

PROVIDING BOOKS RELATED TO STUDENTS PERSONAL INTEREST:
A CASE STUDY OF FOUR SUCCESSFUL READERS

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Introduction

In order for students to be successful readers, they must spend time practicing reading. An all too common problem for teachers is how to motivate students to read. Unfortunately, reading motivation is as complex as the readers themselves. It is therefore advantageous to look specifically at the effect of motivating students by offering reading materials based upon interest and the effect this may have on reading comprehension.

When students are offered books that are related to their personal interest, they will be motivated to spend more time reading and will be more engaged in their reading (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Students will thus experience increased reading comprehension. "Interest in materials enhances comprehension, even if the materials are quite difficult for the children. Thus interest in reading appears to be an important motivational variable influencing different aspects of reading performance" (Renninger, 1992).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of providing students with materials that are related to their personal interests. It was hypothesized that when students are motivated to read they will exhibit comprehension of the text that is significantly more difficult in readability than they would be reading if the reading is assigned. This premise arose from comments by various authorities noting factors that promote comprehension in children and or adolescents at different grade levels (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) comprehension increases as students' motivation increases.

Research Questions

Does providing books related to students' personal interests increase students' motivation to read?

Does providing books related to students' personal interests increase students' reading comprehension?

Methodology

To determine the answer to my research question, I observed fourth grade students that were successfully reading assigned texts (basals) on grade level. The subjects of my study were four fourth graders who were reading on grade level.

Initially these students were given a survey to determine their topics of interest. The information obtained from the surveys was then used to select texts for students. The texts chosen were on a reading level that is above the student's current grade level. Students used these texts in lieu of their fourth grade assigned reading (basals).

It was hypothesized that students would be more intrinsically motivated when reading books of their personal interest. This in turn would allow for increased comprehension of the texts. To assess students' motivation, the amount of time that the students were on task when using the self-selected materials was measured. Furthermore, their comprehension of the texts was assessed through discussion and retellings.

Importance of Study

Students need to be successful readers in order to be successful students. Increasing students' reading comprehension is a constant goal for educators.

In today's world of video games and multi-media overexposure, it is often difficult to motivate students to spend time reading. Teachers do not have control over various factors that influence reading motivation. Providing students with books that relate to their personal interests is one such way that teachers can improve their students' motivation to read at the same time that they are fostering comprehension development.

The effect of interest on the subjects' motivation to read as well as their comprehension was assessed by (a) measuring the amount of time that the students are on task when using the high interest reading material and (b) their discussions and retellings about the texts they have read.

Although this study focused on fourth grade students, what was learned from it can assist teachers of any grade level. This study determined the benefits in reading comprehension when students are provided with texts that are personally engaging to them.

Definitions

Reading Comprehension:

Reading comprehension is the level of understanding of a passage or text. An acceptable level of comprehension is above 75%. It can be stated that it is the "intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader" (Harris and Hodges, 1995).

Readability:

The reader's level of ease or difficulty in understanding the text. Readability is dependant on text and reader characteristics (Pikulski, 2002).

Reading Level:

The grade level material that is challenging but not frustrating for a student to read successfully. According to authorities (Leslie & Caldwell, 2008) the reader has at least 95% word recognition and at least 70% comprehension.

Literature Review

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of providing students with materials that are related to their personal interests. The investigation was carried out by addressing the following questions; 1) Does providing books related to students' personal interests increase students' motivation to read? 2) Does providing books related to students' personal interests increase students' reading comprehension?

The following review of literature begins by discussing research on intrinsic motivation. Then the correlation between a student's motivation to read and reading comprehension is examined. Lastly individual interest and self-selection of reading material is discussed as it relates to motivation and performance.

Motivation

Wigfield and Guthrie (1992) state that *task-involved goals* are when students read to learn because they want to know about the topic. This is known as intrinsic motivation. The literature links intrinsic motivation to students' likelihood of maintaining a positive attitude and continued motivation toward school and reading. A specific aspect of intrinsic motivation according to the authors is total involvement in the task at hand, also called "flow experience". This is when the reader loses track of time and his/her surroundings because he/she is completely absorbed in what is being read. When students have a flow experience, they are intrinsically motivated and their reading is greatly facilitated.

Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) studied 271 third and fifth graders and found that motivation to read comes before frequent reading by students. Students must first be motivated to read before they become avid readers who read for greater amounts of time. Motivation is related to students' engagement in reading. Also, it is a key factor in rebuilding damaged self-concepts. This conclusion was further supported by Asselin (2004) and Edmunds and Bauserman (2006).

Wigfield et al. (1997) found the greatest decline in the motivation to read occurs between first and fourth grade. This decline in motivation has been attributed to children's growing awareness of their own performance as compared to others, as well as to instruction that emphasizes competition and does not address children's interests (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000).

Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) and McKool (2003) both examined factors that influence children to read. Data from student interviews in both studies noted that reading material that is of personal interest motivates students. Children have described books as being interesting if they are related to their own personal interests. The opportunity for self-selection of reading materials has a positive impact on reading motivation. It would seem from these findings that teachers should not only give children the opportunity to choose the books they would like to read but also allot time during the school day to read them.

Motivation and Increased Comprehension

In general, students who spend more time reading, have more time to practice reading strategies and therefore, are more successful readers. Children who enjoy reading

read and are highly motivated readers, display an increased frequency of reading.

Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) reported that highly motivated children read three times as much outside of school as their less motivated peers. Guthrie et al. (1999) found that motivation significantly predicted a student's amount of reading. They concluded that motivation was an important predictor of frequent reading. Research has consistently shown that reading skills and reading motivation influence each other (Morgan and Fuchs, 2007).

Senechal and LeFevre (2002) showed that the more students were motivated to read, the higher was their frequency of reading. Frequent reading contributes to growth in sight word recognition, vocabulary, verbal fluency, reading comprehension, and general knowledge (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1991). Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found that reading practice accounted for 34% of the variance in students' vocabulary scores between first and eleventh grade. Also comprehension skills were positively impacted. Furthermore, a study by Pitcher et al. (2007) found a direct relationship between adolescents' motivation to read and their ultimate competence in their reading. They went on to say that not only is providing reading material that interests students important, but also that reading instruction should be centered on such materials. The relationship between motivation, engagement, and comprehension was also examined by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) who found that children who were in the top one-third of the reading motivation scale spent about 29 to 80 more minutes per day than students who scored in the lowest third of the motivation scale. The highly motivated readers tended to increase their reading engagement over time.

Wigfield and Guthrie (1992) further asserted that when students value reading for intrinsic reasons, they are more successful and choose to read more frequently. In agreement with Asher, Hymel and Wigfield (1978), Wigfield et al (1992) stated that elementary students better comprehend high interest material than low interest. When students are interested in what they read, they can often transcend their reading level (Worthy, 1996).

Individual Interest/Self-Selection

According to Guthrie and Wigfield (1997) students will expend more effort and devote more time to reading when they are using material that is of personal interest to them. Ivey (1998) notes that the decline in reading motivation as students progress through the middle and high schools is due to a mismatch between typical reading assignments and student preferences. Harris (2008) discussed the importance of sharing books with students that will appeal to them. She asserts that when students have books that appeal to their individual interests, they are more engaged in their reading. When students choose the literature that they are reading it gives them ownership over what they are doing and provides natural motivation to read. Reading becomes intrinsically motivated as students want to read and learn about the self-selected material. McKool (2003) found that students who did not have access to materials that they were personally interested in reading were more likely to be reluctant readers. Often these students reported that they had great difficulty finding materials in the school library that they were interested in reading, because their preferred reading materials weren't available or were already checked out. Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) stated that when

students do not have access to series books, comic books, and magazines outside of school, it is critical for schools to provide that access.

McKool (2003) also reported that avid readers were encouraged to read more when they had access to books that were interesting to them. Conversely, they found that reluctant readers reported that they did not feel as if they had the opportunity to read books that were of personal interest to them. When students who were avid readers were asked to read required material during SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) in place of books of their own personal choosing, they admitted that they were less motivated to read. This study further examined how students felt when they were given a choice among books that were selected by the teacher. Even though the students were given a choice, they were not motivated because the materials were not what they wanted to read.

Methodology

When students are provided books related to their personal interests, it was my theory that this would increase students' motivation to read. Furthermore, I looked at whether providing these books would increase students' reading comprehension of that material.

Participants

The primary participants were three students who were in a fourth grade classroom during the 2008-2009 school year. These students were chosen because they were reading on grade level.

Instruments

A survey was given to each of the participants for the purpose of identifying books that would be of interest to them. The survey consisted of short response questions that inquired about topics of interest, hobbies, and favorite books. "What are your top five favorite activities?", "Name some of the hobbies and activities that you participate in.", and "What are five of your favorite books?" are some examples of questions that were included. In some instances follow-up interview questions were needed to clarify the participants' responses. This Survey can be found in the Appendix.

Based upon the information obtained, a list of books was created for each student. Each list contained book titles that were readily available to the student in the classroom and school library. The books on each list were on topics of interest expressed by the

corresponding student and were on a reading level that was frustrational for that student. as determined by Qualitative Reading Inventory (Leslie & Caldwell, 2008) results.

Procedures

Observations

The participants were given time to examine the books on their individual lists and were encouraged to have at least three of them available to read during their classroom sustained silent reading time and their instructional reading time (leveled reading groups).

Students were then observed on five different occasions between September 15th and October 30th in their classroom. During the observations, students were instructed to read silently any book of their choice. Each participant was observed for off-task behaviors using a checklist that can be found in the Appendix. Such behaviors that were noted were how often students looked away from the text, how often the student changed to a new text, and how long the student was actively reading the text.

Reading Comprehension

During the students' classroom instructional reading time, each participant was asked to read from the book on his individual list to read. After reading a predetermined portion of the text, the student's comprehension was assessed through implicit and explicit comprehension questions and retelling of the text. These assessments were carried out three times on each student where adequate performance was judged when at least 75 percent of the questions were answered correctly.

Findings

From the data that was generated, I constructed mini-cases of three students. Students' names were changed to ensure anonymity.

Mark

Mark's answers on his personal interest survey indicated that he had a high interest in sports. Mark participated in many sports himself such as hockey, football, and baseball. His favorite sport to both play and watch was baseball. In answering the survey questions, he indicated that his favorite books were non-fiction books about sports and sports stars. The school librarian helped to locate books about sports and sports stars that were at Mark's frustrational reading level, F/P levels S and T. These books were given to Mark so that he could choose amongst them to have a few books on hand to read. Mark selected Jackie Robinson and the Breaking of the Color Barrier by Russell Shorto, Story of Muhammad Ali: Heavyweight Champion by Barry Denenberg, and Baseball in April by Gary Soto. During his instructional reading time, Mark chose to focus on the book Jackie Robinson and the Breaking of the Color Barrier by Russell Shorto.

Comprehension questions of the book were developed. During the five times that he was assessed for off-task behaviors, Mark showed two off-task behaviors the first time, three the second time, two during the third observation and only one the following times. In each observation, the off-task behavior lasted less than five seconds. After Mark completed reading a predetermined section of text Jackie Robinson and the Breaking of the Color Barrier by Russell Shorto, his comprehension was assessed by implicit and explicit comprehension questions and retelling of the text on three different occasions.

Even though the text was at his frustrational level, Mark successfully comprehended what he had read and demonstrated this comprehension by answering 85% of the questions correctly.

Mary

According to the personal interest survey that Mary completed, she has many hobbies and participates in activities both in and out of school. The activities that Mary wrote about were Girl Scouts, instrumental lessons and Intramural Sports. She indicated that she loved to watch the History Channel at home. Also, Mary stated that she enjoyed reading about history and her favorite books that she had previously read were about women in history. With the assistance of the school librarian books that were at her frustrational level, F/P levels S and T, were located. Of the books that were compiled, Mary selected Amelia Earhart: Challenging the Skies by Susan Sloate, Anne Frank by Rachel Epstein, and The Story of Harriet Tubman: Conductor of the Underground Railroad by Kate McMullan to read. During her instructional reading time, Mary chose to focus on the book The Story of Harriet Tubman: Conductor of the Underground Railroad by Kate McMullan. Comprehension questions were constructed for this text. During the five times that she was assessed for off-task behaviors, Mary showed two off-task behaviors the first time, three the second time, four the third time, two during the fourth observation and only one the last time. In each observation, the off-task behavior lasted less than five seconds. After Mary completed reading a predetermined section of text The Story of Harriet Tubman: Conductor of the Underground Railroad by Kate McMullan, her comprehension was assessed by implicit and explicit comprehension questions and

retelling of the text. Despite the text being at Mary's frustrational level, she successfully demonstrated her comprehension of the text by accurately answering 90% of the questions correctly.

Susan

Susan's interest survey showed that she is involved and interested in many social activities. Susan participates in many school activities such as Destination Imagination, the school's Post Office, Chorus, instrumental lessons, Concert Band, and Jazz Band. Outside of school Susan is involved in sports such as dancing, soccer, and softball. Susan's survey indicated that she preferred to read fictional stories that center around children and school. Again with the assistance of school librarian, books that fit this description and were at her frustrational level, F/P level S and T, were chosen for her. Out of the preselected texts, Susan chose the following: The Boys Start a War and the Girls Get Even by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, Fifth Grade: Here Comes Trouble by Colleen McKenna, and Kid Power by Susan Beth Pfeffer. During her instructional reading time, Mary chose to focus on the book Fifth Grade: Here Comes Trouble by Colleen McKenna. Questions to assess Susan's comprehension were constructed for this text. During the five times that Susan was assessed for off-task behaviors, she showed four off-task behaviors the first time, three the second time, two during the third observation, one the fourth time and four the last time. In each observation, the off-task behavior lasted less than five seconds. After Susan completed reading a predetermined section of text Fifth Grade: Here Comes Trouble by Colleen McKenna, her comprehension was assessed by implicit

and explicit comprehension questions and retelling of the text. Despite the text being at Susan's frustrational level, she successful demonstrated her comprehension of the text by accurately answering 80% of the questions correctly.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of providing students with materials that are related to their personal interests. The impact of this material was looked at as it pertained to a student's motivation to read and their comprehension of the text. It was hypothesized that providing students with reading materials of personal interest would motivate them to spend more time on task. Also, students would be able to comprehend this material on a reading level that is considered frustrational to them.

I found that in every case, the student was able to read the self-selected material that was of personal interest to them successfully. The texts that were selected by the participants were on a frustrational level. Despite this, the students showed a good comprehension of the material with 80%, 85%, and 90% of the assessment correct.

Furthermore, the time on task displayed by the participants indicates their motivation to read the material of personal interest to them. Not surprisingly, the students were attentive to their texts and showed minimal off-task behaviors during all of the observations.

Limitations and Future Research

This is a descriptive case study concerning a limited number of participants in one setting. Because of the size of the study, there is a possibility that students' behavior was affected by my perceived expectations especially when monitoring for off-task behaviors. In the future, research may include larger samples of participants and additional researchers. Furthermore, it would be advantageous to study students who have difficulties with reading and are reading below their current grade level to determine if the results would be the equitable.

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Name: _____ Date: _____

Student Interest Survey

What in-school activities do you participate in?
What activities do you participate in outside of school?
What are some of your favorite hobbies (things you like to do)?
What do you enjoy doing with your family?
What do you enjoy doing with your friends?
What are some of your favorite books?
What types of books do you like to read?
If you went to the library, what types of books would you pick out?

Off-Task Behavior Checklist

Student's Name: _____

Date of Observation: _____

Time of Observation: _____

Off-Task Behavior:	Lasted Less Than Five Seconds:	Lasted Between Five and Ten Seconds:	Lasted Between Ten and Thirty Seconds:	Lasted More Than Thirty Seconds:
Eyes on book, but not tracking text or graphics				
Eyes not on book				
Hands are occupied with object other than book				
Talking to peer				
Talking to teacher				
Got up from chair				
Left classroom				
Other (specify):				
Other (specify):				