agreed to hear comments in front of and from their peers, it was a helpful experience.

A practice I introduced during the second month of RT was self-evaluation. Students were given a form (Appendix D) after every performance to evaluate their own efforts and skills. This approach was useful for students as a type of formative assessment, and for me as evidence of participation. We also used the forms together to measure changes made and not made over time. In addition, I took many anecdotal notes about student participation in rehearsals and performances.

Feedback about the RT program from students and parents included comments such as that it was convenient to know what the homework was simply by knowing the day of the week. One parent mentioned what a relief it was to have homework that she could do with her son, and how

he regularly invited her to be part of it because they had fun trying on the many characters together.

### **The third month of Readers Theatre.**

#### ***Approach.***

By the third month of RT, my students were very comfortable with the weekly process. They were still very excited about practicing and performing, and were still willingly reading their lines 10-12 times per week. We continued to introduce scripts with a read along, but I was able to do that mostly with my small group of low readers while the rest of the class read aloud to each other. By the final weeks, I was able to step back from managing almost entirely as a high percentage of my students were quite self-sufficient. There were several students who even volunteered to give up having lines because they wanted to help direct groups. They seemed to enjoy this process, but I encouraged them to get back into a script themselves by allowing them more choice in group composition. In other words, the high achievers could create their own RT experience without my input. As suggested in the BC English Language Arts K to 7 Curriculum (2006), I wanted to “extend students’ capacity [...] to make connection to text, develop ideas, increase vocabulary, and use metacognition to assess their strengths and set goals to scaffold improvement” (p. 5).

#### ***Fluency instruction.***

Into the final weeks of RT I continued to emphasize all aspect of fluency instruction where and when it was needed. Because students were continuously learning at their own pace, it was important to review previous lessons for the less skilled readers as they caught up to where their more accomplished peers had begun RT two months prior.

In addition, the focus for oral reading instruction was on the performance. Performers practiced making eye contact with audience members by reading by phrases, not whole sentences, and taking their eyes off the page. They also added a bit of personality to roles, and learned to exaggerate pauses and pronunciation for dramatic effect. Some children seemed to take to this naturally while others never did feel comfortable with this kind of reading.

### ***Scripts.***

After two months most of the scripts we used represented an increase in reading level for all students, and the struggling readers continued to be almost indiscernible from the rest in performance, a very significant rise in ability. We continued to use mostly found scripts every week, other than a few student-written ones. Though I wanted to support students in creating their own scripts, this process took too long for it to function well week after week.

### ***Groups.***

By instigating RT with my students I wanted to lead and follow them through a comfortable routine in which they could make many social, emotional and intellectual discoveries. Working in groups offered an informal context in which to learn and practice interactive skills such as cooperation and collaboration (McKay, 2008).

As time passed, students became more adept at and interested in choosing their own groups based on scripts that I introduced and ones they found. Group dynamics flowed more smoothly for the most part, and I noticed this approach had an effect on other group experiences during the day where similar skills were demanded of them.

### ***Rehearsal.***

After 12 weeks of reading scripts 10-12 times per week, students had read their lines over 100 times. In all that time, I did not hear any complaining about having to read again. What I did hear

in rehearsals was “my lines are ready” and even “I have most of my lines memorized”. I believe it was because of the performance element that this number of repeated readings did not seem to “discourage engagement” (p. 271) as was found in RR studies that did not include reading text for performance (Taguchi & Gorsuch, 2012).

Rehearsals actually started to take less time because students were being more efficient, plus it seemed they needed less practice. So I was able to spend more time encouraging deeper connection with the text by asking prediction and inference questions or by suggesting they write and learn new endings for their scripts.

### ***Performance.***

The level of confidence of all readers had definitely increased by the third month. Familiarity, bred by routine and practice, took hold of even the nervous readers allowing them to overcome their fears to some degree. They no longer stood out as the ‘shy’ readers when they took their places at the front of the room.

We had many audiences during the last month of RT. Parents who had yet to visit, other classes from within our school, and a few community people who had heard about the entertainment value of RT, joined us for RT performances.

### ***Feedback.***

Throughout the 12 weeks, I was constantly hearing from students how much they loved RT. They loved practicing together, and they loved performing. In fact, when we came back after the Winter Break several students took an informal poll with the results that 22 students wanted to continue doing RT. The only reason I was able to convince them otherwise was that we would be using the time instead to work in the computer lab. Interestingly, later in the year when we were

presenting memorized poetry, many students commented on how much ease they felt because they had presented so often in RT.

I heard from parents of three out of four of my struggling readers what a difference they saw in their child's reading ability. Several also mentioned a change of attitude, enthusiasm, and courage about reading at home. One mother put it like this, "your readers theatre work at the beginning of this year lit a spark in H. and her reading has improved tremendously" (SR, personal communication, June 26, 2015).

### **Professional Reflection**

I love the bond I develop with students when we are in dynamic teaching situations. RT became one of those experiences where students felt empowered. Learning was taking place in a child-centric, interactive way for most of this program. Other than to manage behaviour, my teacher talk was limited to modelling reading, teaching short lessons and asking questions; that is, it became more dialogic than monologic. RT rehearsals had a feel similar to that of field trips where students are noisily and independently participating in something they enjoy, into which I have been able to release them after adequate preparation. Implementing RT created something special for my students as the level of contact between us could be more personal. Because we participated in the weekly routine so many times, we were all familiar with expectations.

I think I will be a better reading teacher now that I have a deeper understanding of oral reading fluency. Until this project I did not relate to the need for fluency to "form the bridge" from basic word recognition and decoding to fluent reading of connected text and comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005 as cited in Rasinski & Samuels, 2011, p. 95) and how momentous it was for students to have this ability established by Grade 3.

**Critique.**

While my students found RT to be a most engaging activity, it was sometimes seen as a break rather than a learning time. Notwithstanding the evidence that children benefitted from group work and dialogic learning in rehearsals, I found myself needing to manage off-task chatting quite regularly. This need to supervise interrupted my teaching. Some chatting also interfered with the flow of a text during script reading, which in turn hampered some students' ability to establish and maintain their connection with meaning.

It was not possible to appeal to every child's interests in assigning scripts as it is when choosing individual reading material. Plus, in order to assure that the weaker readers were being supported, some of the stronger readers were sometimes assigned a group based on their ability to model read.

I have two main concerns about scripts. As mentioned above, scripts are challenging to individualize. The other problem I find is that the reading is disconnected. A reader might have four or five lines at one time. This has advantages for weaker readers, but as Deeney (2010) indicated building stamina in reading is important. Reading in RT does not help to establish endurance.

**Key learnings.**

Understanding the connection between fluency and comprehension in order to better help readers at any stage of fluency is one of the most important of my key learnings. As a teacher and reading coach I feel better equipped to be more precise with detecting students' fluency challenges, and therefore exploring methods of alleviating them. Both of Samuels' prominent contributions (1974/1979) to fluency research – Theory of Automaticity and Repeated Reading –

have contributed to my understanding, the former as a basis to understanding, the latter as an effective strategy for addressing concerns.

In the future, I will be incorporating suggestions about “the phrased text lesson” (Rasinski, 2012, p. 253) into fluency lessons as an aid to comprehension because it is clear that “effective oral reading involves preliminary interpretation and understanding” (Briggs & Forbes, 2002 as cited in Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008, p. 338). In other words, prosody and comprehension have a circular relationship: a reader needs some ability with connecting words into phrases in order to make meaning so that the phrasing can be determined in order to read it correctly.

There are at least three other theories that will inform my practice as teacher in the future. Schema theory adds to my notion of constructivism that learners bring previous knowing to new situations: “the knowledge a person already possesses has a potent influence on what he or she will learn and remember” (Anderson, 1977, p. 2). Vygotsky’s (1978) focus on children’s ZPD will add to my application of differentiation, and the need to recognize children on their own pathways to learning (Smagorinsky, 2013), specifically in reading instruction. Because I understand in greater detail the process of learning to read along the continuum of phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (Rasinski & Samuels, 2011, p. 95), I am better prepared to scaffold learning by more accurately identifying children’s ZPD for reading instruction.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Popular research into the use of Readers Theatre in classrooms began in earnest in the 1990s (Campbell & Cleland, 2012) and there have been many important studies since (e.g., Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, Strecker, 1998; Millin & Rinehardt, 1999; Young & Nageldinger, 2014; Young & Rasinski, 2009).

The majority of studies I found for my literature review from 2008 onward took place in Grade 2 classes (e.g. Cahill & Gregory, 2011; Conderman & Strobel, 2010; Egmon, & Bauza, 2013; Faver, 2009; Keehn, 2010; Wise, et al., 2010; Young & Rasinski, 2009), and/or with selected groups of low or struggling readers (e.g. Begeny, Krouse, Ross & Mitchell, 2009; Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009; Grant, 2011; Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008; Mraz et al., 2013; Murray, Munger & Clonan, 2012; Vasinda & McLeod, 2011; Young, Mohr, & Rasinski, 2015). Two of these studies (Conderman & Strobel, 2010; Young & Rasinski, 2009) took place over an entire school year, the rest were for between four and ten weeks.

### **Expressive oral reading in intermediate grades.**

A conclusion I consider from the overwhelming amount of Grade 2 and special needs data from RT in the classroom setting is that there may be a need for more research to be done in Grade 3, 4, and 5 classes, and over a longer period of time. While it is typically expected that students are fluently reading text by Grade 2 (BC English Language Arts K to 7 Curriculum, 2006), it has also been found that readers are often “moved into silent independent reading too soon before achieving the expressiveness that expert readers embed in their oral reading” (Rasinski, Homan & Biggs, year, p. 2). In order to assess expressiveness in oral reading of later elementary years students, I would suggest a study of the effects of RT on oral reading fluency as a comparison between intermediate classes over a period of five to ten months.

### **Readers Theatre and technology.**

I found one study as described in chapter two that combined traditional RT with technology. In this 10-week study (Vasinda & McLeod, 2011) podcasting was used as the principal means of representing. That is, after a week of rehearsing scripts in the same way as in typical

implementations of RT, students made an audio recording of their performance and saved it as an mp3 file onto a computer.

I suggest that more research be done matching up the well-known strategy of RT with 21<sup>st</sup> century forms of representing. Specifically, I would like to see research on the use of iPads in the classroom as rehearsal and performance tools; for example, what affect their use has on the development of prosodic reading.

### **Readers Theatre and writing fluency.**

Every study on RT that I reviewed for chapter two related to oral reading fluency, which was the focus of my project. After witnessing the influence of three months of RT on my students' desire to write scripts, however, I also began to wonder if there might be a measurable increase in expressive writing abilities and whether that could be correlated to increased oral fluency as a result of RT.

I found one foundational study (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004) where the teacher/researcher introduced an element of writing to her third year of an RT-based literacy program. By using the passages for repeated reading in RT with her students as models for writing narratives, Griffith and Rasinski found the added element of expressive oral reading helped her students write more expressively.

After my experience with RT and reading Griffith's study, I believe it would be credible to develop a study that assessed the effects of three months or more of RT on writing. Changes in the fluency or expressiveness of writing after or simultaneous with improved oral reading fluency could be considered.

### **Readers Theatre and comprehension.**

Two studies stood out in the review as important in researching the relationship between reading fluency and comprehension (Egmon, Bauza & Moses, 2013; Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008). Most studies I looked at were concerned with how RT influenced aspects of fluency, such as, expression, volume and pace (Clark, Morrison & Wilcox, 2009) and many were most interested in quantifiable measures of pace or rate (Begeny et al., 2009; Grant, 2011). I would be interested in research that compared the development of separate aspects of oral fluency and their connection with comprehension. A question might be asked about whether the development of adequate expression, phrasing or pace was a better contributor to comprehension.

For a list of recommended reading, see Appendix E.

### **Conclusion**

As I wind down the writing of this project and anticipate the oral exam in August, I realize just how much learning I have accumulated. My interest started with Reading Fluency, which lead me to Readers Theatre and Repeated Reading. Based on my project work, I feel capable of discussing methods, characteristics, merits and drawbacks of each of these topics. Throughout this project my interest in children as readers has never dimmed, and my conviction and sense of urgency of the fundamental importance of being a fluent, meaning-making reader in our society has intensified.

My students and I embraced RT enthusiastically for three months this year. They flourished with independent learning and explicit instruction into readers who understood and could demonstrate what fluent reading sounds like. Because of the proven efficacy of RR as a strategy for improving prosodic reading, students benefitted from RT with increased oral reading fluency

and comprehension. As such, the Readers Theatre is an approach I plan to repeat many times in years to come.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Multidimensional Fluency Scale (rubric)

Zutell, J. & Rasinski, T. V. (1991). Training teachers to attend to their students' oral reading fluency. *Theory Into Practice*, 30(3), 211-217.

Multidimensional Fluency Scale

Dimension	1	2	3	4
<b>A. Expression and Volume</b>	Reads with little expression or enthusiasm in voice. Reads words as if simply to get them out. Little sense of trying to make text sound like natural language. Tends to read in a quiet voice.	Some expression. Begins to use voice to make text sound like natural language in some areas of the text, but not others. Focus remains largely on saying the words. Still reads in a quiet voice.	Sounds like natural language throughout the better part of the passage. Occasionally slips into expressionless reading. Voice volume is generally appropriate throughout the text.	Reads with good expression and enthusiasm throughout the text. Sounds like natural language. The reader is able to vary expression and volume to match his/her interpretation of the passage.
<b>B. Phrasing</b>	Monotonic with little sense of phrase boundaries, frequent word-by-word reading.	Frequent two- and three-word phrases giving the impression of choppy reading; improper stress and intonation that fail to mark ends of sentences and clauses.	Mixture of run-ons, mid-sentence pauses for breath, and possibly some chopiness; reasonable stress/intonation.	Generally well phrased, mostly in clause and sentence units, with adequate attention to expression.
<b>C. Smoothness</b>	Frequent extended pauses, hesitations, false starts, sound-outs, repetitions, and/or multiple attempts.	Several "rough spots" in text where extended pauses, hesitations, etc., are more frequent and disruptive.	Occasional breaks in smoothness caused by difficulties with specific words and/or structures.	Generally smooth reading with some breaks, but word and structure difficulties are resolved quickly, usually through self-correction.
<b>D. Pace (during sections of minimal disruption)</b>	Slow and laborious.	Moderately slow.	Uneven mixture of fast and slow reading.	Consistently conversational.

## Appendix B: Resources for scripts

It is very simple with access to a teacher library and/or the internet to quickly find enough pre-made scripts for a whole class to satisfy a year-long program of RT, especially for Grades 2 – 8. The following is a sample of the kind of good material that is available for finding scripts.

### Online.

<http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/RTE.html>

Includes hundreds of scripts by age and length as well as many lists of scripts.

<http://www.thebestclass.org>

A list of over 200 scripts with parts for 2 to 22 readers.

<http://www.margiepalatini.com/whats-l3-2/readers-theater/>

Includes 10 original scripts with laugh-out-loud characters.

<http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm>

Provides teaching suggestions and a list of hundreds of scripts.

[http://www.vrml.k12.la.us/curriculum/reader\\_theatre/home.htm](http://www.vrml.k12.la.us/curriculum/reader_theatre/home.htm)

This site has many lists of sources for scripts.

<https://www.readinga-z.com/fluency/readers-theater-scripts/>

Scripts by reading level. You must be a member to print or project scripts.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/readers-theatre-172.html?tab=4#tabs>

Lesson planning and resources for teaching RT as well as a list of scripts.

[http://www.readingonline.org/electronic/elec\\_index.asp?HREF=carrick/index.html](http://www.readingonline.org/electronic/elec_index.asp?HREF=carrick/index.html)

A great how-to site for implementing RT including an excellent list of scripts.

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/profdev/profdev082.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/profdev/profdev082.shtml)

Good introduction and pointers for creating scripts, plus a list of scripts in their archives:

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/reading/index.shtml#theater](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/reading/index.shtml#theater) which has teacher notes, vocabulary exercises and comprehension questions.

### **Books.**

Barchers, S., & Pfeffinger, C. (2009). *Multi-grade readers theatre: Picture book authors and illustrators*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Features 18 levelled scripts based on well-known kids literature for Grades 2 – 5.

Bennett, D. (2010). *Readers theatre for global explorers*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Features 20 scripts and 10 monologues about 45 worldwide explorers for Grades 4 – 8.

Braun, W., & Braun, C. (2005). *Readers theatre in rhyme: A collection of scripted folktales*. Winnipeg, Canada: Portage & Main.

Includes 22 scripts adapted from well-known folk and fairy tales with rich rhyming vocabulary for a range of elementary ages and levels of reading.

Coleman, M., Farley, J., Holliday, S., Ruffell, A., & Sishton, E. (2001). *Readers' theater: Ten high-interest plays with differentiated reading levels*. Grand Rapids, MI: Frank Schaffer Publications.

Provides full scripts with teacher notes about level of difficulty for each part.

Fredericks, A. (2007). *More frantic frogs and other frankly fractured folktales for readers theatre*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

25 satirical and wacky folk and fairy tale scripts for Grades 4 – 8.

Gerard, M. (2006). *Readers' theater: Sight words*. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Resources.

Contains lesson plans for vocabulary building plus eight scripts.

Katz, B. (2007). *Partner poems for building fluency: 25 original poems with research-based lessons that help students improve their fluency and comprehension*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

To support RT, poems can be presented for practicing vocabulary and performance reading.

Linde, B. (Ed.). (2003). *Readers' theatre grades 1-6*. Monterey, CA: Evan-Moor.

There is a separate book for each grade. Contains teacher notes, vocabulary highlights and follow-up exercises plus 12 scripts.

Rasinski, T. (2010). *The fluent reader: Oral and silent reading strategies for building fluency, word recognition and comprehension*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Includes a comprehensive examination of fluency, including a chapter on performance reading, especially RT. Contains a list of script sources (p. 123), suggestions for how to find, create and adapt scripts, as well as three full scripts at the back of the book.

Suen, A. (2011). *Read and write sports: Readers theatre and writing activities for grades 3 – 8*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Presents ten levelled scripts, each about a sport, plus graphic organizers and teacher notes for guiding the writing of expository, narrative and poetic scripts.

Worthy, J. (2005). *Readers theater for building fluency: Strategies and scripts for making the most of this highly effective, motivating, and research-based approach to oral reading*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Contains research, recommendations and lesson plans about fluency and RT as well as a dozen levelled scripts.

Zamosky, L. (2010). *Reader's theater scripts: Improve fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension*.

Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education.

Includes 11 Grade 2 levelled scripts, graphic organizers, and a Teacher Resource CD.

### Appendix C: Vocal Colouring

Instructions: Read these sentences in the manner suggested.

1. (Complaining) Why do we always have zucchini? Why can't we have something good for a change?
2. (Convincingly) This red beauty will be the fastest sports car on the road. This is one awesome car.
3. (Argumentatively) Why do I always have to do the dishes? It's not my turn.
4. (Hesitantly) I don't know ..... Maybe ..... I'll have to think about it.
5. (Bragging) I'm the best basketball player in the whole school, and I'm only eight years old.
6. (Sarcastically) Now that was a good thing to do.
7. (Impressed) Wow! Is that yours? I wish I had one like that.
8. (Startled) Oh, I didn't see you standing there!
9. (Upset) Look what you've done! You've spilled your drink all over my book!
10. (Whining) Why do I have to go to bed so early? All my friends stay up until 10:00.
11. (Soothingly) Oh no! That must have really hurt. Let's find a bandaid for that.
12. (Pessimistically) Why bother opening my lunch kit, my mother never packs anything good.

## Appendix D: Readers Theatre Self Evaluation

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Script: \_\_\_\_\_

### Rehearsing

1. This week, I practiced my lines \_\_\_\_\_ nights at home. (tally)

2. I remembered to bring my script from home \_\_\_\_\_ days. (tally)

3. At home, my effort practicing my lines was: *excellent, good, fair, poor*

Monday: \_\_\_\_\_ Tuesday: \_\_\_\_\_ Wednesday: \_\_\_\_\_

4. During class, I was helpful in group practice: *very, somewhat, not very*

Monday: \_\_\_\_\_ Tuesday: \_\_\_\_\_ Wednesday: \_\_\_\_\_

5. In rehearsal my effort to improve oral reading fluency was: *excellent, good, fair, poor*

\_\_\_\_\_

### Performance

In today's performance I remembered to: *always, mostly, partly*

~ hold my script low \_\_\_\_\_

~ connect with the audience \_\_\_\_\_

~ follow along the script the whole time \_\_\_\_\_

~ read with expression \_\_\_\_\_

~ read smoothly and fluently \_\_\_\_\_

~ give my character some personality \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: Recommended reading

Here is a list of three articles that I recommend for introductory reading and one book that more thoroughly covers the topics of fluency, repeated reading and Readers Theatre.

Rasinski, T., & Samuels, J. (2011). Reading fluency: What it is and what it is not. In S. Samuels & A. Farstrup (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (pp. 94-114). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

The Rasinski & Samuels' (2011) chapter provides a thorough definition of reading fluency based in part on decades of debate in academia, and in part on the authors' own very well respected research and opinions. They attempt to demystify some false assumptions that exist in education about fluency and offer recommendations for instruction for teachers and parents.

Young, C., & Nageldinger, J. (2014). Considering the context and texts for fluency: Performance, readers theatre, and poetry. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 7(1), 47-56.

In the Young & Nageldinger (2014) article, the authors weave a story of a struggling reader through the most current views on fluency, with emphasis on prosody and automaticity. They describe a style of RR called close reading, in which readers are given a purpose for reading, such as performance. The strengths of performance reading are exemplified in their descriptions of RT and poetry.

Young, C., & Rasinski, T. (2009). Readers theatre as an approach to classroom fluency instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(1), 4-13.

Young & Rasinski (2009) describe a yearlong study of daily integration of RT into a Grade 2 classroom, with the goal of improving fluency and overall reading achievement. As classroom

teacher and researcher, Young describes in detail his lessons, and quantitative and qualitative data from pre- and post-intervention measurements. The authors found high levels of reading improvement and enthusiasm after students spent one year rehearsing and performing 34 RT scripts.

Rasinski, T. (2010). *The fluent reader (2nd ed.): Oral and silent reading strategies for building fluency, word recognition and comprehension*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

This book is a very engaging read of the most up-to-date research combined with chapters full of rich ideas for best practice in the classroom. It includes a comprehensive examination of fluency, including a chapter on performance reading, especially RT.