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CI 260
Final Project

Student Choice: Freedom Fosters Engagement and Motivation

Introduction

“Reading changes your life. Reading unlocks worlds unknown or forgotten, taking travelers around the world and through time. Reading helps you escape the confines of school and pursue your own education. Through characters—the saints and sinners, real or imagined—reading shows you how to be a better human being” (Miller, p. 18, 2009). As a middle school language arts teacher, reading is incredibly close to my heart. It is an integral part of who I am. Every year, I want my students to have that same fire for reading I have. I have chosen to do that this year through allowing complete freedom in regards to independent reading selections and assessments on independent reading.

When I was in middle school, I hated reading. I went from being a young, avid reader who read anything I could get my hands on to someone who absolutely despised reading. I was forced to read what I call “stupid boy novels” during that era: Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jean Craighead George’s *My Side of the Mountain*, Wilson Rawls’s *Where the Red Fern Grows*, etc. I didn’t want to read these books; I didn’t care about them. I wanted to read books about girls and makeup and fashion. I was in a deep love affair with Ann M. Martin’s *The Babysitters Club* series and Francine Pascal’s *Sweet Valley High* series. I wasn’t remotely interested in camping or the great outdoors. Why did I have to read those novels? Where were

my female protagonists? Where were the books about what I was interested in? Why didn't I get to choose?

I swore when I became a teacher that I would allow for greater student choice in my classroom, especially when it came to reading. I didn't want to ruin reading for students the way it was ruined for me in middle school. As a teacher, I wanted to foster a love and respect for literature, especially at the middle school level when school tends to take a backseat. I wanted to give my students the option to read what they loved, not what I thought they should read. I not only wanted them to have control over what they read, but I also wanted to allow for more flexibility in how they show what they know; that is, give several options for assessments that speak to different modalities.

Literature Review

Dr. Alastair Sharp (2006) defines the humanistic approach to teaching as one that puts that emphasis on the innermost feelings of the individual. Proponents of the humanistic approach, such as Carl Rogers, have posited that subject matter and learning itself need to have meaning for the individual, that the content must feel personal and relevant to each individual student (Sharp, 2006). Essentially, students take more care of and control of their learning when they feel they have a personal stake in it, that it matters to them. The humanistic approach values this type of learning and supports an educational process that is emotionally-driven and fosters the growth of the whole child. Supporting the independent reading process and allowing for freedom of student choice are humanistic approaches to the teaching of reading. Giving children the ability to choose texts that they relate to supports growing independence and emotional growth. Different students connect to different topics; freedom of choice in both independent

reading and performance-based assessments acknowledges different cultures, languages, interests, abilities, preferences, and modalities.

According to Andrea Stairs & Sara Burgos, “a literacy-rich classroom environment grounded in student-centered pedagogy offers possibilities for engaging all learners and encourage[s] them to be lifelong readers” (2010). The authors also argue that “independent choice of texts in school should not be a luxury but a norm, particularly in middle grades classrooms where students are transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn” (Stairs & Burgos, 2010). At the end of the day, the purpose for having students read is to strengthen their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. At the very minimum, students need to be able to comprehend what they read and be able to apply what they have read; they need these skills whether they go to college or work a minimum wage job. Literacy is of the utmost importance for all students. Beyond that, teachers such as me want to instill in students an internal desire to read, a motivation to pick up a good book and lose themselves in it. The best way to do this is by allowing students to choose books that speak to them. “Readers are made, not born” (Miller, p. 108, 2009). Lifelong readers read because they want to, because they love it, because they find it rewarding. This phenomenon is the dream for teachers: students who love to read for reading’s sake.

There are countless studies in current literature that all support this humanistic approach to teaching reading, especially at the middle school level. “Providing students with the opportunity to choose their own books to read empowers and encourages them. It strengthens their self-confidence, rewards their interests, and promotes a positive attitude toward reading by valuing the readers and giving him or her a level of control. Readers without power to make their own choices are unmotivated” (Miller, p. 23, 2009).

There are also studies that acknowledge the negatives of student choice. In his failed experiment, P. L. Thomas (2003) discovered that student choice must be something fostered early on in a student's educational career. The high school students Thomas worked with did not fully understand how to be autonomous when choose a text on their own: it is important for us to teach our students at a young age how to pick a book and how to read and analyze it correctly. Another issue Thomas identified, which will hopefully be less problematic with the rise of Common Core, is that standardized tests failed to authentically assess student learning. The independent reading Thomas's Advanced Placement (AP) students did was not supported by the AP test. Despite the supposed failures Thomas experienced, he believes that choice is necessary: "choice is authentic and chaotic—as is life; choice is integral to being an American—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; choice is emancipatory, the only avenue available for human dignity" (Thomas, p. 19, 2003).

English Learners especially benefit from a more humanistic approach to teaching reading. McHatton, Shaunessy, Hughes, Brice, & Ratliff (2007) state that this sub-group [English Learners] must be actively engaged in order for them to succeed academically and socially. Educators need to understand how these students perceive school and how they learn most effectively. The education young English Learners receive helps shape their identities throughout their life. Unfortunately, a lot of our young English Learners struggle with reading, especially texts that are at or above grade-level. When given the ability to choose texts that they relate to, English Learners become more engaged, therefore learning more and strengthening reading, vocabulary, and thinking skills.

Discussion Section

The concept of student choice is a very hot topic. With the implementation of Common Core on the horizon, the move towards more performance-based assessments is looming. All students benefit from student choice, but the greatest benefits are reaped by those who standardized testing has disserved: subgroups such as English Learners and Special Education students.

Student choice in regards to assessment is also imperative for fostering lifelong readers. Assigning typical book reports or giving a standard written assessment on a text are not always the best way for students to show what they know; in fact, these two types of assessments are often incredibly difficult for some students, especially English Learners and Special Education students. Book reports get repetitive; if a child has to complete the same book report on every book he or she has read, the student may lose interest and may not show his or her best work. Additionally, some students have testing anxiety or language issues that prevent them from fully accessing the content of the test. Some tests, such as those found in the Accelerated Reader® program, are simply ten multiple choice questions that focus on small details in the text. I have seen plenty of students over the years fail AR® tests even though I know they read the book.

Allowing for student choice in assessment gives students the freedom to really shine. Assessment choices are geared towards different modalities. Those interested in history and all things linear can create a timeline of important events in the text. Those interested in music can create a “soundtrack” for the novel, explaining where certain songs would go and why. Those interested in the written word can compose a song or poem relating to themes in the text. The curious students can craft a letter to the author or conduct an “interview” with a character in the text. The possibilities are endless.

This is the type of independent reading program I implement in my classroom. Students must read a novel every three weeks. While reading the text they must complete short journal entries in a Reader Response Journal, which focus on reading comprehension strategies and critical thinking skills. For every text they read, they must complete a project that includes eight different options, including those listed in the preceding paragraph (timeline, soundtrack, etc.). The projects students turn in are beautiful; because they are engaged in the book (that they chose) and the project (that they chose) they put a lot of time and effort into the assignment.

The limitations with this type of program are not insurmountable, but they do exist. What about the students who still hate reading? They exist, and I still try as hard as I can to help find books that they will love. Every one of my non-readers this year are boys, so I try to research as many boy-friendly novels and strategies as possible. I have filled my classroom library with Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series, countless titles on sports, graphic novels, etc. Some students have, unfortunately, still not become readers. I keep several titles in Spanish and am working on getting some Mixteco texts due to a growing population at our school, which is proving difficult due to the scarcity of written Mixteco documents. I am currently working with my school site's instructional coaches on how to better motivate my non-readers. Implementing behaviorist strategies such as offering incentives and other positive reinforcements have not worked thus far; I am hesitant to implement any negative reinforcements because I don't want to add any more negative associations to reading for these students.

Another limitation is the availability of resources. Our school library is well-stocked, but with only one copy of each popular title, it is difficult to get your hands on hot novels such as *The Hunger Games* or *Thirteen Reasons Why*. I have spent hundreds of dollars stocking my own

classroom library with popular titles to give more students a chance to read them. Because I teach in an extremely low socioeconomic area, most students lack the funds to purchase their own books. Our school recently gave every student an iPad, so more and more students are downloading free PDFs of texts to read which is helping the problem a bit. We are currently in the midst of putting together a book drive and teachers are active on resource donation websites for such as DonorsChoose.

In regards to Thomas's failed experiment with his AP students, I feel that that situation is very far removed from every other English/Language Arts class. The Advanced Placement class is meant specifically for students to pass the AP test and receive college credits. That was not the time or place to all of a sudden allow complete creative license for students to choose their own books. Those students needed to be explicitly taught how to analyze each text in order to pass the AP test. I do agree, however, with Thomas's conclusions. Student choice must begin at a young age. Students should be taught how to choose a book that is right for them and how to really read it own their own. Many students read texts and forget what they have read; teaching good reading strategies is imperative to building a strong independent reading program. I also agree with Thomas's conclusion that standardized tests do not authentically assess student's abilities, although his case was vastly different than most. I think that if we teach students the reading skills they need then can apply them to their own independent reading.

Conclusions

Multicultural and Social Justice Education requires an equal opportunity for all students to learn, and equal opportunity calls for recognizing each student as an individual and seeing them for who they are; differences are celebrated and used to better educate the students (Grant

& Sleeter, 2009). This leads to cultural pluralism, which supports blending cultures and the idea that there is no one right way to be American (Grant & Sleeter, 2009). Student choice is strongly supported by Multicultural Social Justice Education because it allows for cultural pluralism. Students should be free to read texts that have protagonists they connect to and themes they understand. Students should be free to read texts in their first language, even if that is not English. Students should be free to read books by authors from their home countries.

What better way to model support for diversity than to allow students to choose their own novels? MSJE also calls for allowing for multiple perspectives, which can be difficult to do when requiring students to read certain texts. Giving students freedom of choice supports each child forming his or her own perspective and underscores the MSJE concept of democracy: each individual matters. Student choice may also have a more powerful effect on encouraging social action because students can choose texts that have value and meaning to them. Students are more likely to become involved with a social cause if it is one that is meaningful to them, rather than one the teacher is requiring all students to care about.

B.F. Skinner said “we shouldn’t teach great books, we should teach a love of reading.” It is not the books themselves that matter, it is the children who are reading them. Clearly, student choice is necessary. It not only helps foster lifelong readers, but it increases reading comprehension, strengthens vocabulary skills, sharpens critical thinking skills, increases engagement and internal motivation, and allows students to chooses texts that they connect to: “no single literacy activity has a more positive effect on students’ comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, spelling, writing ability, and overall academic achievement than free voluntary reading” (Miller, p. 51, 2009)

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