

# RESEARCH ON FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM ROUNDTABLES: STEPS TO A TOOL FOR SYSTEMIC SCHOOL RENEWAL AND ADVANCES IN SERVICE SCIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

Weekly “30/30 RoundTables” (30 minutes, 30 students) were implemented in two Fourth Grade classrooms year-long to determine their potential as tools for systemic school renewal--whether RoundTables were 1- sustainable: engaging and ongoing; 2- inclusive: democratically participatory; and 3- emancipatory: accelerating positive learning. These three criteria are proposed as necessary and sufficient conditions of an innovation within in an educational service system, in order to best enhance development of school participants as natural systems. Students took turns leading using a one-page RoundTable script which allots five minutes for the leader’s guide, readings/reviews, and teacher-suggested topic and 25 minutes for student responses--time distributed equally among all. Time-and-task analyses and questionnaire/interviews yielded promising results. RoundTables increased learning opportunities in reliable, measurable ways. Students liked equal turns, being leader, and hearing classmates’ comments. Future studies will: 1- add Faculty-, PTA-, and District-RoundTables to investigate systemic school renewal; and 2- correlate 30+ random RoundTable-using classrooms with STAR scores, predicting measurable group quality and statistical significance.

**Keywords:** educational systems design; systemic change; systemic renewal.

## Objectives

Our objective is to determine whether and in what ways “30/30 RoundTables” are 1- *sustainable*: a consistent, user-friendly activity; 2- *inclusive*: democratically participatory; and 3- *emancipatory*: accelerating unanticipated positive learning. These three conditions are proposed as necessary and sufficient conditions of an innovation within in an educational service system, in order to best enhance development of school participants as natural systems. In this study, weekly RoundTables were implemented with two teachers and their students (natural systems) in two Los Angeles Fourth Grade classrooms (service systems) over ten months.

*Description.* In the 30/30 RoundTable session (30 minutes, 30 students), students sit in one large circle, each holding a one-page *RoundTable Guide* (Appendix A). This guide is a script that contains: 1- *Leader’s Guide*; 2- *RoundTable Guidelines*; and 3- *Topic For Topic*. The teacher indicates the student to be today’s leader who asks five student volunteers to be the readers of the RoundTable Guidelines. Following is an informal composite of a weekly RoundTable session.

On the teacher’s cue, today’s leader reads the Leader’s Guide that opens the RoundTable session and cues the readers. On cue, readers read aloud the RoundTable Guidelines--five one-paragraph passages: *Our Time*, *Our Purposes*, *How We Listen*, *How We Answer*, and *How We Speak*. These passages remind students that everyone is offered one turn, and the only response is “Thank You” after someone speaks. These same paragraphs are read at

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every session. The student leader then asks the teacher for the topic, which typically comes from a current lesson, activity, or field trip related to science, social studies, or language arts.

Reading from the Leader's Guide (script), the leader then asks those ready to speak to raise their hands, and chooses to start where at least three students in a row are ready. The turn goes around the circle. After each person speaks, the leader says "Thank you." Each student has an option to comment as the others quietly listen. Comments are generally personal experience or interest, relating to the topic of the day. Comments, however, are not strictly limited to the topic. Sometimes a student says "Pass," in which case the turn passes to the next student. Boys and girls sit next to each other, all listening intently, some looking at the speaker, others looking down, or at the RoundTable Guide. Students occasionally wiggle in their seats, play with a pencil or other item, or rustle a paper while they are listening. Sometimes they giggle or laugh with the speaker's words, or they nod in agreement. They help each other in the leadership roles. For example, if the leader forgets to call on a student, students nearby call it to the leader's attention. When all students have been given an opportunity to speak, the leader reads the closing reading--which includes thanking the class for their participation--and turns the class back over to the teacher.

*Features.* The RoundTable Guide is designed to be 5 minutes of readings/reviews, leaving 25 minutes for student comments/learning reports--time distributed equally among all. The format allows all students to: 1-review five important basics; 2-give a brief learning report on a teacher-selected topic; and 3-hear 30 classmates' learning reports during each session (enhancing aural/oral language skills). All students are to be offered a turn as RoundTable leader during the year.

*Scope and Sequence.* This study is a step toward larger studies. Future studies will seek evidence of systemic school renewal; that is: the results when RoundTables are available to the whole school community in their faculty meetings, PTA meetings, and district meetings. Other studies will link classroom results to STAR data for statistical significance.

### **Theoretical framework**

Public education needs a valid and reliable plan for continuous whole school improvement. Traditional reforms, addressing only one part of the school community, have been short-lived. Systemic approaches aim to involve the whole school community but are considerably more difficult, as all system members are not at the same level of readiness for change.

Systemic change has been an obscure, ivory-tower concept to many school stakeholders. Recently, its importance has reached front-page news. According to a Rand Corporation report, California schools need "systemic solutions" which "would require huge sums of money" (Helfand, January 4, 2005, Los Angeles Times).

Building on compelling research in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and systemic school change (Jenlink et al, 2010), the 30/30 RoundTable is a potential breakthrough as a promising systemic solution that is also low-cost and user-friendly. It is:

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SYSTEMIC - demonstrating the three necessary conditions, it is:

- Sustainable: a regular part of a class/meeting as a 30-minute session—weekly in classrooms; monthly in school meetings;
- Inclusive: distributes resources equally within the class/meeting; adaptable for all school participants in their existing groups (e.g., classrooms, faculty meetings, PTA meetings, district-level meetings);
- Emancipatory: enhancing unanticipated positive learning for all.

LOW-COST - After very few coached sessions, users (students, educators, parents) run their programs themselves.

USER-FRIENDLY - It is engaging, user-ready, and easily adaptable by users for their own emerging purposes.

Another dimension of the theoretical frame of this study is its explicit shift of goal from systemic school *change* to systemic school *renewal* to emphasize the importance of facilitating change from the inside out. Einstein explains that “we cannot address a problem from the same consciousness that created it: We have to think anew” (Banathy, 1996, p. 255). Fullan (1991) provides a similar argument that in addition to restructuring, reculturing is needed. Indeed, Dewey’s principle of “students not as empty vessels to fill, but active participants in their learning” applies to educators, parents, researchers, and all school-decision-makers.

Early findings are promising. When studied in four 4<sup>th</sup> Grade classrooms, students reported gains in self-expression, authenticity, learning subject matter, learning about classmates, and improved behavior. Teachers gained increased trust in students (Gabriele, 2002). Katz and Ryan, university professors, found the RoundTable valuable in their graduate courses. In fact, “...two of the educational leadership students who are school counselors are using the Roundtable in their high schools with various groups of students with much success.” (2005).

The RoundTable’s value for meetings is anecdotal, but promising. A K-5 principal finds it “...good for airing important issues...” A superintendent states “...the RoundTable provides a kind of learning experience that makes a real contribution to the community as a whole...”

### Study Design, Methods, Data Sources and Evidence

*Selection.* One 4<sup>th</sup> Grade teacher had participated in a ten-week RoundTable study (Gabriele, 2002). She and her colleague wanted to explore weekly RoundTables all year, allowing every student a turn as RoundTable Leader. We decided to hold RoundTables Fridays: one from 12:40 to 1:10, the other from 1:15 to 1:45.

*Implementation.* Using the RoundTable Guide, the teachers acted as RoundTable Leader three Fridays in a row. For the rest of the year, students took turns being RoundTable leader. A suggestion box was created to allow students to suggest topics and make comments. Twice during the year, we held a separate RoundTable Revision session immediately after the weekly RoundTable session. At the first revision session, we announced new optional subject-specific basic readings inspired by the CDE Standards in science (Appendix B), history/social science, and language arts. At both sessions, we heard students’ comments (and comments from the

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suggestions box) about how to improve the format. When comments were unanimous, we revised the RoundTable Guide with the new words. For example, the original RoundTable Guide, in the *Topic* Section, read:

“Regarding the story/chapter, or topic....

- 1- What are your thoughts about it? the events? people? What did it mean? How did it make you feel? What did you like? dislike? What was interesting? surprising? What did you learn? What did you already know? What would you like to know more about? What were you reminded about in your own life? or anything else you’d like to say. “

Several students said this seemed like too many things to think about. Teachers and I explained that they were just suggestions to give them ideas. We *all* agreed to add two words: “SOME IDEAS,” which resulted in:

“ Regarding the story/chapter, or topic....

- 1- SOME IDEAS: What are your thoughts about it? ...” (the rest of the passage unchanged)

*Evaluation.* The study design used mixed methods. Data included time-and-task analysis of RoundTable sessions, questionnaires (Appendix C and D) completed by students and teachers, and observer notes. Time-and-task analysis was to determine whether we allotted the time as planned with no significant deviations or interruption (sustainability), and whether every student was offered equal turns to speak, read, lead, and offer revision ideas (inclusivity). Student questionnaires consisted of 28 questions to determine students’ experience of the RoundTables as sustainable, inclusive, and emancipatory, written in language appropriate for 4<sup>th</sup> Grade students. Students also wrote comments on the back of their questionnaires. Observer notes were informal—comments made by teachers in person and in email exchanges. Table 1 overviews the study design questions, criteria and methods.

**Table 1. Study Design Chart**

| STUDY QUESTION <i>In what ways and to what degree are the RoundTable applications...</i> |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| SUBQUESTION  | CRITERIA  | METHODS AND MEASURES  |
| <i>...sustained?</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent: Used weekly; No significant deviation from the format</li> <li>• User-friendly: Engaging; Easy to convene</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation weekly; time-and-task analysis of the 30-minute session</li> <li>• User views in questionnaires, interviews and observed communications</li> </ul>                 |
| <i>...inclusive?</i>   | Democratically participatory  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counts and distribution of learning roles: speaking, reading, leading, and revising</li> <li>• User views in questionnaires, interviews and observed communications</li> </ul> |
| <i>...emancipatory?</i>  | Unanticipated positive learning   | User views in questionnaires, interviews and observed communications  |

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## Results

This study consisted of two teachers and 60 students, so although time-and-task analyses and user views confirm great potential for the three conditions--that RoundTables are *sustainable*, *inclusive*, and *emancipatory*--results are only suggestive. These three conditions also prove overlapping and interactive, certainly a systems perspective.

Sustainability proved exceptional. There were no significant deviation or interruptions in the 5-25 format, and RoundTables ran more and more smoothly every week, and fewer and fewer students passed their turn (which contributes to the emancipatory condition). In fact, on several occasions, in both classes, the teacher gave students a second round, which gave every student two turns. Also, the RoundTables were actually held weekly, with the exception of unavoidable interruptions—holidays, school assemblies and field trips, and the teachers continued to use them the following year.

Inclusivity was also exceptional. All students had increased and equal opportunities to be readers and speakers. Not all students got to lead, as hoped. Nor did we have time to hear every student's comment during the Revision Sessions. However, all students could use the suggestion box, and sometimes the teacher chose suggestion box topics. Student questionnaires showed that more than 75% of the students thoroughly enjoyed increased, equal turns in the RoundTable session, especially reading, hearing and sharing their ideas (sustainable: engaging and inclusive). More than 75% of the students loved students being leaders (sustainable: engaging). Several students not getting get their turn to lead were disappointed (engaging). Teachers noted that they could relax and observe while students deepened their knowledge of the topics (user-friendly).

The emancipatory condition is suggested, but yet to be proven. Time-and-task analysis proved that the RoundTables increased learning opportunities in reliable, measurable ways. Users reported unanticipated positive learning in academic and affective domains.

## Significance and next steps

Contribution to theory and practice is a new tool to facilitate ongoing, engaging learning and communications that are sustainable, inclusive (democratically participatory), easy to use and revise, and potentially emancipatory. Contributions to systemic renewal/change are yet to be explored. Next steps proposed are larger studies of two types.

*RoundTables for systemic school renewal.* One goal is to implement RoundTables school- and district-wide, weekly in classrooms and monthly in meetings (faculty, PTA and district-level). The RoundTable could stand alone as a tool for systemic school renewal. It could also be used to prepare for, or accompany, a systemic school change program.

*RoundTables for classrooms.* For statistical significance, another goal is to study weekly RoundTables over two years in 30+ same-grade randomly selected classrooms, then correlate STAR scores with RoundTable use. Following Raudenbush et al (2008) asking how group quality affects personal outcomes, we anticipate that RoundTables will improve STAR scores

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significantly (emancipatory). To clarify, it is not our view that test scores are the best indicator of an innovation's value. In fact, we are more interested in healthy learning communities, supporting student love of learning, positive identity development, and respectful behavior. However, we are choosing to use the criteria of STAR scores for four compelling reasons. First, RoundTable studies are promising and indicate desired outcomes of our primary interest: caring community, respectful behavior, and confident learners who love learning. Second, these RoundTable desired outcomes are expected to result in higher STAR scores. Third, STAR data is readily available and abundant for greater potential of significant statistical results. Fourth, STAR data collection will not be a burden on busy schools and teachers.

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