Student Engagement During Literacy Blocks in Grades 7 and 8: 
A Qualitative Case Study of Two Classrooms

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The research described in this presentation examines student engagement during literacy blocks. Before describing the research any further it is necessary to explain the term, literacy blocks. There is no one definition of literacy blocks, and the term can be used to describe any block of time that has been designated for literacy learning. The blocks may last from one hour to three hours and may include time for independent reading and/or writing, guided reading and/or writing, word study, and language study. Instruction may be whole class or small group. The purpose of literacy blocks is to achieve balanced literacy instruction. In this research, a modified Four Blocks (Cunningham & Hall, 2001) was used which consisted of the following four component blocks: Independent Reading, Reading Instruction, Writing Workshop and Language and Word Study.

Background for Study

Literacy blocks were initially created for the Early Years setting and have been researched extensively in this setting (Cunningham and Hall, 2001; King, Jonson, Whitehead & Reinken, 2003; Shiel, 2003; Success for All Foundation, 2008; Williams, 1998.) In the past seven years literacy blocks researchers have started to explore the use of literacy blocks in the middle years (Cunningham & Hall, 2001; Daniels, Madden & Slavin, 2004; Literacy Collaborative, 2009) and curriculum designers and writers have started to recommend literacy blocks as frameworks of instruction for middle years students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2002; Reif & Heimburge, 2007). Given that middle years students have unique needs, middle years classrooms have different
structures and middle years curriculum are all different than in the early years it was the purpose of this research to begin to examine whether a literacy blocks framework of instruction makes sense for this context. Do literacy blocks promote student engagement, a critical factor in middle years instruction, and are teachers able to implement the blocks in the middle years?

The research questions that guided this research were:

1) What are the qualitative markers of student engagement during literacy blocks in grades 7 and 8?; and

2) What were the teacher experiences of implementation of literacy blocks in grades 7 and 8?.

This research is grounded in two concepts: social constructivism and balanced literacy. Inherent in an understanding of social constructivism are both the gradual release of responsibility and student engagement. With the gradual release of responsibility the expert scaffolds the students’ learning as the student changes their participation from observing to guided practice to independence in an activity (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The notion of social constructivism - that we build our knowledge in social constructs - suggests that students must be engaged to be learning. Students need to be active participants in the active construction of knowledge (Larson & Marsh, 2006).

With balanced literacy instruction there is a balance between all facets of literacy instruction – reading, writing, speaking, listening, representing, viewing – and different approaches of instruction – whole class, group and individual. Above all teachers ensure that a balance must be achieved between skill development and meaning making in both the emphasis of instruction and the time spent on different activities. Assessment guides
Explicit instruction of strategies is inherent in balanced literacy instruction, as is the gradual release of responsibility as students move towards independence within the framework of instruction.

Literature Review

The journey that literacy instruction has taken from turn-of-the-century reading primers to Dewey to phonics to whole language to balanced literacy is often seen as a pendulum swinging back and forth. However, when it is understood what each of these people, or movements, contribute to the teaching of literacy, the journey can be seen as a path moving in one direction. The theories of Dewey, Vygotsky and Rosenblatt all led to the research-based practices that fully support these theories. It can be seen how research in cognitive psychology, and brain-based research has built on the theories so that we can now say why collaborative, student-centered, inquiry-based literacy instruction that acknowledges students’ schema works.

Although there are many different literacy block models, the first models, and most researched, are New Zealand’s literacy blocks (King, Jonson, Whitehead & Reinken, 2003), Success for All (Slavin & Madden, 1999, 2004), Literacy Hour (Shiel, 2003), The Four Blocks (Cunningham, Hall & Defee, 1998), The Literacy Collaborative (Williams, 1998, 1999). These 5 different literacy blocks frameworks, which have been researched in the past 28 years, show significant gains in quantitative measures of reading ability, with most of the research in grades kindergarten to grade 3. Despite these
successes there has been concerns voiced in the research about the boring prescribed programs of Success for All (Datnow & Castellano, 2000), the teacher-directed instruction of Literacy Hour (Mroz, Smith and Hardman, 2000), and with regards to all blocks, the concern that all this literacy instruction is taking away from content area learning - or building a knowledge base for our students (Hirsch, 2007).

In the past 20 years student engagement has been a growing concern in education. The definition of student engagement used in this study comes from the research of Lutz, Guthrie and Davis (2006). In their definition, student engagement is described across four domains. Students have to be engaged affectively - be interested or enjoying what they are doing - engaged behaviourally - being on-task - engaged cognitively - putting mental effort into the task - and engaged socially - talking with others about their learning to be fully engaged. Student engagement decreases progressively as students move into adolescence (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004) and studies connect student engagement to specific increases in literacy skills (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson & Rodriguez, 2003). Student engagement must be a consideration in any planning done for grade 7 and 8 students.

Student engagement is enhanced by:

1. Inquiry-based instruction that built on students’ interests (Brown & Campione, 1994; Engle & Contant, 2002; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Petrosino, 2004; Short, Harste & Burke, 1996).

2. Instruction in which teachers saw themselves as partners in learning with students and partook in dialogue with students (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Hall, Allan, Dean & Warren, 2003; Zimmer-Gembeck, Chipeur, Hanisch and McGregor, 2006)

4. And instruction that brings all literacies into the classroom (Alvermann, 2003; Barrell & Hammond, 2002; Faulkner, 2006; O'Brien, 2004; Shenton and Paget, 2007).

Methodology

The literacy blocks framework decided on for this study was a modified Four Blocks (Cunningham and Hall, 2001). Each of the component four blocks was to have occurred four times in a six-day cycle: a 30 minute Reading Workshop, a 30 minute Writing Workshop, a 20 minute Language and Word Study and a 30 – 45 minute Reading Instruction so that students were participating in 90 minutes of integrated literacy instruction daily. Based on the research, the literacy blocks for this study were designed to incorporate choice, curriculum integration, inquiry, ICT, collaboration, student-directed learning. Inherent in the design of each block was the explicit instruction of skills and strategies.

This research was a qualitative case study of two classrooms. The two teachers from each classroom, as well as the ten students, were interviewed before, during and after the literacy blocks intervention. Both classrooms were observed for one hour four times throughout the ten-week study. During the observation student behaviours were observed and noted using a student engagement rubric (Lutz, Guthrie & Davis, 2006). Field notes were also recorded. Teachers participated in three-one hour professional development sessions with the researcher to develop their understandings of literacy blocks instruction. Teachers received a binder of resources to guide their instruction.
Results

The qualitative markers of student engagement were analyzed in two stages. First, the student interviews were coded using Guthrie and Wigfield’s (2000) four engagement processes. It was found that motivation and social interactions were key processes of student engagement for these students. Intrinsic motivation was highest and connected to self-efficacy motivation. Student statements such as, “I was pretty into that - I like writing and stuff,” reflect the connection between intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. Negative social interactions with peers negatively affected engagement as exemplified by the statement “One person does it all so nobody else really learns.” Strategy use and conceptual knowledge were almost nonexistent in the students’ discussions as processes of engagement.

In the second stage of the analysis the results from the observational rubrics were compiled, and compared against teacher reports of student engagement (teacher interviews), and student self-reports (student interviews). This analysis showed that students were clearly engaged across all domains about 25% of the time. This means that students were on-task, thinking about their learning, engaging with one another, or the teacher about their learning, and looking interested or pleased, for about 1/4 of the time that I observed them. Behavioural and cognitive engagement were highest when social engagement was lowest. Affect was most often neutral. Teachers and students both stated that with certain blocks (different in each class) there was increased student engagement.

Within the ten-week study teachers were clearly at the beginning stages of implementation of literacy blocks. At this stage student engagement did not look high.
However, relatively, teachers believed their students were demonstrating increased engagement in some of the blocks, and students reported feeling increased engagement at times.

The third stage of analysis examined a new question which arose out of the observed results of stages one and two: Could Guthrie & Wigfield’s Engagement Model of Reading Engagement (2000) account for the levels of student engagement that was observed? To answer this question the observational data and interviews were used to analyze the instructional context according Guthrie & Wigfield’s (2000) instructional priorities. It was found that teacher involvement, learning goals, rewards & praise and evaluation were all close to the ideal context that Guthrie and Wigfield describe. This explains why students’ engagement processes were based on the positive social interactions students had with teachers and on intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, teachers used “group work” but did not use collaborative learning strategies in the class to promote collaboration between students. Explicit strategy instruction occurred on occasion, but not consistently. This explains why negative social interactions with peers caused disengagement and why strategy use was not named as an engagement process for these students.

The fourth stage of data analysis examined teacher experiences of implementation of literacy blocks. Teacher interviews and professional development meetings were analyzed according to the components of literacy blocks design of this research. The teachers were at the beginning stages of implementation. They were learning what literacy blocks are, and developing plans for how to use the blocks in their context. Thus, at this point they were unable to consistently incorporate all of the components of literacy
blocks as described by this research design. It was clear that the teachers found the implementation of literacy blocks to be a challenge, yet even in the early stages teachers saw the potential as frameworks to guide their instruction, develop routines, and create student engagement. The following teacher quotes reflect the positive experiences that the teachers had:

*The structure of it, some of the experiences I have had with students . . . Make this something that I will do for the rest of my career.* – Rob

*This has been good to reflect on what worked, which was obviously choice, and what didn’t work, which was the timetabling, and to be more plan-ful for next year . . . I like having the routine. It’s good for the kids, they know what it looks like, and what’s expected.* – Bill

Discussion of Results

In this research it was found that Guthrie & Wigfield’s Engagement Model of Reading Development (2000) could be used to analyze student engagement and the instructional context during literacy blocks, suggesting that this model has a broader application than for just engagement in reading. When the instructional context was analyzed the new understandings of the classroom could be used to build on what is working to promote student engagement in the classroom as well as to suggest possible changes to enhance student engagement.

The qualitative approach to studying student engagement enabled the researcher to understand the mediating factors of engagement so that a clearer picture developed of
how different instructional contexts lead to increased student performance. In these classes the presence of positive teacher relationships and intrinsic enjoyment in a task, supported by choice, positively impacted student engagement. The absence of collaborative learning and consistent explicit instruction with a gradual release of responsibility model seemed to impact negatively on student engagement.

Teachers noticed that the structures and routines of literacy blocks were making a difference; they saw increased student engagement at the times that they were effectively implementing strategies. One teacher saw increased engagement in reading during Reading Workshop, and one teacher saw increased engagement in writing during Writing Workshop. The framework of literacy blocks also helped to guide teacher instruction; teachers believed that the consistent structures helped them in their planning and program implementation.

A concern for the teachers, and for the researcher, is that the implementation of literacy blocks requires an extensive depth and breadth of knowledge in the teaching of literacy. Many teachers, especially teachers who have the majority of their training and experience in the middle years and senior years, do not have this knowledge. Access to professional development in a non-judgemental setting would be the key to successful implementation for teachers as they develop the knowledge and skills they need. It is also necessary, due to time constraints, that the use of literacy blocks in the middle years requires integration of curricula. This integration requires both resources and times, so initially the switch to literacy blocks in a school will require additional supports to be in place.
Future research could focus on teacher implementation of literacy blocks because it is the practices that occur within the blocks that will lead to increased student engagement. Researchers can focus on the resources and support required to move teachers through the stages of adoption as they appropriate conceptual and pedagogical tools. The activity setting that will support teacher learning. How teacher beliefs, goals and knowledge interact as teachers implement literacy blocks.

Further research could also examine student engagement in a classroom where full implementation of literacy blocks has occurred.
References


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