Literacy Blocks: Student Engagement and Student Learning

in Grade 7 and 8 Classrooms

by Carol Hill

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Language & Literacy Focus

“Research in Progress”
Prologue:

This research came out of my studies in the Masters of Education program, Language and Literacy. The following paper describes my journey to the mid-point of data collection. Before describing my research, it is important that I provide some context for my thinking and learning on this topic because what I have learned has had an impact on my thesis questions, and the design of my study.

The first thing ( . . . and this is why I entered Language and Literacy) I noticed as I began teaching was that literacy skills are probably the most important skills necessary for school success. As a middle years teacher I found that many of my students did not have the literacy skills they needed to negotiate the curriculum to become successful. Secondly, I noticed that teachers could make a different in the lives of their students. Practices that promote student engagement do make a difference in student behaviour and learning. And thirdly the more I found out about literacy in the first eight years of teaching, the harder it became to figure out how to balance the teaching of explicit skills with the creation of a meaningful context. The course work, and research, I have done has validated these initial views I had.

As I progressed in my course work, three essential understandings stood out to me that have formed the basis of my thesis. The first is Social Constructivism. My readings and thinking have returned again and again to Vygotsky’s idea that we construct our knowledge within a social context. According to Ben-Ari and Kedem-Friedrich (2000), Vygotsky believed that “the construction of knowledge happens by interactions of individuals within the society and learning is seen as the internalization of social interaction” (2000, p. 154). Within this context learning is seen as “changing participation in culturally valued activity” (Larson & Marsh, 2006, p.109).
Viewing learning this way has an impact on how we come to understand learners, and how we assess their learning.

A second essential understanding that I bring to my research is a balanced literacy approach. This approach is a middle ground between the whole language versus phonics debate that recognizes the need for both explicit instruction of skills and strategies and the need for a meaningful context for learning. (Squire, 2003; Rief & Heimburge, 2007; Fountas and Pinnell, 2003; Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass & Massengill, 2005; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson & Rodriguez, 2003).

The final understanding essential to my research is the expanding definition of literacy. The proliferation of multimodal texts has forced a change in thinking about literacy such that it is now defined as the ability to view images and represent ideas (Manitoba Education and Training, ELA Curriculum, 1996). This expanded view of literacy has led to the term, “multiliteracies.” This term was coined originally by The London Group (1996) and was developed to deal with the changing nature of literacy brought about by the increase in electronic and digital communication, as well as the increasing diversity of communication experienced by most people in the form of images, sounds and languages. Middle years students today experience communication in many modes, from multiple sources, throughout any day. Valuing these multiple literacies is an essential component of any literacy program in the 21st Century (NCTE, 2004; Alvermann, 2001). To connect to our students, we must use the multimodal texts in the classroom that they use outside of the classroom.
Literacy Blocks:

During the past four years I have explored the theory behind, and the practices of guided reading, reading workshop, language and word study, visual tools and graphic organizers, writing workshops, the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which of course led to a look at critical and media literacies – all within the overarching concept of literacy as inquiry. What became obvious to me is that we know so much about good literacy practices, but in so many cases these practices are not happening in classrooms. The question became: What framework of instruction would help to organize all of these components into a cohesive whole?

I noticed that early years teachers were talking about literacy blocks, and these blocks seemed to work for them. So I started to experiment with the literacy block framework with my middle years classrooms. This has led to my thesis research that is a case study following the ten-week implementation of literacy blocks in two different classrooms.

The questions I am asking are:

1) What are the qualitative markers of student engagement and student learning in literacy block?

2) What are the teachers’ experiences of implementation of literacy blocks in grades 7 and 8, with specific attention paid to practices that promote student engagement such as: integration of content; implementation of student questioning strategies; implementation of collaborative strategies; integration of ICT and allowance for student choice and student, self-directed work?
Teachers will also be asked to comment on timetabling concerns, because in the middle years this is a concern due to programs with larger curricula, and in many cases multiple teachers. Data will be gathered through: interviews with teachers and students; classroom lesson observations; teacher workshops.

Literacy Blocks originated in New Zealand in the early 1980s as part of the balanced literacy movement (Stretch, 1995). These first literacy blocks included small-group, guided reading groups, within a whole-language context. New Zealand’s successes in literacy are at least in part seen as due to their literacy blocks. (King, Jonson, Whitehead & Reinken, 2003).

There is no single definition of a literacy block but there are some common components of all literacy blocks. They all are held at a routinely scheduled, uninterrupted, time of day when the teacher and students focus on literacy learning. There is some integration with content area learning. There are variations about the amount of whole-class or small group instruction as well as in the length of time a block lasts (from 1 to 3 hours in length). Blocks may include the following components: independent reading, independent writing, guided reading, guided writing, word study and language study.

After New Zealand’s success three different groups of American researchers began studies of literacy blocks in the early grades at approximately the same time – in the late 80s. Pinnell’s Literacy Collaborative at Ohio State University (Williams, 1998), Cunningham and Hall’s Four Block Approach (1989) and Slavin and Madden’s Success for All (Success for all Foundation, 2008) all demonstrated that literacy blocks do increase different literacy skills in varying degrees. Slavin and Madden have extended their program to include middle years students. After these groups showed success, England adopted a nation wide Literacy Hour for its K – 5 students (Shiel, 2003).
With their third grade assessments the Literacy Collaborative has demonstrated slightly higher passing rates than other schools, substantially greater year-to-year passing rates, with fewer grade 2 retentions and less special education referrals (Dexter, 2007). Cunningham and Hall’s (1998) Four Blocks have achieved 80% or more grade one students reading at or above grade level and by the end of second grade only 2-9% of children are reading below grade level. Success for All has shown increased reading achievement in state standardized tests and a reduction in special education placements (Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996; Slavin & Madden, 1999). In England, the Literacy Hour has resulted in 75% of age 11 students reaching level 4 or higher (age-level appropriate literacy levels) on their nation-wide standards test (Shiel, 2003).

Although there have been small, isolated studies of literacy blocks in Canada the main evidence that we are paying attention to the research around the world supporting the use of literacy blocks is what is happening in the newer ELA Curricula. British Columbia (2006), Nova Scotia (2002), and Ontario (2007) are all calling for the use of literacy blocks in their elementary schools, with BC stretching into grade 7.

Fountas and Pinnell (2001) give many reasons why literacy blocks are an effective framework of instruction. At their best literacy blocks provide: daily participation in literacy learning activities, explicit instruction of strategies and skills, efficient allocation of time with cross-curricular instruction enhancing connection making and the creation of routines that support student independent learning.

Despite the successes some researchers have brought some concerns about literacy blocks forward. Success for All and Literacy Hour are highly prescriptive programs (Hall, Allan, Dean and Warren, 2003; Parker and Hurry, 2007) that limit the ability of teachers to respond to their
students’ needs and interests. And even though Success for All is supposed to use collaborative learning, and during Literacy Hour teachers are supposed to use interactive teaching in both programs there is a lot of direct teaching with traditional teacher discourse patterns. The next point relates to the first - the programs are difficult for teachers to follow, even when teachers support the programs it is challenging for them to do everything the researchers want them to do (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; OSU, 1998; Parker and Hurry, 2007).

Even though programs that use leveled grouping say the groups should be flexible there have been some concerns with keeping students in long-term, levelled groups. This has caused problems for some students who are seen as “languishing” (Klinger, Cramer & Harry, 2006).

Most of the research on the success of literacy block programs has been quantitative. The narrow definition of literacy that quantitative studies employ put the research at odds with our current understandings of literacy as inquiry, the multimodal nature of literacy and social constructivism. This is confirmed with research in England on the Literacy Hour (Peacock & Weedon, 2002). According to standardized tests reading comprehension is improving but this has not led to a transference of greater comprehension in the content area reading.

Hirsch (2007) points out that time taken from content areas for literacy blocks is dangerous because no amount of knowledge about comprehension processes will help a child, who has no prior knowledge of a concept.

Overall, research indicates that literacy blocks can have potentially positive effects. Despite this, the concerns brought forward in the research suggest some cause for care as literacy blocks are moved into the Middle Years given what we know about adolescent literacy and drop out rates.
Student Engagement:

The 2003 PISA study indicates that 25% of 15 year old students are functioning at a low literacy level with only 44% capable of difficult reading tasks. ABC Canada (2008) states that drop out rates are linked to literacy levels and literacy levels are one of the main indicators in success. Studies of adolescent engagement connect student engagement to drop out rates (Smyth & Fasoli, 2007; Irvin, Meltzer & Dukes, 2007). Engagement in school decreases as students move up through the grades (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004). The data and research cited here leads me to see a strong connection between student engagement, literacy, and drop out. For this reason, as a grade 8 teacher of literacy it is doubly important for me to understand student engagement and any program that I implement in my class must promote student engagement.

In their research on student engagement Lutz, Guthrie and Davis (2006) developed an observational rubric of student engagement that builds on previous definitions of engagement. This rubric, which I use in my own research, describes student engagement across 4 domains. First is affective engagement, which can be described as “positive affective reactions toward teachers, classmates, and school” (Lutz et al. 2006, p.5). Secondly is the term most teachers refer to when they talk of student engagement. This is behavioural engagement, which is active participation. Thirdly is cognitive engagement and “incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert effort” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004, p.60). As well as the creation of a rubric, the addition that Lutz et al. (2006) made to the description of student engagement is the domain of social engagement, which is “the exchange of interpretations of text and other ideas about reading and writing with peers in a community of literacy” (Lutz et al. 2006, p.5).
Research into student engagement in literacy points to three general conditions for the promotion of student engagement. First of all students must be interested in what they are doing. Student interest can be increased through the integration of literacy instruction with content area inquiry as described by Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, Humenick & Littles (2006) with Concept Oriented Reading Instruction 2006, by Engle and Conant (2002) with their Fostering Communities of Learners and the How People Learn framework as described by Petrosino (2004). When an inquiry stance is present throughout all subject areas student interest is increased (Strickland & Feeley, 2003; Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth 1996, 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Short, Harste and Burke, 1996; and Fraser, 2003). Student interest is also promoted when students are allowed to self-select their own reading material (Reis, McCoach, Coyne, Schreiber, Eckert & Gubbins, 2007), and when they are allowed to take personal excursions (Azevedo, 2006). Hidi and Harackiewicz (2001) also state that student interest in activity leads to increased perseverance in an activity by students.

A second general condition that leads to increased student engagement is meeting the need students have to build relationships, and take part in meaningful discourse in the classroom. When students feel that they have positive relationships with teachers student engagement and student learning increases (Zimmer-Gembeck, Chipeur, Hanisch & McGregor, 2006; Smyth & Fasoli, 2007; Caine & Caine, 1991). The type of dialogue occurring in classrooms impacts student engagement. Researchers have found that interactive discourse and high-level questioning are both effective strategies (Fecho and Botzakis, 2007; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson and Rodriguez, 2003; Hall, Allan, Dean and Warren, 2003; 1997; P. Johnston. 2004). Many studies also connect collaborative learning in English classes to increased student learning and engagement (Bear and Invernizzi, 1984; Almanza, 1997; Reimer, 2001).
Finally, the third general condition, which should be met to create an environment that promotes student engagement, is that multiple literacies should be brought into the classroom and valued by teachers. Faulkner (2006), Alvermann (2001), and O'Brien (2004) all support the use of out-of-school literacies especially with at-risk students. Gaztambide-Fernández (2007) emphasizes the use of art and popular culture to engage students in literacy learning. Other researchers support the use of technology in the class (Shenton and Paget, 2007; Lightner, Baber & Willi, 2007; Boss, 2008).

The research in student engagement has relied heavily on survey data and this has given us some good ideas about what leads to engagement. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) suggest that if we really want to understand the why and how of student engagement that it is time to start using qualitative studies. This is why I have chosen to do case studies for my thesis research in student engagement during literacy blocks.

**Epilogue:**

My journey through the second half of my data collection is changed by reflecting upon what I have observed thus far.

An emerging theme is that student engagement is a concern for the teachers in my study, and is one of the main reasons for their involvement. Teachers state that their students need to be engaged to learn. They believe that making personal connections and working with student interests are two keys to develop student engagement. For the teachers these two needs seem to be in a constant conflict with the need to teach the prescribed curricula, and move students through a course of study.
Although the teachers participating in my study care deeply about being the best possible teachers they can be, they have not been given training in some fundamental understandings of literacy development. Implementing all aspects of the literacy block is a challenge for them. The teachers teach writing and reading, but the idea of regularly scheduled reading and writing workshop time with a focus on choice is a new approach. The reading instruction block focusing on guided reading, and the language and word study blocks are totally foreign to them. For literacy blocks to be effective in the middle years teacher education is of the utmost importance. The professional discussions we are having during our designated workshop times seem to provide a safe and open way to share ideas and ask questions. I look forward to getting teacher feedback about these sessions.

In many cases middle years students are just beginning to develop self-awareness. This fact makes it interesting to compare what they say about themselves and their learning in interviews compared to what I see during classroom observations. I am not sure that students understand engagement or learning. They talk a lot about liking things that are fun such as physical education and field trips, but they don’t seem to realize that they are smiling and enjoying themselves just as much during a heated discussion about various texts during literacy block time. Developing positive attitudes about learning may be an important step in creating a space where students are truly engaged.

This thought has led me to a question that is beginning to form as I observe classrooms: What role does the of the behaviour of all adults in the building play on student engagement? If learning is the objective should adults be interrupting this learning with administrative tasks or cheerful banter with each other? Does this contribute to a feeling of community, or undermine the importance of the task of learning? Sitting back and watching gives me a chance to reflect on
my own teaching practices, and the practices of all adults in my own building. Are we showing students that what we are doing is important and worth being engaged in?

References


Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2007). Inner, outer, and in-between: Why popular culture and
the arts matter for urban youth. *Orbit, 36*(3), 35-37.


