

Student-Described Engagement with Text: Insights are Discovered from Fourth Graders

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Abstract

This article reports on a research study investigating student-described engagement with self-selected text in a classroom where a core reading program (in the context of this study meaning instruction based primarily on manuals and commercial textbooks) comprised the majority of their literacy instruction. Fourth grade students were invited to characterize their responses to their self-selected reading within focus group discussions. Data instruments included audio taped focus group discussions, student photographs, observational field notes, and students' literature. Implementing the constant comparative method for data analysis, outcomes were determined and implications for classroom practice suggested.

Keywords: Elementary Reading Methods, Critical Literacy, Intrinsic Motivations for Reading, Children's Literature, United States.

Introduction

The Misuse of Children's Literature

Nurturing meaningful engagement between students and what they are reading by evoking students' personal and emotional connections to the text is a phenomenon that research has shown to enhance meaning making (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Barone, 2011; Pantaleo, 2004; Short, 1992; Sipe, 1998). However, classroom practices can sometimes create stumbling blocks that hinder students' deeper understandings (Rosenblatt, 1982). The problem lies within several areas one of which is the lack of teacher education programs requiring a course or courses in the study of children's literature (Hoewisch, 2000). Cooper (2007) admonished that educators acquire strong instructional background knowledge about children's literature and how to use literature for supporting children's psychosocial development.

Another problem area is the practice of implementing comprehension strategy instruction using children's literature that narrowly focuses on understanding story elements, i.e., settings, characters, problems, and events, rather than textual analysis (Calkins, 2000; Collins, 2004; Daniels, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). This shift was most likely fueled by the

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mandates for students to show adequate progress in high-stakes reading tests (Guthrie, in press).

A further area of concern is the use of core reading programs (i.e., manuals and commercial textbooks) which tend to lump reading instructional strategies together without regard to matching text type or genre to the appropriate strategy. For example, informational texts (e.g., expository texts), rather than narrative texts, lend themselves well for teaching such strategies as K-W-L, Concept Mapping, T-Notes, QAR, SQ3R, Learning Logs, Main Idea and Detail Charts. These strategies are primarily used to help students gain and learn information from text that they can take away from the text to use primarily on a test. In comparison, stories, or narrative material, are more suited to invite students to make personal and emotional connections to text, thereby enhancing deeper understandings of these genres (Nathanson, 2006).

Textbook Reading

An additional road block that stands in the way of students forming deeper understandings of text is that the majority of school reading is based upon traditional textbooks (Alvermann & Moore, 1991) which consists primarily of standard forms of traditional language that limit the possibility for multiple discourses among students (New London Group, 1996). Both new and highly experienced teachers are frequently required to maintain a level of standardization to a prescribed reading program, rather than develop curriculum that aligns with what research has suggested as being pedagogically sound practice for teaching students reading and language (Pease-Alvarez, Samway, & Cifka-Herrera, 2010; Spencer, 2009). Some teachers have even referred to specific reading program manuals as “the Bible” (see Compton-Lilly, 2011). This pressure to adhere to highly specified reading programs have shown to be fueled by high-stakes accountability policies (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Colburn, 2001, 2005; Stillman, 2009; Stillman & Anderson, 2011). In a response to this pressure, teachers have reduced their reading curriculum to skills and strategies (Crosland & Gutierrez, 2003; Oullette, Dagonstino, & Carifio, 1999; Valli & Buese, 2007). This has placed teachers into an imposed contradiction to teach in ways that are in opposition to what they know are best literacy practices (Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Valli & Chambliss, 2007).

Consequences of Skills-Based Reading Instruction

A serious consequence could follow if students’ primary experiences with reading are for skills instruction alone, they may ultimately see reading as a chore and something only connected to school work. Dyson (2003, 2008) and Compton-Lilly (2007) reported how today’s expectations for literacy instruction narrows the opportunities for students to develop a rich repertoire of literary understanding. Dyson (2003), following a study of students’ literacy growth over time, argued that students do not learn literacy in a series of stages with sequentially learned skills that are the same for all students. However, literacy instruction today has seen a shift from student-centered, differentiated curriculum and instruction to mandated core programs, i.e., manuals and commercial textbooks, that treat all students as if they are all the same (Handsfield & Jimenez, 2008). In these situations, teachers are encouraging students to respond to their reading through sub-skill development (Cooper, 2007) as frequently seen on worksheets that lead them to the same convergent way of thinking about a text.

Motivation to Read

Past research has demonstrated that students’ success in reading is linked to their intrinsic motivations to read (Gottfried, 1990; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) described students’ motivations to read in terms of their personally held values, beliefs, needs, and goals. Consequently, when classroom reading instruction is

based upon what students are interested in reading, the greater potential exists for students to expand their efforts towards reading (Pitcher et al., 2007).

Another area that past research has shown to inspire students towards reading is allowing them some choice in what they read (Kurkjian & Livingston, 2005; Livingston & Kurkjian, 2003; Worthy, 1996; Worthy, Turner, & Moorman, 1998). Worthy (1996) argued that if students are not reading text that they enjoy, they may develop an aversion to reading that could last the rest of their lives. Strommen and Mates (2004) also echoed this view by arguing that a serious problem exists when students experience the majority of classroom reading assignments as unconnected to their interests and needs that they soon will become nonreaders. In related research, Pacheco (2010) furthered this problem by claiming that current classroom practice in reading instruction has seen a reduction in allowing students choices in what they read based upon assumptions that students do not always choose literature worthy for learning. Additional research has suggested that what students choose to read on their own frequently is not viewed school-worthy enough to count as literature (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Janks, 2000; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Vasquez, 2001).

Unique Reading Experiences

Cognizant of the current landscape of reading instruction in today's classrooms, the aim of this study was to discover how students were engaging with self-selected text in a classroom where the teacher was expected to teach reading from a core reading program and to prepare students to take standardized reading tests. With this in mind, in responding to literature discussion prompts focused on eliciting students' personal responses, would students, for instance, mimic their core reading instruction and respond in similar ways, most often focusing on the rote literary comprehension aspects of a text, or would they express a more critical, personal interpretation of text based upon their perspectives, opinions, and beliefs?

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded within reader response criticism. This school of literary theory focuses on the reader and his or her personal and unique experience of a literary work. The reader is viewed as an active participant who creates meaning from the text through interpretation. Rosenblatt (1969, 1982), a prominent theorist in reader response criticism, held that readers experience a text through the melding of the emotional and intellectual dimensions of reading, and that readers need to have an engaged relationship with a text, or a "lived-through" experience before being able to critically analyze a text, and this involves emotional and intellectual aspects of the experience. She argued that these reader responses are not mutually exclusive from each other, but instead, work in concert with each other depending on the reader's purpose or stance for reading (1982). This engagement or transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978) between the text and the reader is necessary for positioning the reader to experience the joy of reading, and thereby increasing the likelihood that he will become a life-long reader. Moreover, Rosenblatt (1976) proposed that there exists a transactional event between the reader and the text that takes into account the reader's social and cultural context. Based upon this assumption, when students demonstrate understanding of text, they do so through the lens of their personal perspectives, opinions, and beliefs. Pantaleo (2004) contributed to this understanding by examining students' textual connections through small-group discussions and found supporting evidence that students' discussions about literature reflected their personal understandings of the text as they expressed interpretations in relationship to their own life experiences.

Students read to gain something from the experience. Within Rosenblatt's (1978) reader-response theory, a reader positions himself or herself in a particular stance

towards a text. If the focus is to take knowledge away from the text, then an efferent stance is assumed, whereby the reader will think about the informational concepts and details to be retained for personal use. When readers are focused on a story or "poem," then they will more likely be thinking about the feelings, emotions, and perspectives conveyed within the text and use these as bridges to make connections to their own humanness. Rosenblatt held that the relationships between texts, narrative and expository; and stances, aesthetic and efferent; represent dominant tendencies in readers, but not necessarily rigid divisions. In turn, readers can and do form informational attitudes towards narrative texts and emotional attitudes towards expository texts.

When students' needs are met through reading, this is something that they not only want to repeat, but also to share with each other. It is through these student exchanges that students learn to understand themselves and those around them (Rosenblatt, 1982). Teachers can capitalize on students' natural emotions by reading aloud to them selections that build excitement, intrigue, mystery, and that are laced with juvenile humor. Students frequently express their emotions through non-verbal ways such as wide-eyes, gaping mouths, and tense bodies. When students experience reading in this manner, the activity becomes something that they want to repeat.

When teachers want students to experience the emotion, feelings, sense of social justice, or human connectedness through reading, then the appropriate texts lie within the narrative genres of fiction (Stoodt-Hill & Amspaugh-Corson, 2009). Story related activities that would influence students to connect emotionally to the text might include dramatization (see Paley, 1981, 1990), visual representations of the story which could take the form of graphic arts or multimedia formats (see Bedard & Fuhrken, 2011), and peer discussions, poetic interpretations, and community service projects (see Adams, 2007). Through these types of responses, students are engaged in multimodal approaches to learning (De Koning & van der Schoot, 2013; Gardner, 2006), transmediation (Mills, 2011; Siegle, 2006), and aesthetic responses to texts (Greene, 2001; Johnson, 2008; Lohfink & Loya, 2010).

Studies on motivation and effective teaching strongly suggest that children's literature plays a key role in engaging students (Pressley, Dolezal, Raphael, Mohan, Roehrig, & Bogner, 2003). Intrinsic motivation to read is tied to a student's joy in reading that is done "for its own sake," which is characterized by the student's excitement and interest in the act of reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). It is through this excitement and motivation that literary relationships are born. The context in which students are engaged in reading instruction can have a powerful influence on the stance that students assume while reading. In other words, what students are being asked to do in their reading classroom will have an influence upon the reading connections that they form (Sipe, 2008).

Open-ended Response to Reading

Sipe (2000), in a study examining the spontaneous responses of second graders to literature found that they used their comprehension and interpretation of story events as springboards into their own creative purposes. In a similar context, while investigating a group of second graders who were allowed and encouraged to respond to literature through creative expressions, Adomat (2010) found that the students' understandings of the literature was enhanced. Taking a different, but related approach, Soundy and Drucker (2010) investigated how students used illustrations in their literature as models for their own creations. They found that the students were able to demonstrate their own literary understandings through self-created illustrations.

Austin (2010) examined readers' responses to a novel and found that her participants responded to how the author created the characters, setting, problem, events and theme. In addition, she claimed that a reader's background knowledge and experiences relative to the content of the novel, had a strong impact upon the reader's responses. In addition, Mellor and Patterson (2000) as well as Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen (1998), suggested that students develop reader responses in relationship to how authors have situated characters both socially and culturally within a narrative.

Martin, Smolen, Oswald, and Milam (2012) analyzed the oral and written responses of eighteen third grade students while they read literature that contained themes of social justice. They concluded from their data that the students responded to their readings with a heightened sense of respect, caring, and understanding towards other people in need. In addition, Moller (2012), indicated that while students were discussing a novel in which the author brings to the forefront concerns about the social and political treatment of a certain group of people, the students became increasingly empathetic in their understanding that at first, was lacking.

Heath (2013) provided evidence based upon her three decades of research on the learning lives of working-class families that students seek out reading opportunities that develop and broaden their individual special interests. She asserted that it is crucial for educators to pay attention to what interests students and to support them in their choices of learning projects. Additionally, in a study involving 384 students, Pitcher, et al. (2007), discovered that students were most motivated to read literature that connected to a topic that held special interest to them. Moreover, they found that students' reading interests and needs usually did not match the assigned reading in their classrooms.

In her earlier research, Heath (1986) argued that developing a child's imagination through reading was the necessary component for comprehension and textual interpretation, and therefore, teaching to the imagination through children's literature should be the goal of reading instruction. Vygotsky (1978) pointed out that imaginative thinking is the precursor of abstract thought. He held that children's imaginative play leads to the creation of a zone of proximal development that enhances problem-solving skills beyond what the child currently is capable. Cooper (2007) further confirmed that imaginative play and imaginative literature are connected through their mutual support for helping children develop problem solving skills and in addition, enhancing their intellectual, social, and emotional development. Researchers such as Coles (1989) and Greene (1995) admonished the necessity of imaginative literature for the promotion of self-awareness, creation of new knowledge, and the awareness of social aims. Frequently, when students' imaginations are sparked, their responses are manifested through out-of-school, self-generated, and spontaneous multimodal activities (Siegel, 2006) that spring from literature, but are not teacher assigned. For example, students role-play character action (Sipe, 2000), illustrate visualized content (see De Koning & van der Schoot, 2013), create videos (see Schillinger, 2011), develop storyboards (see Bogard & McMackin, 2012), or record songs (Cardany, 2012).

We, as educators, have the responsibility to ignite spontaneous and intrinsic reader responses within students; however, when teachers adhere to a core literacy curriculum, which is typically standardized (one-size-fits-all) and scripted, they are in effect assuming that all students are the same, or "generic" (Luke, 1995/1996), and there is scant opportunity for students to experience authentic lived-through engagement (Rosenblatt, 1969, 1982) with a text that would cause them to create the literary relationships necessary to foster a life time of reading desire and enjoyment.

These are the concerns that led to this present study, and insights were discovered from the primary source, the students.

Method

Participants

The goal of the study was to describe and interpret social phenomena in a natural setting (Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, the study utilized the constructivist paradigm of being descriptive, qualitative, and naturalistic (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) explained that qualitative researchers are not understood simply as objective cameras for recording data, but rather interpret the data through the perspectives of their own subjectivities and intellectual backgrounds, and become part of the context that they are studying. Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained that researchers who act from the constructivist research paradigm do not approach data with rigid expectations, but rather build grounded theory based on the conceptual relationships they construct from the data. In addition, Tracy (2013) described qualitative research as immersing oneself into the context being studied in order to make sense of it.

The School

The study was developed over the course of five months in a fourth grade classroom located in an urban community made up of two adjoining cities with a population of about 100, 000 located in the Midwestern United States. The school itself has a population of about 400 students Kindergarten-grade six, with 89% European American, 5.3% African American, 3.7% Hispanic, and 3.9% Asian American.

The Teacher and Researcher

The classroom teacher, Connor (pseudonyms used throughout), was in his eighth year of teaching, all spent in the fourth grade. Both his undergraduate and master's program emphasized the constructivist approach that involved children in actively constructing their own meaning through social collaboration within the classroom setting.

As the researcher, I added my own background to the social context of the classroom. My teaching experience included 14 years as an elementary classroom teacher. Although I am presently a university professor and researcher, the common ground between myself and Connor as classroom teachers enabled us to communicate fluidly with understanding.

The Students

The classroom students were a heterogeneous group of nine boys and 11 girls. There was one African American girl and one Asian American boy, and the rest were of Anglo European ethnicity. In this class all students were either reading at grade level or above.

The Classroom Context

The classroom was organized with student desks clustered in small groups, tables, book shelves with novels and reference materials, and a computer area with four desktop computers. During Connor's literacy block, students were engaged individually and silently in a version of the Daily Five (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Connor's version of the Daily Five involved students in reading alone, listening to books on tape, working on writing, and working on a computer with a spelling program. While students were working by themselves, Connor called small groups to come to a kidney shaped table in front of the classroom for reading instruction from the manual *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for all Children* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) that he used for his core

reading program. Adhering to this core program, Connor delivered instruction, according to the manual, in “story” elements including characters, plots, and themes; however, included within the directions are for the students to look for important ideas and concepts, which are elements more typically associated with expository text.

Most of the books that Connor used followed the story grammar format, and the book list in the manual mainly lists narrative titles. For homework, students took their group assigned books home and wrote summaries in a journal. At home, students also kept a reading log in where they recorded the number of pages read and the amount of time spent reading self-selected books. In the middle of the literacy block, students engaged in sustained silent reading (SSR) and ate a snack, after which the Daily Five resumed along with the guided reading instruction.

Data Collection

Observational Field Notes. I kept a researcher’s journal (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) in which I wrote various types of notes throughout the study. I wrote descriptive notes about the context of the setting including the appearance of the classroom and the activities of the students and teacher (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Merriam (1998) asserts that observations represent a first-hand encounter with the phenomenon of interest and when combined with interviewing, allow for a more complete interpretation. I recorded reflective notes regarding my ideas for the procedures for the study that would best fit into the social context of the classroom (Richardson, 1994). I wrote summaries of conversations that I had with Connor that later served as member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). While the students were involved in the focus interviews, I wrote analytic reflections that represented my initial or gut reactions (Tracy, 2013) regarding my interpretations of the responses that the students were conveying to me.

Audio Recordings. The students were audio taped during the focus group interviews in order to obtain the best possible record of their exact words (Patton, 1990). The students spoke in their own words in response to the interview prompts and were not following any type of a predetermined script or survey.

Photographs. Connor provided photographs of all the students. The photographs provided rich, descriptive data that I used during data analysis to bring back memories of the students that served to further my understanding and interpretation of their spoken words on the audio tapes (Bogden & Bilken, 2007).

Literature. The literature that the students discussed during the focus group interviews was documented and became part of the analysis process. Students were not required to bring literature, and they were not limited in what they decided to discuss.

Phases of Data Collection. The study was constructed in a series of phases over five months. During the first phase, the goals were to gather data specifics about the school, teacher, and students. During the second phase, data were gathered relating to the classroom’s culture, routines, and organization. It was during this phase that plans were made between Connor and me for implementing the focus group interviews. The last phases of the data construction were the focus group interviews.

Focus Group Interviews. In qualitative research, interviews can be thought of as a conversation with a purpose (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews can range on a scale from highly structured where the interview questions are carefully formulated beforehand, or an unstructured format, where the interviewer asks and actively listens for the sake of understanding what the interviewees are experiencing and communicating in their own words (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The type of interviews chosen for this study were semi-structured, focus group interviews. Merriam (1998) explains that the semi-structured interview is halfway between the structured and

unstructured interview with some of the same open-ended questions asked of all the participants in pursuance of the phenomenon under study, but allowing for questions and answers to naturally occur. Similarly, Tracy (2013) described focus group interviews as guided group discussions that are characterized by interactive dialogue between the interviewer and the participants. This above description illuminates the focus group interviews for this present study.

The focus interviews were recorded in two ways, notes taken during the interview and audio recordings. The students were randomly assigned to five groups for the interviews.

The aim of the study was to discover from the participants how they were responding to the literature in their lives given the current emphasis on testing and focusing reading instruction on preparing students to take these tests. For the purpose of learning from the students, the following open-ended, focus interview discussion prompts were created and are presented below along with the intended rationale for each one.

1) Tell me the title of a book, magazine, or something else that you are now reading or have recently read that you really liked. The aim of this prompt was to discover the genres and formats of literature the students enjoyed along with giving them the approval of discussing alternate literature that may or may not be connected to classroom practice. In addition, the prompt was intended to be easy for the students to answer, therefore acting as a segue into an open-ended discussion framed by the subsequent prompts.

2) Tell me what you liked about the literature. The intention of this prompt was to discover from the students their intrinsic motivation for reading the literature they chose to discuss.

3) Tell me about activities, either in school or out-of-school, that you did, that were related somehow to the literature that you read. This could also be an activity that you have not done yet, but would like to do someday. This discussion prompt was created to discover from the students how they were responding to the literature they were reading.

4) What about a book, magazine, or other reading material draws you to want to read it? The purpose of this prompt was to find out from the students if they had a specific genre or set of text characteristics that appealed to them when selecting literature for their personal enjoyment.

Data Analysis

Preparation of the Data Analysis. In pursuance of making the data collected during the duration of the study readable, workable, and to provide for trustworthiness, the taped focus group discussions were transcribed, the researcher's journal was typed, and the photographs of the students were printed. The data were coded as to types and sources (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Unitizing. The next phase of data analysis was to identify the units of meaning contained within the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described a unit of meaning as the smallest piece of information about something that can be understood without any additional details other than the knowledge of the broader context from which it came. Unitizing is a component embedded into the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Maykut and Morehouse (1994) explained that the constant comparative method, identifying and categorizing specific units of information and comparing the units to previous

information, provides the researcher with a clear direction for engaging in analysis of data that is both challenging and illuminating. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) further defined this analysis practice as examining all of the data for repetitive refrains.

Discovery. The units of meaning gleaned from the data were further refined during the discovery phase of analysis. Taylor and Bogden (1984) described this process as looking for recurring words, phrases, and concepts across the units of meaning. The discovery list for this study was constructed and reconstructed three different times in taking multiple soundings (Gilligan, Brown, & Rogers, 1989) while searching for subtle meanings and complex perspectives expressed within the data. Rather than listening to a story, a story was being discovered from the data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Inductive category coding. During this process of data analysis, the prominent ideas were selected from the discovery list, and each of these became a provisional category. This process continued with grouping the units of meaning into related categories using the look/feel alike criteria advanced by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Rules of inclusion. Once the units of meaning were grouped into categories, they were examined to determine the overall message contained within them. This information, or rule of inclusion, then became a propositional statement of fact grounded in the data (Taylor & Bogden, 1984), and used to either include or exclude subsequent units of meaning for each category. Once these were determined, the units of meaning were coded as to their rule-based category.

Examining relationships and patterns across categories. Further syntheses of the data involved examining relationships between categories and studying the propositions for those that stood-alone or formed salient relationships and patterns (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). During this final analysis in applying the constant comparative process, it became evident that some of the categories shared ideas that were related. These ideas were grounded in the data and stood as evidence of what I was learning from my participants in the study, and is what led to the determination of the study outcomes, which are presented and discussed in the next section

Results And Discussion: Defining The Students' Text Engagements

Five outcomes emerged from the data analysis process and revealed the nature of the students' responses with the literature they chose to discuss. Each outcome is discussed below along with example evidence grounding the outcome within the data and past research.

Outcome 1: Students Respond to Text through the Enjoyment of an Event in their Reading

This outcome was evidenced in the data by those students who expressed literary understandings of events described in stories wherein the characters are involved in solving problems that sometimes leads to unique and humor-filled situations. This outcome from the present study expands upon previous research from Sipe (2000) suggesting that students respond to stories through interpreting and evaluating events. In the data excerpts below, Fed recounts a funny event in his book where some characters are pranked with a bucket of water being thrown on them. Billy Bob details a recurring event in his book wherein whenever the main characters encounter bad luck, they blame it on a family curse. Rob is impacted by an event in his book where two characters receive broken bones as consequences of their ill-conceived actions. Selected examples from the data that stood as evidence that appeared to be representative of this outcome included the following:

Fred: I am reading Diary of a Wimpy Kid [Kinney, 2007]. It is funny, because on Halloween, whenever teenagers walk by, his dad will throw a bucket of water on them, and I like that because it is funny...I like to read funny books.

Billy Bob: I am reading Holes [Sachar, 2000]. I like that part where he gets sent to jail, because, well actually, because they keep on blaming their great, great, great grandfather, they say no good pig stealing great, great, great grandfather, I think...Um, because every time they blame him and um, when he got sent to court, he was at the wrong place at the wrong time, and that's the curse from his great, great, great grandpa.

Rob: I am reading The Invention of Hugo Cabret [Selznick, 2007]. I like the part where the girl and the boy were going to break into the apartment, but the boy slammed his hand in the door and broke it, and the girl dropped a box on her leg, and she broke her leg.

Data that represented this outcome was reflective of the students' reading instruction in the classroom with their core reading program which emphasized recalling events from the plots of stories. During the discussion, the students' body language and inquisitive expressions aimed at me gave me the impression that they thought I had a correct answer in mind, and they were charged with finding out what it was. This too, was indicative of their classroom reading instruction wherein they were asked to relay details of the stories back to their teacher. Even though the discussion prompts were intended to be open-ended, students seemed to be constrained, possibly due to being on unfamiliar ground. This outcome was indicated in past research findings suggesting that reading instruction based on core programs, narrowly focuses on story elements rather than on textual analysis (Calkins, 2000; Collins, 2004; Daniels, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997).

Outcome 2: Students Respond to their Reading through Self-creative Endeavors

Patterns in the data demonstrated that students responded to their reading through creative expressions that sprang from the text. This outcome builds upon previous research by Adomat (2010) confirming that students use literature as a platform for expressing their understandings through a variety of creative modalities. Additionally, Sipe (2000) also concluded that students engage and respond to literature by using their comprehension of the text as a springboard into their own creative expressions. Moreover, Soundy and Drucker (2010) suggested that students use the illustrations in literature as models for their own creations, thereby demonstrating their literary meaning making and understanding. In the data excerpts below, Fred gives an account of how he responded to his book by creating a three dimensional representation of himself reading the book. Frankie felt inspired to mold a clay dragon like the one depicted in his book. Kinsey details a bookmark that she made after reading her book, but then comes up with an idea influenced by her book to create her own, unique version of the story. Rob conveys that he drew a picture of himself reading his book. Isabella also made a drawing after reading her book wherein she represented the front cover. Some data examples that were categorized into this outcome are given below:

Fred: I made the book out of a paper and a self-portrait of myself with the book in my hands and it looks like I am reading it.

Frankie: I want to make a clay dragon like they did in the book [Ice Fire, D'Lacey, 2006]. I like adventure stories.

Kinsey: I like James and the Giant Peach [Dahl, 1961]. I have this Thinkmark [<http://www.thinkmark.org/>], and I put this page number down, and I write what was interesting on that page, and like something that either I don't like, I like, or doesn't make

sense or something....Maybe just like write, in writing workshop time, maybe write like um, maybe kind a like a book that has talking animals like...Like maybe I could make a big leaf that they imagined that could never get so big.

Rob: After I read the book, I made a picture of myself, and I drew a picture of the book and put the book in my hands.

Isabella: When I read the book [The Lost Treasure of the Emerald Eye, Stilton 2004], I always like to write a response after, and um, sometimes I like to draw the cover.

Students really struggled with thinking about having done or doing anything creative in relation to their book that they chose to share. After clarifying with each other and again looking to me for the answers, they came up with something to talk about. However, the self-portrait that Fred and Rob discuss was actually a school assignment. The Thinkmark and “write a response” that Kinsey and Isabella share, were also school assignments. This outcome also supports previous research findings showing that today’s literacy instruction narrows the opportunities for students to develop creative expressions that represent their engagement and understanding (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Dyson, 2003, 2008). In contrast, however, Frankie reflects back to his book and comments that he wants to make a clay dragon. This unit of meaning was very exciting to discover, and also suggests that he was willing to explore with a more intrinsic expression of his inner text relationship in an unconventional modality, at least, not experienced in his classroom instruction.

Outcome 3: Students Respond to their Reading through Self-Created Goal Setting Related to Special Interests

Evidence grounded in the data suggested that students’ literary responses were connected to their personal goals that they set for themselves that were related to their individual special interests. This evidence from the present study expands upon past research from Heath (2013) suggesting that students seek out reading opportunities that develop and enrich their special interests. Equally important, this outcome builds upon past research from Pitcher et al. (2007) indicating that students like to read literature that connects to their personal hobbies and activities in their search for more information. As evidenced from the data excerpts below, Skyler felt stirred from her reading to go camping, and Elizabeth shared that she enjoys digging, something that happened in her reading, and that she had already engaged in. A couple of examples from the data representing this outcome are as follows:

Skyler: I am reading the book The River [Paulsen, 1993], and I like my book because it has a lot of nature in it...I like the books that are informational...The information that maybe you could use for writing or a subject...The activity that I would like to do is go camping.

Elizabeth: The activity that I already did was digging [reading Holes (Sachar, 2000)].

The data that formed this outcome was scarce and lacking, but supports previous research pointing out that current practices in reading instruction has seen a reduction in allowing students choices in what they read based on the assumptions that students do not always choose literature worthy for learning or even reading material that would count as literature (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Janks, 2000; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Vasquez, 2001). This serious problem is evidenced in the data for this present study, and echoes the concern that if students are not reading text that represents their

interests and goals, they could develop an aversion to reading (Worthy, 1996) and stand the risk of becoming nonreaders (Strommen & Mates, 2004).

Outcome 4: Students Respond to their Reading through the enjoyment of the Author's Writing Creativity

Through the refinement of the data, there emerged the outcome that the students responded to authors' creativities in developing characters, settings, problems, humor, and including, making nonfiction interesting. This outcome supports previous research from Austin (2010) suggesting that students develop text-related responses to how authors portray characters, develop problems, content, and theme. Additionally, this outcome connects to the research of Mellor and Paterson (2000) and Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen (1998) who further provided evidence that students engage with text and develop literary responses connected to how they perceive characters acting in association with how authors have created the narrative. As suggested from the selected data excerpts below, Fred, Isabella, Billy Bob, Elizabeth, and Rob, all appreciated how the authors of their literature created the experiences of humor. Isabella discussed liking literature characters and mystery problems that the reader can work through to solve. Frankie recounts how the author of his book used a lot of interesting, descriptive words that were unique. Elizabeth conveyed her interest in how the author of her book created intriguing nicknames for the characters. Rob commented that he looks for a theme of humor in the literature he reads, and if he likes the first book, he looks for more by the same author. Kinsey related that she connects with books that have exciting plots. Included below are selected examples from the data that represented the categories that formed this outcome:

Fred: I am reading Diary of a Wimpy Kid [Kinney, 2007]... it is funny.

Isabella: I read the book the Lost Treasure of the Emerald Eye [Stilton, 2004]. I like about the book because it has a problem in it and I like how it is very funny and stuff... It's like I write the genre, ah the connections, and the things that I like, and the characters and stuff...I always like the books that have mysteries and big problems that you have to solve and stuff, and I like funny books and stuff.

Billy Bob: I like sports magazines with jokes in them.

Frankie: I am reading Ice Fire [D'Lacey, 2006]. I like it because it is very descriptive...Like they use sayings and sort of things that you really don't hear, like it describes people, and it described this witch and said her teeth looked like curled up snails...I like adventure stories.

Elizabeth: I am reading Holes [Sachar, 2000] and I like the book because I like all their nicknames, and they all have nicknames...I look for the books that are funny and stuff like that.

Rob: I like to read stuff that has humor, or if sometimes if I've read the first book and there is a series, I will look for the whole series.

Kinsey: I like James and the Giant Peach [Dahl, 1961]... It is interesting and um it just has like a lot of talking animals and stuff that come to life...The fact that a peach grows bigger than a house and they go inside of it....I look for stuff that is interesting, 'cause I don't like reading books that don't have very much interesting things in them, because then you never come to an interesting thing, and it gets a little boring in that book... Like I tried reading, I forgot the title but it was like a Brat's Girl book [Multiple Authors, 2003-2006], and all it was talking about was the Brats girls and like um a concert that they were going to, and it never had like interesting things or like a mystery or something that they had to do or something, or like into it, what they did and stuff.

The data that formed this outcome was more plentiful as compared to the units that formed the other outcomes. Reasons for this are provided from past research confirming that today's reading instruction is grounded in sub-skill development, i.e., grammar, main-ideas, details, vocabulary, making connections, and literary elements (Crosland & Gutierrez, 2003; Oullette, Dagonstino, & Carifio, 1999; Valli & Buese, 2007). The concern with this practice is that it can impede students from fully engaging with text and forming the deeper, emotional relationships necessary to insure enhanced meaning making (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Barone, 2011; Pantaleo, 2004; Short, 1992; Sipe, 1998).

Outcome 5: Students Respond to their reading through Self-expressed Caring for Others

This outcome was evidenced in only one unit of meaning that was generated from one student. It is included as an outcome because of the value it represents. This outcome expands upon past research from Martin, Smolen, Oswald, and Milam (2012); and also including the research from Moller (2012) suggesting that students develop a heightened sense of social awareness and concern for others based upon their reading of literature in which the authors have brought these concerns to their understandings. Billy Bob was the only student in the study that indicated this response to his reading when he said that he was inspired to donate to charity. The data excerpt with his comment is included below.

Billy Bob: I would like to donate to charity like they did [Holes (Sachar, 2000)].

There was only one unit of meaning that formed this outcome and given today's focus on raising social awareness and empathy with students, should have been many more. The lack of data units for this outcome stands to confirm a serious problem inherent in a one-size-fits all core reading program that leads students to the same convergent way of thinking about a text (Cooper, 2007). Instead of exploring a more critical, personal interpretation of the text based upon individual perspectives, opinions, and beliefs, students are being prepared to take high-stakes reading tests (Guthrie, 2002).

Limitations and Future Directions

The participants of this study comprised students from one fourth grade classroom situated in one elementary school. Future investigations could examine a different grade level, across grade levels, or across schools. The participants in this study were predominately European American. It would be beneficial for future studies to include a more diverse population with regards to ethnicity. The setting for this study was a medium sized city located in the Midwestern United States, it would be of interest for future research to examine a small, rural community not connected or in close proximity to a larger metropolitan area, and located in a different region of the United States or a different country.

Conclusions

This present study is significant because it advances multiple theories regarding the adverse effects of core curriculum policies surrounding the teaching of reading and language by supporting these propositions, many of which have been expressed in opinion papers, with student-generated evidence. Additionally, in comparison to previous qualitative studies that began with examining data based upon established categories, the findings of this present study emerged from a discovery process grounded in the data analysis and not from predetermined categories. Finally, this

present study differs from many past studies in that the students' literature-based responses were generated from their self-selected literature and not from pre-selected literature determined by the researcher or classroom teacher. Given these significances, the findings of this study were the results of an authentic discovery process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Fortunately, many of the mandated state and federal curriculum policies are beginning to expire and there have been many studies that have suggested their ineffectiveness (Gamse, Bloom, Kemple, & Jacob, 2008; Spencer, 2009; Pease-Alvarez, Samway, & Cifka-Herrera, 2010). Teachers are becoming freer to center their curriculum on student needs and cultural significances. But how can teachers guide their students in forming deeper, long lasting relationships built upon emotional and intellectual connections to what they read? Reader response will need to be nurtured within students. Teachers can begin by allowing and providing for students to make their own personal choices in what they read. This will not be easy, as students that have long been schooled with generic, one size-fits-all reading curriculum, may have developed an aversion to reading or they may have a poor self-image of themselves as a reader. Interviews and surveys can be given to students to discover their reading interests, and then teachers and librarians can work together to provide the literature that students are most excited about. Once students have the literature in hand that they most desire, then teachers can work to elicit reader response from them by first modeling their own response during a highly engaging read aloud. This may need to happen through several books or events. Eventually, students will begin to think beyond the literal, text-structured questions typically asked during guided reading lessons, and think more deeply about how they are feeling inside about what they are hearing or reading. It is helpful for teachers to stop at key parts during a read aloud event and illicit this emotional response from students to draw out their thoughts and criticisms, allowing and encouraging students to freely express themselves without being judged right or wrong by teachers or their peers. This may happen slowly at first, but once students become comfortable with realizing that the teacher does not already know the answer and that they are not being put into a contrived position of trying to figure out what it is-watch out! The mold will be broken of the teacher with a short question and the student with a short answer, and students will start having meaningful discussions that will flow between each other as they make meaning together, and the language arts block will become more student-centered, than program-centered. Some teachers may not feel comfortable at first, especially if they are used to following a scripted curriculum where the path is heavily trodden, student and teacher senses have been dulled, and the chance of discovering new meaning together is not promoted. But when teachers join students in making meaning together from a shared book, both will come away from the experience with new and exciting perspectives about themselves and the world in which they live.



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