

TEACHERS AS READERS: PRACTICING WHAT YOU TEACH

BY MARGRIET RUURS

It is 4:30 on a Thursday afternoon as I enter the restaurant called Oregon Electric Station in Eugene, Oregon. I drop my book bag on a chair and order an iced tea. Two of my friends are already here, and more drop in shortly. This is a monthly ritual that I always look forward to. Once we are all seated and sipping our drinks, Barbara calls us to order by asking "So what did you think of *Touching Spirit Bear*?"

A lively discussion develops around the book we have all recently read.

"It really tied in to the topic of bullying that my fifth grade is discussing," one of us says.

"My seventh graders will love reading it," says another one.

"Do you know if those Spirit bears really exist?" someone asks. We talk about Alaska, peer pressure, and writing styles.

Then someone says, "What about the other book we read—*Feather Boy*?"

"It, too, dealt with the topic of bullying, but it was so different."

"It was interesting to read a British book."

"I liked the voice of the boy in the book, but was the way in which the problem was solved realistic?"

Joining a Teachers as Readers (TAR) group has helped me to become a more critical reader. My book group meets once a month on a weekday afternoon after school. We meet in a wonderful setting: a local restaurant where the back room resembles an old-fashioned library room. Books line wood-paneled walls, and lazy chairs make for an ideal book-discussion setting. Sometimes we order food and munch on nachos while discussing the books we have read.

Mine is a children's book group: We read two children's or young adult novels per month and often also

what she likes about her book group, Gayla says, "Stretching my mind to read books I would never have chosen on my own and hearing diverse interpretations of them. The social aspect is very rewarding, and we usually have good food!"

The social setting is often what makes a TAR group attractive and fun. It doesn't feel like work! Book groups can meet in a school or in a member's home, as well as in any other convenient setting. Diversity of members adds to the dynamics of the group as well. "We respect each other's opinions, and we are quite widely read. Also,

How to organize a TAR group

- Invite about 10 people, including teachers, parents, administrators, librarians, and community members.
- Select a facilitator.
- Set a regular meeting date and time.
- Find a convenient meeting place.
- Establish a way to determine reading materials.
- Talk about listening and speaking skills and expectations.
- Read and enjoy!

groups. "As comments and comparisons are made, opinions and ideas are modified or expanded, with the result of the total being greater than the sum of the parts," she says.

Practical benefits

Does the TAR group affect the way you now teach? "Yes," says Gayla Clark. "I give students more opportunities to make connections to their literature and model by sharing mine. We highlight expressive and colorful writing, author's purpose, character traits, and other story elements."

"I read aloud to my students each week," says Alexa

Parker. "The TAR group helps me find the perfect books for each lesson." All participants who are teachers agree that the book group helps them to know what their students are reading and gives them a better grasp of which books to use and recommend.

The value of Teachers as Readers groups has been recognized by IRA as well as by other organizations, including The National Association of Elementary School Principals and the U.S. Department of Education. All of the TAR group participants I talked to agreed that the experience has enriched their lives as readers by making them read books they would not otherwise have selected and through the rich discussions that follow. Gayla Clark put it best: "Book discussions help us think about how we can teach our students to enjoy their reading and give us permission to do what we love: read, talk, and eat!"

If you would like to join or start a TAR group, there are several resources available to help you. Check with local and state reading councils to see if funding is available. The Oregon Reading Association, for instance, makes start-up grants available to TAR groups to help with the purchase of books. ❖

*Margriet Ruurs has written books for both children and teachers. Her latest book is *My Librarian Is a Camel: How Books Are Brought to Children Around the World* (Boyd's Mills Press, 2005).*



Books, food, and friendship all combine to make Teachers as Readers group meetings enjoyable.

our single male member brings a new perspective," says Sylvia Thompson.

Alexa Parker teaches children's literature courses at the University of Oregon. "I like the range of people in the group," she says. "Some are teachers, some were teachers, some are artists, world travelers, students, librarians."

When asked how being a TAR group member has affected the way she reads books, Parker states, "I pay more attention to the author's style and how the plot turns. I've started marking sections in the books that I want to talk about." Most of the people I talked to found that they have become more critical in their reading, more aware of the author's technique or voice.

"I'm more reflective," says Gayla Clark. "Sometimes I jot down questions or opinions. I also tend to reread interesting passages more, and sometimes look up geographical, political, or biographical information."

Karen Antikajian is a past president of the Oregon Reading Association and an avid fan of TAR

Resources

- Teachers as Readers Starter Kit with video, International Reading Association (see: <http://marketplace.reading.org>)
- *Teachers as Readers: Perspectives on the Importance of Reading in Teachers' Classrooms and Lives*, IRA book, Michelle Commeyras, Betty Shockley Bisplinghoff, and Jennifer Olson, editors, 2003, (see: <http://marketplace.reading.org>)

share picture books. Titles are decided on through mutual agreement, and any member is able to suggest new titles. Some of the books we read have been around for a long time, but we just haven't had a chance to read them yet. Others are newly published or have recently won awards and intrigue us.

Upping your insight

"Joining a TAR group has made me a more critical reader," says Sylvia Thompson of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who has been a book group member for eight years. "When I am reading a club selection, I read much more carefully and thoughtfully."

Gayla Clark of Eugene, Oregon, agrees. She has been a TAR member and facilitator for 16 years and has been instrumental in starting up several book groups in schools in her district. Her own book group reads adult selections rather than children's books. When asked

Where to find titles to read

www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html

www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/childrensnoteable/notablebooklist/currentnotable.htm

www.cbcbooks.org/readinglists

www.bookcentre.ca/book_reviews/index.shtml

www.waterborolibrary.org/bklistjg.htm