Journey into the Unknown:
Moving Beyond Behaviourism in Literacy Education

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Abstract

I was not the teacher that I wanted to be. My reading instruction was not meeting my own expectations. As a teacher and graduate student, I was interested in finding out more about reading instruction and student reading comprehension. I wanted to make the connection between theory and my own practice, which led me to question how I could incorporate student engagement into my reading instruction. This teacher research study examines the influence of mandated literacy curricula on student reading actions and experiences. The research findings attained through teacher journaling provide insight into how this reflective practice may transform reading instruction, and how these transformed practices may enable students to be active participants in the classroom while deepening their comprehension. This research study provides teachers with an example of how reading instructional practices based on student learning increases the likelihood of student participation and comprehension.

Introduction

I was not the teacher that I wanted to be. My reading instruction was simply following a plan created outside of my classroom. When I was provided with a new teaching assignment, which would have me compact the English Language Arts curriculum for grade six students into five months, I thought it was a great opportunity to critically examine my reading instructional practices. There was no instructional program that I could rely upon for teaching a compacted curriculum; therefore I would have to reflect on my past instructional practices as a means of identifying a plan that would address all outcomes in five months. In addition to this new teaching assignment, I enrolled in a graduate studies literacy program.

In this article I first situate myself as a teacher and researcher. I briefly explain how my teaching and graduate studies coincided to lead me on this research journey. Next, I provide an overview of the theoretical framework for this study. This is followed by a discussion of how teacher research was used as the methodology for this study. Following this is a section outlining how I used a journal for the data collection and analysis methods. The findings section provides insight into the journey my students and I took during the five months, and how my reading instructional practices started to reflect student learning. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and the conclusion of my study.

Context

The school that I had taught in for five years had fewer than two hundred students. This Grades 1-6 school is located in a rural, socio-economically challenged community in Eastern Canada. The school is the center point of the community, and life beyond the community does not always hold a lot of hope for the students.

It seemed as though my grade six classroom, which consisted of eighteen English speaking students, was merely a passageway into the next grade; nothing monumental. My classroom was not a site of change, but

rather merely a stepping-stone on the education pathway. Students continued struggling with whatever it was they struggled with before entering my classroom. For example, a large majority of students had difficulty with reading comprehension, and although I was doing my best to facilitate the curriculum in the manner laid out in the curriculum guide – following lesson plans and facilitating close-ended assessment activities – I did not feel as though I was addressing this need. I felt that something needed to change in order for the curriculum as well as the instruction to be better suited to meet the needs and interests of my students.

Graduate Studies

While teaching full-time, I enrolled in a graduate literacy program at Mount Saint Vincent University as a way to improve my instructional practices. The concept of literacy as being more than just reading and writing captured my attention (Street, 2003). Although literacy education was not entirely new to me, the research I was reading throughout the graduate courses presented some new and challenging ideas, such as the relationship between instruction and learning (Barnes, 1992; Cambourne, 1987; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997), reading theories (Aukerman, 2008), and a variety of perspectives on student reading achievement (Handsfield & Jiménez, 2008; Routman, 2003). It was not until I started reading about different teaching styles that my interest was completely piqued. This coursework and these readings gave rise to a number of questions related to what type of teacher I was. Was I a knowledge-dispenser, spouting information from the front of my classroom (Jordan, 2005)? Was I "on a stage playing to an audience that did not particularly want to listen or to learn" (Murray, 1982, p. 56)? Was I the interpretive teacher who included students in the generation of knowledge (Barnes, 1992)? I began to question my teaching practices and the impact my decisions had on students' learning.

Re-evaluating my teaching practices was overwhelming, and I soon realized that I needed to narrow the scope of my research. I focused my graduate research on reading instruction in relation to both comprehension and student engagement, in order to broaden my understanding and enhance my teaching practices. Finding a way to connect my research to my teaching practices was not problematic; actually, it was one of the easier parts of my learning journey. Although my research initially began as a course requirement, the application of this learning to my teaching practices was paramount for me. Student comprehension was a stumbling block in my classroom, and I suspected that it had been for quite some time. My students understood reading as merely saying the words that they encountered, and they saw language arts class as an excruciatingly long period designed to develop their decoding skills.

I was both intrigued and confused. How was I going to address my research question: How can my reading instructional practice strengthen the connection between reading and comprehension? I knew right away that I needed to take an in-depth look at myself as a teacher, and my beliefs about education. I was constantly moving from teaching in the classroom to working through my graduate studies. Throughout this exploration I hoped to gain insights into the complex process of reading; understanding both reading and comprehension. My goal was to develop a teaching pedagogy that would facilitate a connection between the two (reading and comprehension).

Theoretical Framework

This section provides a description of the change in my theoretical perspective during the course of this research study. Originally, I saw the purpose of literacy instruction as "training students in observable behaviors (e.g., repeating spelling or phonics drills)" (Handsfield & Jiménez, 2008, p. 451), whereby having a student read aloud would provide the teacher with evidence of student reading achievement. Through verbal and physical actions, students would demonstrate their ability to read.

Within such a reading perspective, comprehension is seen as being one of two aspects: comprehension-as-outcome, or comprehension-as-procedure (Aukerman, 2008). Comprehension-as-outcome is the perspective that a text has a predetermined understanding, and that all other understandings are erroneous.

The meaning of the text is fixed, and all students are expected to achieve this set meaning if they are to be assessed as having comprehended the text. Within a comprehension-as-outcome paradigm, teachers ensure that students learn what the text is *really* about.

Comprehension-as-procedure is situated on the notion that "a good reader is seen as one who accesses a fixed set of strategies to arrive successfully at the outcome" (Aukerman, 2008, p. 52). Within this view of comprehension, a text has one meaning and students need to use specific strategies to arrive at this particular meaning. Within comprehension-as-procedure, teachers instruct students about specific strategies that necessary to comprehend texts.

Through my graduate studies, I started to deepen my understanding of reading. Like Routman (2003), I saw students being able to read the words on the page but not understand the meaning behind what they were reading. I wanted my students to be able to read texts, and have the understanding necessary to participate in conversations about these texts. I again turned to the work of Aukerman (2008) and decided to emphasize comprehension-as-sense-making in the classroom. Comprehension-as-sense-making describes comprehension as being the process of deciding what a text might mean, rather than relying on the ability to arrive at any one specific meaning. Students bring their life experiences, questions, and predictions to the text as they are reading. Because of the reliance on students' connection to texts, comprehension-as-sense-making does not have one set meaning for any given text. Therefore, meaning for a text is derived from the experiences that the individual brings to the text.

I started to question myself as to what my role would be in making this move towards comprehension-as-sense-meaning. Duffy et al. (2003) argued that it was the teacher who played a pivotal role in student reading achievement, not the program. The program is a tool for teachers to support their classroom instruction. Reading Duffy et al. made me question the physical arrangement of my classroom. I wanted to promote a community environment whereby student conversation would be incorporated into reading lessons. Ketch (2005) demonstrated the connection between conversation and comprehension by illustrating how "talk can transform teaching into learning" (p. 12).

Ketch (2005) also pointed out that "classrooms should be places where students think out loud and are asked by the teacher to share why and how they came to their beliefs" (p. 10). In doing so, students would move from being recipients of knowledge to active meaning-makers (Meyer & Manning, 2007). Thus, I no longer viewed curriculum as a department driven document, but as the students' take on what is going on in the classroom (Manning, 1993).

Methodology

For the purpose of my research study, I selected teacher research because of its contextual approach to research. Data from daily experiences – as opposed to data from experiments – allowed me to study my classroom and my teaching practices in a real-life setting. I was recording and examining why things were happening as they happened. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) considered gathering data in real-life settings as a crucial aspect of qualitative research. Through observation, teachers can develop new ways of understanding their teaching and classroom (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2008). Qualitative research enabled me to look more extensively at, and listen more intently to, what was going on in my classroom and "understand something that is complex, socially influenced, dynamic, and interactive with many variables" (p. 34).

As a means of examining the complexity of my classroom questions and concerns, I hosted a weekly discussion forum in my classroom with all students. At the end of each week, my students and I discussed the activities of the week. The discussion forum was an open format where students were given the opportunity to share their thoughts orally in relation to the classroom and text being read: what worked, what did not work, what they liked, what they did not like, etc. My hope was that students would feel safe enough to express their views and opinions, and that they would not worry about having to share an answer that would be judged as right or wrong. Initially, the discussion forum consisted of me asking questions.

However, as time passed, students began to volunteer thoughts, and participate in the discussions more. Our discussions centered on reading, and what students thought the connection was between reading and school.

Teacher Research

Teacher research is not a new concept, and has been referred to as many methods: teacher research, action research, reflective teaching and/or practical inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2008; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; Manning & Harste, 1994; Raphael, 1999). For the purpose of this research study, I will refer to my research methodology as teacher research.

Teacher research, as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990), is the systematic and intentional inquiry by teachers to answer authentic questions derived from real classroom experiences. The key aspect of teacher research is that it is an attempt to understand authentic questions deriving from real experiences. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) agreed that the research questions involved in teacher research must stem from teachers' daily experiences and practices; and that these questions must be based on practice and theory, and must stem from a critical reflection of both. Lankshear and Knobel (2006), reaffirming the work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle, stated that teacher research "must flow from the *authentic* (or felt) questions, issues and concerns of *teachers themselves*" (p. 8).

The desire for teachers to make sense of their experiences sets teacher research apart from other forms of research and researchers. Teacher research is a process of discovery and understanding as opposed to a process of determining something to be true or false; right or wrong (Britton, 1987). Teacher research provides the opportunity for a teacher to examine his/her reading instruction with the mindset that there is no single way to teach. As Manning and Harste (1994) stated, teacher research was "about trying to understand our own professional practice" (p. 2).

Data Collection

Classrooms provide teachers with an abundance of research opportunities ranging from lesson plans, to classroom interactions, to dialogue amongst students, and to dialogue between teachers and students. Classroom incidences also provide rich data for the teacher researcher. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) attest, teachers "have sophisticated and sensitive observation skills grounded in the context of actual classrooms and schools" (p. 7). These observational skills allow the teacher to examine both obvious and subtle events that occur. Lesson plans as well as teaching resources (assessment tools and classroom texts) provide an effective way of researching teaching and learning. Understanding the rationale behind the lesson plans and the results of implementing the lessons provide insight into the teacher's theory as well as the impact of teaching decisions on student learning. The teacher researcher is able to situate these texts and learning events within contextual understanding of the classroom.

One of the first things I did in the name of teacher research was to follow O'Keefe's (1996) role as a kid-watcher; "learning to see what's there and using the information to create a better classroom" (p. 64). I began to monitor and record the effect of my lessons on student learning. As a way of documenting this data, I used a research journal. I used my journal to capture and reflect on classroom events. My journal provided a detailed understanding of my decisions and student learning within the classroom. The journal provides the teacher researcher an avenue to "document and describe experience, to explore, to gather insights, and to give voice to our developing professional hunches and repertoires" (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2008, p. 14).

Often, I jotted quick notes about student engagement and my own response to lessons. On any given day I would have several entries, which I reflected on by writing notes and questions in the margins of the page. Writing a reflexive journal provides "rich data about classroom life" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 8). This data can take many forms: daily events, reflections, interpretations, hunches, emotional responses, and

questions (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Waters (1999) stated that it was through the writing down of observations, the recording of reflections, and the collecting and sorting out entries related to teaching and learning, that the teacher discovered more about themselves and their students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a crucial component of teacher research. It is during this stage that the researcher analyzes and makes interpretations based upon the collected data. However, data analysis can be woven throughout the entire research study instead of merely at the conclusion of the research (Merritt & Labbo, 2004). Therefore, the data collected can influence the research decisions of the teacher. Data analysis reveals what the data means in relation to the research question. The researchers must "see what is there—not what we expect to be there" (Merritt & Labbo, 2004, p. 408). The researcher must be responsive to the data and cannot have preconceived notions of what will be found.

For the purpose of this research study, I have analyzed my teacher research journal. The language of the data analysis was "coding, identifying emerging patterns, recognizing themes, and challenging interpretations" (Merritt & Labbo, 2004, p. 414). I coded the entries of my journal to identify the themes present. Three specific themes emerged from analysis of my journal: 1) conversation; 2) student participation; and 3) student comprehension. These themes allowed me to categorize my data into manageable portions. Upon further analysis of the identified themes, I considered how these themes emerged, the consequences of these themes on my teaching practice, and my contribution to these themes as significant classroom experiences. By looking at my data as pieces of a puzzle, I was able to identify patterns which were crucial during the process of data analysis (Power & Hubbard, 1999).

Findings

Similar to Routman (2003), I learned that students read the words on the page, but they do not necessarily think about what they are reading. I found that I needed to re-teach the concept of reading in my classroom in order to show my students that reading means the ability to discern meaning from the text (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). This realization led to my cultivating the meaning of reading as a process of inquiry (Ayra et al., 2005).

I found that decoding and fluency play a role in reading, but students were missing the comprehension piece in their overall comprehension. In order to undertake this initiative of re-teaching the concept of reading, I needed to examine the concepts of reading and comprehension, and examine my pedagogical practices, which related comprehension to literacy practices in my classroom. As teacher researcher, I was examining my instructional practices both inside and outside the classroom. I continued to rely on my journal for insights as well as reading through my graduate program texts and reflecting on my pedagogy.

The link between reading and comprehension became a focal point for me in my practice. As a teacher and graduate student, I was constantly trying to remain aware of the students' perspective on every lesson and activity we did in class. I wrote in my journal daily; tracking my thoughts, questions, and reflection as they arose:

> *Did the students connect to the lesson/activity?*
> *Were students engaged during this lesson?*
> *Was it exciting and/or relevant to their lives?*
> *I was trying to ensure that my lessons were for a greater purpose than just executing a lesson. My lessons needed to have a purpose.*

Reflecting on my past lessons was almost painful. Up until now I had followed a more behaviourist approach to teaching. My goal in the classroom was to complete the lessons set forth in the published anthology provided to all grade six teachers in my province. The program contains a step-by-step outline for each lesson. I took little ownership over the lessons. My aim was just to cross them off at the end of the

day. I saw the purpose of literacy instruction as "training students in observable behaviors (e.g., repeating spelling or phonics drills)" (Handsfield & Jiménez, 2008, p. 451) rather than providing students with the opportunity to use their experiences to engage and interact with texts.

As painful as this reflection was, it was also very necessary. I needed to do more than just reflect; I needed to incorporate reflexivity into my process. Reflecting implied looking at our past and/or current practices to determine effectiveness. Reflexivity, as Manning and Harste (1994) pointed out, "is different from reflection. It is acting on the reflection and includes the interrogation of why we use the very constructs we do to make sense of the world" (p. 4). Upon thinking about reflexivity, I started thinking about my instructional practices and students' reading practices. Then, I decided to turn to my writing and reflect on the entries. I felt that I needed to move forward with my goal of planning instruction based on the needs of my students:

> *Another lesson...another day that I feel I didn't reach my students. I spent 25 minutes on Speller. I asked students the 18 words and had them write a paragraph to practice their dictation skills. What is the point of this? Students weren't engaged. They weren't asking questions. They weren't excited. I would have rather used this time for an activity that promoted comprehension, critical thinking and student interest projects.*
> *How is this reading?*

This entry, as well as others, allowed me to see where I had started from, where I was going, and how I was getting there. Reflecting on my practice provided me with the support and justification I needed to take ownership over my lessons. I stepped away from the published Language Arts program, and developed lessons and activities that addressed both curriculum and student learning. I abandoned my previous instructional approach of following the program verbatim. I started to identify gaps in what the program recommended and what was necessary for my classroom of students. I started to monitor daily incidences for the purpose of planning instruction. I felt confident and empowered with this new mindset.

I wanted my students to share in my newfound confidence. I wanted to give them a tool that would provide them with this same sense of ownership and voice over their learning experiences. At first, I considered having students use a journal to reflect on their own learning, but this just did not feel right to me. I did not want their learning journey to be private. Instead, I wanted something that we could share – something that we could experience together. I decided to create a large graphic organizer, which we referred to as our mind map, to visually depict our brainstorming practices.

I had an old chalkboard along the side of my room, which, aside from gathering dust and supporting the odd picture, did nothing at all. We covered this empty space with paper and began our group mind map. Initially, we recorded ideas and issues from our discussion forums. Over time, we began making connections between the ideas that we were recording. We had connecting lines marked with headings and/or connecting words. We circled similar ideas and used coloured highlighting to illustrate groups and patterns. New lessons began to connect to past lessons and an accumulation of learning was built by the students. I reflected on student interest in my journal:

> *Students love writing on our mind map. They are eager to fill in spaces, make connections with existing comments, and to ask questions that will take us in a new direction.*
> *I was told that this mind map means the class belongs to them. This is something new that they created. They don't see it as my mind map...they see it as their mind map.*

This was the beginning of incorporating student voice and student engagement into my instructional decisions. Students were both included and interested in my lesson. For once, my students were an integral part of building my classroom and my curriculum. I needed not only to teach these students, but to help foster a sense of pride as learners and a sense of independence in their learning. I believe these attributes were necessary for them to continue as lifelong learners. I did not want to produce or enable dependent learners "who find it difficult to take responsibility for their own learning" (Cambourne, 1987, p. 39). I wanted my students to not only to be able to read something, but to also have the understanding necessary

to participate in a conversation about what they were learning. This want closely aligned with my journey as a teacher. I started to have a voice in my reading instructional practices instead of relying on the program. Similar to students, I was becoming an active participant in the classroom learning environment instead of being a passive follower of the program.

Comprehension was a glaringly large blank space on our mind map. As a result, we started to investigate the issue of comprehension. Why was comprehension omitted from our mind map? What did we already know about comprehension? What did we feel that we needed to know? How could we facilitate connections between what we had learned and comprehension?

I perceived this line of questioning as a critical turning point for myself and the learners. Like Routman (2003), I support the idea that teaching practices should be based on experiences in order for students to be able to better understand. At this point, I did not want to dictate what comprehension should be from the front of the class, as I would have in my previous teaching practice. Rather, I wanted students to discover the purpose of comprehension for themselves. I needed to facilitate this learning to ensure that my students discovered comprehension-as-sense-making and not comprehension-as-procedure or comprehension-as-outcome (Aukerman, 2008). I structured my reading instruction on student interests. I facilitated discussions surrounding multiple interpretations of text so that students were able to understand that comprehension related to their interaction with the text.

It was then that I encountered my first major obstacle in my new pedagogical practice. I wrote the following in my journal numerous times:

> *How does one go about teaching comprehension?*

I knew that teaching comprehension was gong to be the hardest part of my journey. Understanding the theories surrounding comprehension was quite different from actually teaching students how to go about making sense of the words they read. I felt that I needed to have a firm grasp on my own beliefs about comprehension, and identify how my classroom activities supported or negated this particular belief.

Again, I reflected on my journal - this time using comprehension as my lens. Many of the lessons I had been using to teach comprehension actually reflected and supported the comprehension-as-outcome theory. In this way, I was viewing the text as "containing certain information" and comprehension as "having the predetermined 'right' understanding of that information" (Aukerman, 2008, p. 52).

I do not know that I ever really believed in single right answers, but I never really made the connection between what I believed, and what I was doing in my classroom. I had assumed that my lessons and activities supported the teaching of reading, and that these lessons and activities were sufficiently developing the reading abilities of my students. Once I became aware that my teaching practices may not be influencing student reading that way I planned, I needed to examine my teaching to see both its intended and unintended consequences on student reading. I needed to know how to guide my teaching practices to better reflect and model comprehension-as-sense-making. I needed to explore strategies that would model comprehension as meaningful, something that would not reflect a single predetermined answer. I wanted students to see comprehension as involving their experiences, their questions, and their insights.

I sifted through mountains of books, papers, articles and journals written about comprehension looking for professional scholarship that would guide me in the right direction. A large majority of the materials I reviewed seemed to focus on comprehension-as-procedure and were primarily how-to guides for teaching comprehension. I certainly understood the attraction to texts touted as fixing or remediating the current problems by "teaching students a standard procedure that will enable them to generate the 'right' understanding" (Aukerman, 2008, p. 54). As a teacher, I wanted all of my students to reach their reading potential, so the idea of having one standard procedure to produce understanding was appealing. Although this makes teaching comprehension look easy, it is also uncomfortably similar to my earlier do-the-lesson-meet-the-outcome pedagogy. As Duffy et al. (2003) argued, the teacher played a pivotal role in student reading achievement, rather than the program. The program is a tool for teachers to use to support their

classroom instruction.

The class mind map helped to solidify my decision to base my teaching practices on the learning needs of my students, while incorporating their perspectives and ways of knowing. Under our comprehension title, students started to brainstorm successful methods of comprehension. However, each strategy referred to closed-ended recall questions whereby all that was needed was a keyword/phrase from the text. The lack of reference to sense-making proved to me that comprehension was an area we needed to work on.

I wanted my students to have a variety of tools that would support their comprehension by modeling different strategies and allowing them to pick and choose what to use and when to use it. This decision was guided by my realization that there was no one right method for learning, much the same as there was no one right method for teaching: probably the most profound realization I had had over the course of my research.

My next step was to determine which theories, strategies, and practices would best support my goal. My views about curriculum changed during the course of my research, and therefore, my practices needed to change to reflect this. I no longer viewed curriculum as a department-driven document, but more as Manning's (1993) view that curriculum should be the students' take on what is going on in the classroom.

I needed my classroom to mirror this student-centered view of curriculum. I wanted to better understand students' thinking. In order to do this, my classroom needed to focus on conversation, dialogue, and on the sharing of information between students and the teacher. I needed to share the responsibility of the learning journey with the students and allow them to guide my teaching. My journal entry reflected this shift:

> *I am here teaching students how to read various texts. Yet, I always have developed the lessons myself and didn't feel comfortable deviating from the plan. Where are students represented in this belief? I was not including them as partners. I needed to plan with them.*

I had been taught to take full control initially and to gradually release it over time. Little did I realize that a teacher is never in full control of student learning. Instead, student learning occurs through a student's relationship with and sense of belonging, to his/her community. My classroom needed to become such a community.

Ketch (2005) and Aukerman (2008) were the driving forces behind the physical rearrangement of my classroom to facilitate conversation and communication. I arranged the desks into a horseshoe, my own desk included. The front of the classroom was no longer reserved as the teacher's space as the entire classroom became a forum from which we all shared our views, beliefs, and connections surrounding reading. Students were given input into the placement of their desk. I wanted the physical environment to represent greater equality in the teaching and learning process. In doing so, I believed that my classroom became a safer place to ask, question, clarify, and learn.

Now that the physical arrangement of the classroom promoted a community environment, I focused on incorporating conversation into my reading lessons. Ketch (2005) demonstrated the connection between conversation and comprehension, and illustrated how "talk can transform teaching into learning" (p. 12). Ketch (2005) also pointed out that "classrooms should be places where students think out loud and are asked by the teacher to share why and how they came to their beliefs" (p. 10). I began to infuse these beliefs into my everyday classroom practices. I asked more questions, promoted problem solving in my classroom, and invited alternative methods of responses. Students were encouraged to ask questions of each other, and not just direct questions to me or the author of the text they were reading (Handsfield & Jiménez, 2008). It was through this conversation that students strengthened their thinking in relation to the text and the comments of others.

Discussion

Conversation had been the starting point for many of my discoveries, and had been guiding both the students' learning as well as my own. Discussions became an integral part of our language arts class. Students made connections, and described their experiences and emotional reactions to various texts. These conversations demonstrated the comprehension that students had previously struggled with.

Now, my teaching focused on learning as the process of sharing and debating information. Conclusions were reached through consensus and communication. Individual strengths and successes were shared and celebrated, and every student had the opportunity to demonstrate his/her expertise. New concepts were presented and discussed, deliberated, and scrutinized. This discussion became the vehicle for comprehension. Students were able to clarify and deepen their understanding through group discussions and classroom workshops. During class workshops, students had the opportunity to engage in reading, to select their own reading material, and to spend time talking with others about their reading.

Student projects and methods of evaluation also underwent an enormous transformation during the semester that students were with me. Through reflecting on past assignments and discussions with students, I began to realize that I had been giving assignments for the purpose of giving grades. Much of the learning in my classroom did not need to be followed up through a formal assignment. I put away the close-ended novel questions that usually accompanied the novels I gave to my students. I stopped demanding the traditional pen and paper response after each chapter of a text. I have come to recognize that knowledge can be demonstrated in a multitude of modalities.

During silent reading, I began to see the value in students reading for enjoyment, and I did not feel the need to assign the traditional summary response for every text. For classroom assignments, I allowed for choice in students' responses. I also incorporated traditional written responses, technological responses, musical responses, drama, and art as modes of response. Regardless of the medium, I put as few limitations on assignments as possible, maintaining as high a level of student ownership as possible. All these experiences contributed to student confidence and achievement, both of which were necessary in students successfully completing grade level assessments.

With the changes that have occurred in my teaching practice, the boundaries of my classroom have also expanded. More and more often my classroom setting has moved into the library, the computer lab, the art room and even the school stage. I find that the more I include student choice into my classroom, the larger my classroom became. Instead of exclusively discussing questions that I perceived as being pertinent to the content of the text, students started sharing connections they made to their lives outside school. My classroom became a community, and I too became a learner seeing things in new ways through my students' eyes.

By facilitating student conversation, sharing, and questioning, and through the incorporation of student input in classroom projects, my instructional practices reflected a pedagogy I believed was necessary for student achievement. By including instructional practices such as mind mapping and the discussion forum, students were provided with the opportunities to share their thoughts and questions. Throughout the duration of the course, students became decision-makers in shaping the environment to reflect what they felt was necessary for them to grow as readers. I learned that I needed to change my approach to teaching and be willing to be open-minded and flexible when working with students.

Aside from the modifications to my personal pedagogy, I have also come to value choice and voice in learning and teaching. I believe that the changes in my curriculum delivery and classroom practices were successful because they all centered on student choice and engagement. My teaching has become more effective, because my students became responsible for their own learning.

Conclusion

Learning and teaching are so deeply intertwined that it is difficult to separate either into a set of discrete skills. There needs to be a balance between teaching and learning, which I struggled with at the beginning of my teacher research study. I could not simply focus on my teaching practices without considering student learning; nor could I focus on student learning without understanding the influence of my teaching. I soon learned that maintaining a healthy balance required ongoing effort and awareness. Keeping a journal has helped me with this juggling as I reflect on my teaching practices and student learning as well as to see any gaps in my thinking captured in the journal. Throughout the teacher research study, I was shocked to see how I initially focused on only a small part of the classroom dynamic and did not realize the influence of my practices on student reading, the classroom environment, and my position in the classroom.

Much of what I have learned required deliberate focus. Despite my decision to pursue comprehension-as-sense-making, I continually monitored and questioned my practices to ensure that I did not stray too far from my intended path of a student-centered approach. I remained cognizant of the fact that my students need to always be the driving force behind my teaching.

This research study provided me the opportunity to examine my reading instruction and the related influence on student reading. I used to question why students did not comprehend the texts they read, and why they were disengaged in the reading process. Upon analyzing my data, I realized that these questions were a residual effect of my teaching decisions. I realized that I was not making enough room in my class for student choice, nor was I allowing students to make meaning of what they read.

I have realized that for students to actively engage with a text and to become contributing members of the classroom community, they need to have decision-making abilities. Students need to have their voices heard, and they need to have the ability to shape classroom decisions. My teacher research journey has illuminated the importance of basing instructional decisions on student learning as opposed to program manuals. Instead of following a program manual, I based my instructional practices on student learning. My instruction was much more responsive to the needs of students. As a result of this responsiveness, students became more engaged in classroom decision-making and their learning. This research study provides teachers with an example of how reading instructional practices based on student learning increases the likelihood of student participation and comprehension. This research study showed me the value of student participation in teaching and learning. Regardless of grade level or content area, basing instructional practices on student learning and providing students with opportunities to share in the decision-making process will always be priorities for me as I move forward in my educational career.

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