The Power of Play: A Case Study of One Teacher's Approach to Motivating Underachieving Students in Middle School Reading Classes

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ABSTRACT

Effective reading education is important to student success. This qualitative research study examined one teacher's perception of effective methods and strategies related to improving the literacy skills of sixth grade students who struggled with passing state high-stakes testing. The results of the study affirmed that students who have experienced repeated failure in high-stakes testing have a complex range of emotional and cognitive barriers preventing success. This study has implications for policy and practice concerning success among reading students. Several areas of concern emerged from the study including students' low self esteem, resistance to completing tasks, inability to mentally visualize text, and negative emotional response associated with reading. Play emerged as an essential resource for increasing student engagement and interest in reading for fun.

Learning to Read: A Matter of Motivation

The purpose of this study is to examine how one teacher has used play to address the learning needs of sixth grade reading students who had given up on themselves and on school. Emerging from this case study was a look inside the mind of an expert teacher who shared her keys to engaging students and improving their attitudes toward learning and achieving. Connecting the inherent student motive for play with complex learning activities necessary to master reading had been highly effective in changing the attitudes of students toward themselves and learning experiences in reading. It is assumed that the approaches taken by this one highly successful teacher can be applied in other teaching and learning environments.

This study began in a sixth grade classroom on the first day of school. Anne, a sixth grade reading teacher, looked expectantly upon the faces of her sixth-grade students. Rather than happy, excited boys and girls ready for the challenges of the new year, Anne was distressed by what she observed. Instead, she saw grim faces, full of despair. In Anne's particular school district, all sixth-grade students were required to take English and reading as two separate courses. Anne's students, however, had been assigned to yet an additional required reading "elective" because they had failed state tests in reading on three separate occasions. Rather than having the freedom to select the more popular courses such as art, choir, or drama, these very students, quite forlorn, were placed with Anne in a mandatory reading course.

Understandably, these students entered their "required elective" reading class deflated and angry over the loss of elective choice. The students did not want to be in yet another reading course. Anne described her students this way: "The students' self-esteem was flat. They were deflated, angry, and even sad. They seemed small, almost fragile, and their whole body language spoke that they were defeated and unhappy."

The way Anne approached these students could make all the difference in the world as to whether they would learn to dislike and avoid reading or whether they would learn to enjoy and seek out readings for fun and the joy of learning something new. This study follows Anne's experience and thinking as a teacher to understand what strategies for increasing engagement she has used successfully to turn these students around. Her success at this endeavor would provide for each child a sound foundation in reading that would be essential to future learning. Her perspective also suggests strategies that could be applied by other teachers to their own classrooms.

Statement of the Problem

Reading is an essential skill for student success. Whether or not a person can read well is considered a determinant for lifelong success (Chabra & McCardle, 2004). Despite its importance, there are large numbers of students who struggle with reading. Many students find themselves falling behind their prescribed grade level more and more each year that they attend public school. On the other hand, many of their peers perform well in school. The problem is that when poor readers face increasingly challenging material without the necessary skills they give up. Their reading ability and self

confidence follows a downward spiral that negatively impacts academic achievement and self-esteem.

For many, frustration and anxiety over the inability to read are acted out in the form of persistent behavior problems or complete withdrawal. Some students that struggled with reading in past years were able to "fake" their way through school, relying on social skills to secure the assistance of other students or teachers. This has changed with the implementation of state mandated high-stakes testing in most states. Today it is almost impossible to disguise one's lack of reading skills. Students that have been identified through mandatory testing as having low literacy skills must be provided with special assistance.

In Texas, the state where this case study was conducted, students are first evaluated by high stakes testing in the third grade. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) is that state's version of mandatory, minimum competency, high stakes tests. While many students pass this exam, some do not. When students do not pass, identified as having low reading skills, they must be provided remediation. What happens, though, in cases where a student continues to fail the reading portion of the TAKS, grade after grade, notwithstanding repeated intervention? What will it take to interrupt the cycle of perpetual failure for these students? Are there teaching strategies that can turn the tide of reading failure on which so many students ride?

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore knowledge concerning one teacher's experiences applying strategies to address the literacy deficits of sixth grade students assigned to her reading class for remediation. The guiding research question for this study was the following: What teaching strategies are most effective at addressing the literacy needs of sixth-grade students who have been unsuccessful at passing the reading portion of the TAKS test? Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. How does an experienced reading teacher perceive that students have been impacted by failure to pass the reading portion of the state mandated high-stakes testing?
2. What patterns of weakness in reading does an experienced reading teacher perceive to contribute to the students' inability to pass the reading portion of the state high-stakes test?
3. What teaching strategies does an experienced reading teacher perceive to be most effective at addressing the weaknesses of students that have failed the reading portion of state high-stakes testing?
4. What are the implications of school policies that categorize students based on the inability to pass high-stakes testing?

Understanding the answers to these questions presents the potential for revealing pertinent information that can be used to enhance student success in the public school system.

Perspectives

Decades of research have been dedicated to understanding reading and literacy. Two broad categories of reading investigation include reading research concerning a cognitive/psychological approach and reading research exploring effective methods or strategies for teaching reading. These two categories, the cognitive/psychological perspective and the effective strategies perspective, provide a conceptual framework informing this study.

Cognitive Psychology Perspective

The cognitive view of learning holds that language is an essential part of the learning process. Language acquisition is complex. The following observations reveal the many different areas of cognitive research and thought regarding the nature, function, and role of language in human social life: 1) Language involves an array of sensorimotor processing and logic [functions], including (but not limited to) auditory discrimination, visual discrimination, sequencing, sound blending, abstract symbol recognition, and the ability to recognize the context of symbol use (McGuinness, 1997); 2) The letters of the alphabet are symbolic of sounds. Words are symbolic of concepts; 3) Paivio (1986) asserts that human language serves a dual functionality incorporating "linguistic input and output (in the form of speech or writing) while at the same time serving a symbolic function with respect to nonverbal objects, events, and behaviors" (p. 53); 4) According to Paivio, mental imagery is an essential extension of the language system.

Like language acquisition, learning to read involves the visual processing of these complicated symbols and meanings. There must be a strong desire to learn to read on the part of the learner. Vygotsky (1987) noted that learning and social interaction are intricately woven together and cannot be separated. "Vygotsky believed that our life experiences affect and influence our development. Our use of language determines our learning; and our learning determines our use of language. None of this takes place in a vacuum" (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 60). Motivation affects cognition. Children who learn in a non-threatening environment are more likely to become engaged in the learning process and are more like to succeed. On the other hand, students who experience a series of failures in learning the intricacies of language and reading can become passive, lack confidence, and act out frustration with misbehavior (Fullerton, 1997).

Effective Strategies Perspective

In addition to the cognitive/psychological perspective is the view that effective teaching strategies can be used to leverage reading instruction time. Research by Allington and Johnston (2002) explored the effective strategies of successful fourth-grade teachers. Some of these strategies included (a) personalized, caring talk between students and teachers, (b) multi-sourced, multi-level material use, (c) meaningful inquiry-based study with managed choice, (d) open tasks with multiple opportunities to clarify thinking, (e) collaborative learning, (f) encouragement of self-evaluation and self-regulation, and

(g) structured classroom rules fostering respect. Together, these elements create the ideal learning environment for students to improve literacy.

Coles (2000) noted that a rich variety of language activities creates the ideal learning environment for students to improve literacy. Additionally, Powell, McIntyre, Rightmyer (2006) examined reading and motivation. The authors found that certain more traditional types of instructional strategy used in the classroom can actually undermine students' engagement and motivation to participate in reading. This suggests that there may be certain teaching activities that are counter-productive to student success.

For teachers of adolescents, Rasinski and Padak (2005) suggest coaching students on building reading fluency. Comprehension suffers when the reading rate is slow. Building fluency can be accomplished through repeated readings, performance-based readings (such as song lyrics, poetry, or plays), and assisted or paired readings. Rog and Kropp note that struggling readers can be helped through increasing the quantity and the quality of the reading selections the students read. High interest reading material with illustrations promotes increased interest and connectivity. While engaged in the reading, students are taught to stop during the reading process and assess comprehension. If the information is not understood, then the students are encouraged to work on the skills needed to return to the text. This approach involves the student in "fixing" their reading comprehension (2005).

One program allowed the poor readers to self-select reading material, use independent reading time, and share information about their books. Students were taught comprehension skills regularly. Choral reading sessions helped to build language skills by providing letter/word sight and sound review. The students learned to enjoy reading, became motivated, and exhibited fewer behavior problems (Ahrens, 2005). Since students tend to become less interested in reading for enjoyment as they become older (Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004), any increase in reading for pleasure is noteworthy.

Methods and Procedures

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach. This approach was selected because it best matched the case study approach in which complex social processes are at work among various participants. Qualitative methodology is a tool for obtaining holistic knowledge and understanding about complex social processes through analyzing the detailed reports of the affected participants (Creswell, 1994). Qualitative researchers avoid assumptions about the research topic and allow the reality of the issue, with its grounded theories, to emerge from data collected through interviews and observations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lancy, 1993). Descriptive research can reveal "important information about the nature of learning and its relationship to a variety of instructional practices" (Kamil, Langer, & Shanahan, 1985, p. 65). The qualitative data-gathering genres used in this study incorporated interview and lived experience.

The investigator wanted to construct a research design that would allow the participant's own voice to be the source of knowledge. The interview and lived experience methods as data-gathering techniques were the most appropriate for eliciting data based on expert systems thinking. According to Harmon and King (1994), the word

"expert" refers to "an individual who is widely recognized as being able to solve a particular type of problem that most other people cannot solve nearly as efficiently or effectively" (p. 31). In this study, a sixth grade reading teacher is the expert. The experienced, well-trained teacher who is in the classroom and living the experience of teaching the students is the best candidate for providing relevant data concerning the topic of effective instructional methods for sixth grade students have a history of failing state high-stakes testing.

The strategy for collecting the data was to select and interview one experienced sixth grade reading elective teacher who taught multiple classes of students. The school site and its demographics were secondary considerations to the selection of the best possible candidate for the teacher interview. Information provided by the teacher was used to develop concepts related to best teaching practices and policies concerning students that struggle with passing mandated reading testing.

Teacher

One public school teacher, Anne, from a large suburban school district in south central Texas was selected based upon the extensive experiential background of the teacher, the teacher's credentials, and the courses taught. The participant had over seventeen years teaching experience in public schools, was certified in teaching reading, had won numerous awards associated with teaching excellence, and was currently teaching three courses of a reading elective. All three reading elective courses consisted of students purposely placed in the classes due to previous unsuccessful attempts at passing the reading portion of the state test (TAKS).

Site and Students

While no students were interviewed or contacted in any way by the investigator, the school site and its students are part of the study informally because of the teacher's employment. Thus, in order to provide a more complete picture of the participant's experiences, the school site and student demographics will be provided. The school is one of many middle schools in a suburban school district in a south central Texas city of approximately one million population. The school serves grades six through eight. According to publicly accessible online data provided by Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System most recent information (2004-2005), this school had an enrollment of 1,574 and a teaching staff of 97. For that year it was rated academically acceptable. The student population subgroups included African American (10.0 %), Hispanic (29.1%), White (54.4%), Native American (0.4%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (6.1%). Students receiving special education services made up 19.3% of the student population, while there were few Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students (0.6%). A fairly large portion of the students were economically disadvantaged (32.2%) and an even greater number classified as At-Risk (41.7%). At-Risk students are categorized by the administration as being at risk of failing in school due to any number of emotional, personal, or family situations that interfere with student success.

Data Collection

The researcher informed the teacher of the research project and asked for voluntary participation. The teacher was advised that the participant's name as well as the names of the city, district, and school would not be revealed in the study. A pseudonym was chosen and the interview lasted one and one-half hours. The interview was audio-recorded for analysis use by the investigator. Follow up telephone interviews were conducted to confirm data and gather additional information. Questions of the teacher were related to her teaching experiences, perspectives on teaching and learning, and her unique approaches to teaching and motivating students particularly through role playing and game playing activities.

Results

The investigator asked Anne if there were special education students included in the reading elective classes. Her response was that most of the students were regular education students. Only a few were officially classified as special education. In fact, prior to the interview, she had examined the class rolls looking for patterns within her reading courses' student populations, but found that there were students from all socio-economic levels and all ethnic groups in her classes. She could not find that any one group was weighted more strongly than another. The commonality among them was that they had not been able to pass the state tests in reading.

The purpose of the reading elective was to improve the literacy skills of the students so they could pass the reading portion of the TAKS test, yet Anne had directives that set parameters for instruction. "They told me to never mention TAKS testing. I was not supposed to use TAKS testing format for teaching and not to do any benchmark testing," she said. "They wanted me to work on building the students' self-esteem and create an atmosphere of 'fun with reading.'"

When asked why she was chosen to teach the reading elective, Anne stated that she is a certified reading instructor, but acknowledged that her strong theater background had supported elements that the district wanted included in the reading elective. Anne had written the curriculum for the middle school theater courses she had taught in previous years. Those courses included (but were not limited to) lessons in characterization, drawing inferences, vocabulary, genres, reading, writing, analyzing scripts, summarizing, and interactive group work as well as performance. Anne indicated that the students loved the theater classes and made great literacy gains. Anne knew that she could include components of the theater class curriculum into making the reading elective an engaging, successful course for the students.

Anne said that she spent the first two weeks of the school year getting to know her students and building trust. This was important, she said, because the students entered the class the first day mad a having to be there and unhappy with themselves academically. Working in groups, playing games, and building the bonds to enable a learning community were critical to establishing the strong foundation needed for an effective class. Anne said that she wanted the students to know that they were not alone in their

experiences, so she told them that she sometimes would read a paragraph and then not be able to remember what she had read. "Have any of you experienced this?" she asked the class. The amazed students agreed that it happened all of the time for them. Anne said that she would help them learn how to read and be able to understand better what had been read. The teacher expressed the importance of this initial student-teacher interaction. Knowing that the teacher knew how they felt helped students to begin on a pathway to dispelling some of the students' reading fears.

Anne was asked if she could describe any patterns of weakness among the students in the reading elective classes. "When the students read out loud, they are okay. It is when they are asked to read silently that they drift mentally. You can see them shut down and start looking around," she said. "Now these are not attention deficit students," she asserted. "They associate reading with a boring activity and they don't want to do it." She added, "If the students are tested on reading aloud, they can score fifth- or sixth-grade." This is on or near grade level. "Yet when the students read silently and are tested they score a reading level of third-grade," Anne commented.

The investigator asked Anne if she could explain that discrepancy between reading aloud and reading silently. She indicated that these were smart, bright children that could remember what they had read if they had to read it aloud, due to having to intensely concentrate on the material. However, when reading silently, the students look at every single word, but don't remember. The attention paid to silent reading is slight, and the students fall through the cracks on testing, because it is made up of silent reading. A major reading weakness that Anne reported concerned the concentration factor, the "inability to mentally visualize" the text. "If I say the word 'garden' there is a mental image in my head of what a garden is like. There is no picture in their heads. The students cannot visualize a garden." Anne indicated that she practiced visualization techniques with her students. "I tell them to close their eyes and I have them put their hands over their eyes. Then I ask them what they 'see.' I lead them through a discussion of the sights, smells, sounds, and feelings of being in a garden so they can create a mental image." Anne commented that it was no wonder that the students lacked enjoyment of reading when there was no mental imagery to go with it. Teaching visualization was a strategy that she employed repeatedly to increase student ability to associate multi-sensory mental images with words.

Another pattern of weakness that Anne observed is that the students do not go back into the text to look for answers to questions. While most good readers will search a text for answers, these students read a text once, then try to guess the answers. "I will see the students looking around the room trying to remember the answer, when it is right there in front of them in the story." So, Anne teaches the students how to examine the text for answers by going back and highlighting within the text the answer to a question. "Or, I have them highlight the main idea," she added. She indicated that her students had to be forced to re-read text for answers, even though it come naturally for many students to do so.

One of the main problems that the students have is that, "they consider themselves to be failures." They have given up on themselves and school. Most of the students in these classes will turn in work that is incomplete or hurriedly done, just to get rid of it. Anne stated that she will not accept work that is a low grade. Students are given their

work back and told to "fix it." "I won't let them fail. Failing is not an option. They must turn in acceptable work," she said. The students are willing to turn in failing work because they consider themselves failures. "I tell them, 'You are not 67 material; you have to re-do this.'" Then, she said that the students fix the work and make a 97 on it. The students need constant reassurance that they are worthy of making good grades. Anne indicated that it takes a long time to break the cycle of failure of which the students have become so accustomed.

The investigator asked Anne how she was able to get the students to read more. She responded that the students entered her class with a loathing for reading. "The students would rather do anything than read, because it is associated with frustration and failure," she said. Anne indicated that one good strategy for getting students to read independently is to make use of the Illustrated Classics series from Scribner. The students have choice over the book selection, and do not have to fill out a packet or write a formal book report. Instead, Anne said that she determines if the student read the material by asking one or two key questions about the story. If the student cannot answer it or gives a wrong answer, she sends the student back to the text for re-reading. For example, for a student who reads *Robinson Caruso,* she might ask "How does it end?" If the student answers that he was rescued, she makes the student go back and re-read for better understanding. The students get to tell the class what they like or dislike about the book, which promotes interest in other students for a future choice. An illustrated booklet report is an enjoyable activity that enhances awareness of literary elements in the selected book without being an overwhelming assignment.

Another teaching strategy that Anne revealed was the way she arranged the students in the class. She sat the students differently from regular instructional classes, grouping them in small groups. The students worked together and enjoyed learning from each other. Being in groups also allowed Anne to spend with the groups or call out students individually as needed for counseling. Group work included the use of manipulatives, which made regular work seem more fun for the students. "I went to the building store and bought shower board and cut it into sections so the students would have dry erase boards. Instead of doing work on worksheets ("they hate worksheets!"), the students use colored markers to draw out their ideas." She added that it was successful to assign different jobs to the group members, such as timer, writer, presenter, or reader, and then rotate jobs on different assignments. "Helping each other helps success. They need the interaction and support they can give one another," Anne stated. The teacher must be a moving facilitator within the room, answering questions and keeping students on task.

Anne continued discussion in the interview with a description of the students' favorite activity – games. The students are allowed to play education games on Fridays. Some games are commercially available and others are modifications of pre-existing games. All students must participate. Some of the games that Anne uses include (a) Imagine If – this is a game where inference skills are built. "Imagine if Kim was a piece of furniture, what would she be?" Anne asked as an example. The answer would have to be explained, such as, "Kim would be a great recliner, because she is friendly and easy-going." Extensions of this game can be "if Rene was a superhero, who would he be?" (b) Hilarium – this is a game of charades where a situation is given and participants act it

out until it is guessed. This teaches inferencing, attention to detail, and problem-solving, (c) Catch Phrase – this is a game of synonyms where all of the clues that describe a term are given and the students guess the word. For example, for the word pumpkin, one group of students would provide the descriptive clues needed for others to guess the word. This leads to vocabulary building, analytical thinking, and problem solving, (d) Scene It – this is a game based on movie clips. A short movie segment is shown and then a very obscure question is asked about some element within the clip. The question is trivial and the students learn to watch the movie clips with great intensity, looking for every detail. The game promotes concentration, attention to detail, and analysis, (e) Password – this is a game based on the old television game where students guess words based on clues. It is similar to Catch Phrase, but is set up in competitive panels as was the television show, (f) Clue – this game is based on a mystery where the students must use problem solving techniques to guess the identity of a person. It teaches problem-solving, analysis, and drawing conclusions based on evidence, (g) Pictionary – this game is enjoyed with few modifications from the commercial game available. It is played with dry erase markers on a board. Students must draw pictures to represent words. It enhances imagery, vocabulary, and problem-solving. These games and others are selected by the teacher and are rotated throughout the year.

In summary, Anne commented that the struggling readers that she has taught have suffered from low self-esteem, lack of ability to mentally visualize text, inability to stay with tasks (turning in work just to get rid of it), and the acceptance of failure as part of their school identity. They are surprised by success. To overcome these obstacles, Anne had worked to build reading and comprehension skills and reinforce the fact that the students can be successful. By the latter part of the school year, she noted that the students seemed happier and better adjusted. They no longer seemed small and defeated. They were more confident about their academic success. Yet, when it came time for the spring round of TAKS testing, Anne lamented how pressured the students felt to perform well. She said that she could tell they were very nervous and scared. One had a severe bloody nose and another was so nervous that he/she vomited. It was a traumatic experience that Anne indicated was heart-wrenching. She later found out that 70% of "her" students passed the reading portion of the TAKS. The district was thrilled with those results, she said. However, Anne was personally saddened that she wasn't able to reach them all.

The results of the study affirmed that students who have experienced repeated failure in the reading portion of high-stakes testing have a complex range of emotional and cognitive barriers preventing success. The reading teacher perceived some of these barriers to include the students' low self esteem, resistance to completing tasks, inability to mentally visualize text, and negative emotional response associated with reading. Results also included the corrective teaching methods and strategies used in the classroom and perceived by this teacher to alleviate the impact of these barriers.

Discussion

Students who have perceived themselves to be failures can be difficult to teach. Since all of Anne's students had failed high-stakes minimum competency testing in reading more than once, all had lost the treasure of having a sixth-grade elective choice. Anne made teaching strategy choices to meet the needs of the students in the reading elective classes that she taught. She believed that her choices were effective because the students responded positively to her teaching methods. In fact her selected methods aligned almost identically with the best practices noted by Allington and Johnston (2002). A caring, positive teacher in a non-threatening environment can be highly effective. Additionally, reading more, reading quality literature, and "fixing" miscues of understanding are effective strategies supported by research (Rog & Kropp, 2005).

One of the problems that Anne noted that was indicated in the literature review was the fact that readers need to be able to mentally image the text in order to gain comprehension (Paivio, 1986). This is an important part of building an ability to appreciate and understand literature. Anne, similar to the findings of Ahrens (2005), found students more interested when there was reading material choice. Students, over time, became more motivated to read for pleasure.

Summary and Conclusion

When students fail state high-stakes testing in reading more than once, special intervention with effective teaching strategies is crucial to address the needs of the struggling reader. It is important to break that cycle of failure and promote success. Continued failure has been noted in research as leading to passive lack of engagement or misbehavior (Fullerton, 1977). To become successful in reading has the potential to impact these students' entire academic careers.

This study is significant because it reveals the thought and practice of a highly skilled, experienced, and consistently effective teacher of a specific population of students who have been measured as having low reading levels. The specific teacher dispositions, habits, and strategies are transferrable to other classrooms by teachers who learn from Anne's experience. Research reveals that the barriers to reading are as complex as the cognitive processes for language acquisition and learning to read. Learning to look at learning difficulties in elaborate and complex ways can increase the teacher success. When academic and emotional well-being of each student is addressed, greater personal fulfillment will enhance the individual's ability to contribute to the broader society.

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