Call for Action: Supporting the Needs of Struggling Adolescent Readers

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This article shares the experiences of a high school reading teacher, Tara, who used reader identity and motivation as tools in meeting the needs of her students. Tara looked beyond the assessments that placed the students in the striving reader class to determine how the students viewed themselves as readers as well as what motivated them to read. She used this data to plan a responsive curriculum for teaching her students to think about in-school texts while preparing the students for high stakes assessment. Tara’s experiences remind teacher educators that teaching reading is about both knowledge of content and knowledge of students and that it is the integration of the two that will lead students to be more successful.

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America’s middle and high schools are at a turning point in the field of adolescent literacy. Students must be prepared to read for information while participating in a global society at a time when teachers in middle and high school are faced with students who lack the literacy skills required for such success (Alvermann, 2006). Many secondary students are unable to understand key concepts and acquire new knowledge from grade-level texts where teaching has become “increasingly complex, less personally relevant, and conceptually dense” (Jetton & Alexander, 2004, p.232 ). Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy (2006) indicated students in general lack the skills required to read for purpose, fluency and comprehension. Moreover, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report only 23% of
adolescent readers can read and write with proficiency (Donahue, Daane, & Grigg, 2006). Struggling students continue to face gaps in understanding vocabulary, lack the ability to comprehend complex materials and have difficulties developing and writing long compositions (Pressley, 2004). The Florida Department of Education reported only 34% of tenth graders in 2007 passed the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) with little improvement in 2008 where only 38% of tenth graders passed (FLDOE, 2008). The American College Testing Program (ACT) is a curriculum-based measure of college readiness. In 2008, Florida reported only 45% of students met college readiness benchmarks in reading, down from last year (ACT, 2008). Yet, despite students’ low performance in reading within the classroom and on standardized reading tests, many adolescents are engaged in a multitude of literacy tasks.

Adolescents encounter a variety of literacy tasks every day. They read and write as part of social groups or in the search for information as they interact with texts such as novels, the World Wide Web, text messages, and traditional classroom strategies (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). The tasks in which adolescent readers are engaged are rich and varied but may not be supportive of the skills/strategies they need to be successful on standardized tests. Yet, it is the test that often labels the reader as successful and/or struggling. Additionally, Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore (2000) called for a conception of adolescent literacy that “includes adolescents' literacy practices beyond the secondary classroom, expands the students notion of text (i.e., the Internet, television, and magazines), and develops the relationship between literacy and the development of student identity” (Moje E. Y., 2000, p. 406).
The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to clarify that a struggling reader is not necessarily a non-reader; and (2) to examine the classroom of a teacher who acknowledged this point and used it to her students’ advantage. First, background regarding reading, reader identity, and motivation will be discussed. Then, the thoughts of students who failed the state high school proficiency exam, but who as a whole enjoyed reading, will be examined. Finally, the actions taken by the teacher of these students who had failed the state exam designed to integrate the identities of these readers with motivating activities focused on helping students develop expertise in reading for information will be discussed.

The Adolescent Reader: Reader Identity and Motivation

The adolescent reader is a complex individual whose identity affects his actions as a reader and writer. Reader identity formation begins with the adolescents’ contacts with family members, friends and community. Hence, contacts shape the beliefs, values, and language systems resulting in adolescent literacy (Alvermann, 2001). A student’s cultural identity calls for teachers, classrooms and curriculum that will take into account individual differences. In addition, most students’ “reader identity” is partially established in elementary school where students are still mastering basic concepts. Through the use of standardized tests students are flagged for non-mastery of content and identified as struggling readers. Inevitably, students are labeled avid readers, good readers, slow readers, or struggling readers based on test scores. Thus struggling students who have been identified are likely to have a long and negative history with reading in school and may believe that they will have little success comprehending a text. Therefore, reading is not worth their time and effort (Hall, 2007).
Discovering a student’s identity as a reader is important in addressing the needs of the individual. Some of the findings related to identity and schooling include the need for students to connect their literacy lives with other aspects of their identity, such as personal interests (Triplett, 2004) or their developing awareness of race, culture, and gender (McCarthey, 2001). As Alvermann (2001) suggested, literacy educators must consider the cultural construction of struggling readers, and, in labeling students as struggling readers, educators are choosing students’ reading identities for them.

Motivation

McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth (1995) suggest that motivating students to read is one of the critical tasks of teaching. In particular, middle and high school teachers are constantly searching for ways to motivate their students toward academic achievement. Wigfield (2004) found that students’ motivation can affect their performance in different achievements areas, including reading where age and cultural identity contribute to a student’s self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation. Self-efficacy is defined as a student’s assessment of their ability to engage, comprehend and complete activities successfully in the classroom based on prior success with the task (Wigfield, 2004). For example, when a student has performed well in activities associated with reading, the student typically develops a positive sense of self-efficacy for reading and their ability to be successful on future assignments. Moreover, if students believe they have a good chance of succeeding at understanding what they are reading, then students are likely to be more motivated to engage in reading (Vacca, 2006). Intrinsic motivation, central to self-regulated learning and self-determination, embodies a student's desire for mastery (Schlackman, 2006). Intrinsic motivation also arises from a student’s interest in a topic or activity and is
satisfied through completion and comprehension of that topic or activity. For example, when students are motivated from within to learn, they become engaged in the learning activity at hand and devote time and energy to it (Wigfield, 2004). Additionally, Wigfield (2004) indicated students’ intrinsic motivation develops when they have interesting materials to work with, opportunities to develop their competencies, control of their own learning, and opportunities to collaborate with others. Finally, intrinsically motivated students are often those readers who are successful in school, in particular, on standardized testing measures of student performance in reading and comprehension.

Accountability pressures placed on teachers through the No Child Left Behind Act 2002, (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) have had an impact in the classroom as well. With Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) mandates and numerous accountability measures, teachers are less focused on students’ background or increasing motivation in order to teach technical reading, comprehension and literacy skills. As a result, depersonalization of the curriculum translates to some students feeling disconnected between school reading and personal reading. Further, Alvermann, (2001) found that integration of a student’s background and knowledge into the curriculum increases student performance and motivation in the classroom and have been identified as best practices in education. Additionally, research indicates cultural, cognitive and social characteristics play a crucial role in the evolution of middle school students and their reader.

Methodology

Participants: Getting to know the students
This study was conducted in Tara’s classroom at a large, diverse, urban high school in the southeast. Tara’s class included students in the 11th grade who had failed the 10th grade Florida state proficiency test required for graduation. Tara’s students were diverse in their socio-economic backgrounds and academic achievement as determined by class registration. Students were enrolled in regular, honors, advanced placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. All of the students had a minimum score of 135 for oral reading fluency. Tara’s class periods consisted of 45 minutes of daily instruction to develop strategies needed to succeed on the required state test.

Data Sources and Analyses

Tara, “Expected all the students in high school reading to have one or more of the following: poor attendance, no one independently reads, poor grades, low achieving placements, some ESE, ELL, bad behavior, police records, no parental support” (Interview with Tara Fall 2007). Thus she began the year by trying to get to know her students using a short anonymous survey. The teacher’s survey asked several questions about each student’s perceptions of their reading ability, comprehension of reading materials chosen for enjoyment, and comprehension of required textbook assignments. Tara administered the survey in three sections over the course of a week. Students responded to questions anonymously pertaining to their level of enjoyment, comprehension and frequency of reading. Initially, Tara began by asking students about their course enrollment to learn about student’s achievement beyond their indicated test scores through the use of informal questions from the Motivational to Read Survey. Next, Tara asked her students about student perception of themselves as readers borrowing questions from the Motivation to Read Survey (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni,
1996). Finally, Tara asked her students about the types of reading students were engaged in, hoping to find the hook needed to motivate them (see Appendix A).

**Data Analysis**

Initial analysis of the survey indicated Tara’s students were interested in reading and engaged in a variety of reading activities outside of the classroom. 68% of students reported enjoying reading in general and 79% rated themselves as good or excellent readers. Additionally, over 83% of students indicated that they had friends who believed they were either good or very good readers. However, students’ perception of comprehension of textbook materials indicated that almost 70% of student’s in Tara’s class sometimes or hardly ever understood what they read. These students perceived themselves as good readers, but not of textbooks, which indicated that content area reading is a struggle for Tara’s students. Thus the students in Tara’s class viewed reading in a variety of ways. They appear to view textbook reading differently than reading as a general task. Tara’s students reported reading magazines, articles on the internet, and novels. When self-assessing their individual reading abilities students include only the non-traditional texts that they read for personal interests.

As a means to further investigate the association between the student’s perception and comprehension of text, the data were analyzed using the Pearson Chi-Square method Test of Independence to determine if there was a relationship between the two variables of student perception as a reader and comprehension of textbooks. In our case we looked to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between the student’s perception of themselves as readers and their level of comprehension when reading both textbooks and books outside of the classroom. Although statistical significance was not
obvious within most of the responses and results, a cross tabulation analysis indicated that students who identified themselves as excellent readers also indicated they did not comprehend assigned material from course textbooks. Additionally a relationship between a student’s enjoyment of reading and the perception held by others and themselves as good readers found no statistical significance. Statistical significance was found, however, with students’ comprehension of material when reading other books outside the classroom and their perception of themselves as a reader and the level of reading enjoyment in general. For example, of the students who reported that reading a book is something that they do sometimes, 54.4% reported that they comprehended almost everything that they read. Further, of those students who reported being good readers, 65.8% reported comprehension of almost all of the material in the reading.

For students who enjoy reading, intrinsic motivation provides the foundation for engagement. Despite this motivation however, students who enjoy reading in general continue to struggle with comprehension of the middle and high school curriculum. Furthermore, these readers continue to disengage in school. Additionally, analysis showed those students who self identified as excellent readers reported little comprehension of materials read for pleasure. Results suggest a significant gap in students’ perceptions of reader quality and what perceptions of reader quality and comprehension of both classroom and outside reading for pleasure. Tara’s students actually comprehend both inside and outside of the classroom environment. Moreover, the notion that student voice needs to be an integral component when looking to improve adolescent literacy skills plays a crucial role in the evolution of middle school students.
Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School

Literacy made recommendations on how to meet the needs of struggling readers. Fifteen Elements of Effective Adolescent Literacy Programs emphasized building motivation to read and support for independent student learning (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Additionally, increased motivation can be cultivated by providing students the opportunity to read materials of interest and relevant not only to them but their culture, beliefs and values developed outside the classroom. Tara used many of these techniques when helping her students become readings of informational text.

Implications for Practice

Tara’s response to the survey

This group was not the horror I expected. I realized I had a group of students who want to work hard. These students are involved in school activities from honor society, varsity sports, leadership clubs, fund raising, etc. They don’t just want to pass the state test, they are looking at colleges. There are kids in upper level classes honor or AP. Their parents are as interested in their success as they are and frequently communicate through email. The bottom line is that all these kids want to pass the test and graduate. (Fall, 2007)

Armed with new knowledge regarding who her students were, Tara created a three part plan to guide them to success. The first element was to create a safe learning environment in which they could support one another. Next, Tara wanted to teach students that good readers are active and that the process is complex. Finally, students needed to develop skills which connected school reading with out of school reading.
The first part of the plan was to let students know that her classroom was a safe learning environment. Confused by their test scores, students indicated they felt like failures since they believed they could read. Although they read for personal reasons, students were disconnected from the type of reading required by the school and the state exam. Additionally, students were fearful of being teased and consequently refused to work with their peers. Further, students did not see themselves as striving readers and did not want to be identified as a person who was failing. For Tara’s room, interaction with peers in a class for students who failed the state reading test meant that students had to admit to their failure. In general, Tara’s students saw themselves as good readers and did not believe they had anything to gain from working with students who were not good readers. Tara began with team building activities such as scavenger hunts through tests, working with texts below the students reading levels, and allowing time for discussion regarding general school issues. Students learned that they had things in common with their peers, beyond failure on the test, and shared ideas, magazines and even some novels. The students were working together and talking about reading.

The second step was more difficult for students. The idea that reading is a complex process was not what they wanted to hear. One student told Tara, “Just tell me what I need to do to pass the !?XXX! test” (Fall 2007). Since the students did not find their out of school reading difficult, they believed that the reading they needed to do for the text must have some magic bullet. They knew that when they read a text, they understood the text. They did not realize that their understandings were limited to literal understanding. This disconnect between out-of-school reading and what they needed to do for school reading was key to identifying students struggling with reading and
comprehension of textbook materials. Therefore, Tara modeled several strategies that would benefit students reading both in and out of the school environment. These strategies included, thinking during reading, demonstration of how highlighting or marking a text could help students to understand text, and techniques for questioning during reading. Tara used sticky notes to help students model strategies of good readers as she talked about the differences between the school texts and the magazines, Internet articles, and other sources of reading that students read during independent reading. Sticky notes were written based on thoughts going through the students head while reading. Anytime they had a thought students were coached to write a sticky note. Additionally, students were taught codes for sticky notes. These codes included exclamation points for things that were interesting, a question mark for something that students had a question about, a box for a picture in their head created by the reading, etc.

Once Tara had the students seeing that they were thinking while reading school texts, she wanted to focus more on Question Answer Relationships (Raphael & Au, 2005) since the state test was right around the corner. Once Tara had shown the students the testing and question format, students began using practice passages with test questions similar to the state exam. The goal was to help students develop strategies for answering difficult questions that they encountered on the state exam. As students demonstrated progress with comprehension of textbook materials in Tara’s class, they were excited about learning something in reading class that would actually help them in other classes and on the state exam. Further, her students were beginning to understand and develop strategies for comprehension and the ability to identify key elements of text. Tara’s
students developed the skills necessary to enhance their comprehension and apply concepts to both personal and school reading materials. Now Tara had their full attention.

One of Tara’s main objectives was to help students understand the complexity of reading. Additionally, Tara needed the students to “buy into” the idea that they needed to be active and use both the text and their background knowledge to build understanding of any material that they read. Tara used knowledge about student identity and what she knew and understood about them to develop a plan for teaching reading comprehension strategies. She created a safe learning environment, helped students develop an understanding about active reading, and provided them with the skills needed to be successful. After the state exam, Tara continued working on active reading strategies. She taught the students how to utilize graphic organizers and guided them in their use during content area reading. Additionally, Tara implemented literature circles and modeled and coached students on developing inferences during reading. Finally, Tara had successfully created a classroom in which students became active readers across, both in and out of school.

Implications for the broader classroom

Tara found that reaching her students required acknowledging their personal beliefs regarding their skills as readers. She took the time to learn who her students were and created a plan to teach her students addressing reading identity and motivation. This plan was designed to teach her students not to teach a test or a program.

The implications for teacher educators are that we must prepare teachers of reading to be knowledgeable in the content of reading as well as in their students. We must work to prepare teachers to work with the programs they are given to teach the
students in their classrooms. Thus individualized and customizing instruction to meet students’ needs. As teacher educators, we must guide our teachers to see the students behind the test scores.
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