



COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY: TEAM TEACHING *IT'S ALL ABOUT INDEPENDENT READING*

Summary: The morning literacy block was the frame of our project as we collaborated to harness strategies to increase the reading motivation of the students. Our observation of “student engagement” during both *Independent Reading* and *Shared Reading* routines forced us to examine evidence based research regarding these facets, in hopes of changing student’s reading behaviour and build teacher capacity. This is a documentation of our professional journey and identifies the positive impact on student’s attitudes and reading behaviour.

In the Beginning

We had had many ideas and directions when we began our initial exploration of project goals for *It's About Time*. As we were dedicated to team teach for periods of the comprehensive literacy block, we came with differing perspectives and optimistic views of the semesters ahead. Both of us were new to our roles and new to this class of students.

One observation that helped us narrow our focus for this project was our conversation and professional observations during independent reading times. In the blended 3/4 grade, independent reading was met with reluctance. Many students would quickly be off task and/or engaged in role play reading but not engaged in the text. During individual reading conferences the students were clearly struggling to share *anything* about the book in front of them. Engaging the developing readers with *just right* text was integral to the students as they were eager to have their nose buried in the texts that were not their level. It was an image battle. The students were professional fakers!

There is significant evidence that independent reading is integral to individual reading success and contributes to motivating readers. Kastin & Wilfong remind us that readers need regular practice just as hockey players or dancers (2007). Such a dedicated block of independent

reading time provides required, “practice” reading in a safe environment. As professionals we have come to understand the inherent value of reading, but may be less effective in implementing in our classes, the “amount of time that children spend leisure reading is correlated with student reading achievement. (Stairs & Stairs, pp 42, 2010).” Struggling readers will increase vocabulary, internalise language structures and develop fluency as well, they develop strategies to read accurately, solve words easily and so increase their confidence (Pinnel & Fountas, 2009). The consistent reading routine reduces the perspective that reading is “done/ is a task,” but transforms reading to “explore their passions, interests and questions to bring the world into focus for pleasure, for entertainment, and read to find information of personal interest (S. Harvie & A.Goudvis 2000). Setting the structure of purposeful independent reading ensures the teachers time for quality one on one conferences, small group targeted instruction, guided reading and writing groups, assessment, such as running records or scheduled observations of reading behaviours.

We began with a five point Reading Survey (appendix 1) for all students. The students consistently reported unfavourably to reading independently, could not name a book that they enjoyed by themselves at school. But there were two students who were favourable and animated about their reading experiences. They both named series that they enjoyed to read and could share their favourite episodes in detail. The series identified were *Magic Tree House*, *Bones* and *Geronimo Stilton*. Our class library did not have any of these series as a spring board to other students. In fact, there were very few series in the class library.

Series books help challenged readers because the text presents with the same organization, characters are familiar, and series also allow the reader to easily predict what may happen (Kelly and Clausen-Grace, 2009). It can be beneficial to establish the familiarity with a series when the initial book is introduced as a read aloud with availability to many more in the series for the students. Our library needed serious attention. We know that readers need to have access to what they want to read and what their peers are reading (Kastin & Wilfong, 2007). Stairs & Stairs (2010) support independent reading selection stating “independent choice of texts in school should not be a luxury but a norm (pp.43).” As teachers with significant data including running records, DRA and conferences, we were very familiar with their interests and reading levels. “If we want our students to grow to appreciate literature, we need to give them a say in the decisions about the literature they will read. (Atwell, p.36.1998). We had to ensure the library reflected the students in *this* year’s class. We also considered that teachers who invest in a personal library, will in fact be reluctant to share those books with other classrooms. As a result, this reduces the flexibility of class libraries within a school, limiting choice for students; teachers would naturally secure their library purchase.

Our goal became to support the individual readers during independent reading time and so increase their engagement during this task. Collecting evidence to support our professional knowledge that independent reading is a critical foundation to establishing a solid literacy program was our first step. Recording anecdotal comments and having the students respond to a reader’s survey resulted in some raw comments from the students including “boring,” a “waste of time” and “it is hard” were some of the recurring responses. In addition, we recognised that the students were not connecting with any text for pleasure and entertainment; they could not name a single book that they had read by themselves.

First, we revisited students approach to selecting text. Readers saw reading as a task that *must* be difficult; they easily dismissed books as “too easy.” Students, both challenged and competent readers, did not read for any intrinsic purpose such as, pleasure, entertainment or thrill of discovery. They read because they were compliant to a teachers request or they had enough avoidance tactics to get through the independent reading time. Sharing our personal reading habits had an impact on the class.

Students were introduced to the fact that adults read texts that are “simple” because we enjoy them and we like to share our reading for pleasure. Our lesson offered a variety of books; typical thick, text books, a selection of tiny font books void of illustrations and a range of graphic novels and children’s picture books. The students were asked to select the book that teachers like to read and why. They consistently selected the typical teacher texts. The reasoning was “teachers are good readers”, “we were smart enough to read” and “the others (picture books) are for babies!” As we selected our favourite books; “StellaLuna,” “The Mystery of the Stolen Stanley Cup,” or the poetry of Shel Silverstein. The students were amused. We continued by our enthusiastic sharing of books that were in *their just right reading zone*. The door to reading pleasure was cracking open. We then continued to conference with students as they posted their *Best* selection and was then read by a teacher. The following conference would be animated would end with enthusiastic thanks for telling me(the teacher) about this book. Also, we would ask if you could also recommend this book to a friend or classmate.

In preparation for next school year, we did adapt an observation checklist (appendix #2) ready to use next year that we will use to focus on five students at a time. We will collect a tally and hope to address engagement early during independent reading. We want to be proactive to catch the faker and compliant readers and support them into becoming engaged readers!

Celebration

Two hundred dollars of OTF’s resurce fund was an investment that cannot be measured in having a positive impact on student’s engagement and motivation to read. This lead to students selecting and collecting books that *they* wanted to talk about. Conferencing confirmed their appreciation of details and their ability to continue personal connections. Their meaningful inferences and the conversations were rich. When compared with the conferences earlier in the year that were drab and flat! We now enjoyed conversations that are animated and connected students to each other. The closing reading survey resulted in comments that included;

“ I feel I sometimes learn new stuff and sometimes I am reading for fun. Mr. Halverson bought some new books and some series it is unbelievable!” Korbin

“This reading is good. I just fell into a book and I forgot I was at school!” Julie

Learning more and more things and we have series about hockey it ...makes me joyful! Matt

Relaxing and fun my mind coasts and rests after hard work. The series are great! Judah

We could not ask for more! The students did teach us they do love to read!

References

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