

Beyond Just Books: Sparking Children's Interest in Reading

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Abstract

It is imperative that teachers use non-traditional texts to engage readers so that children do not become disinterested in the reading process. Too many times, young children develop a dislike toward reading, which can last a lifetime. Beneath layers of frustration and previous failures, there lies an urge to read within every child. Often, students love to read other types of printed text such as magazines and newspapers while they would not even consider reading a book. After surveying my class of 25 students to determine their reading interests, I gained administrative approval to subscribe to several magazines and newspapers specifically geared towards children. Once these reading materials arrived, I acted as a salesman, trying to convince my class to read the new types of print. Using centers, my students rotated between reading magazines, newspapers, and hypertext on a daily basis for 15 minutes. As a result, my students no longer complained that reading time was work; instead, reading became a fun activity. The non-traditional texts acted as springboards towards reading meaningful books.

Keywords: Reading, Elementary, Interest, Alternate texts

In a society surrounded by immediate gratification, some children dislike reading because they find books to be uninteresting. It is well known that motivating students to read by providing texts of interest is an integral part of any effective reading program. As comprehension research has made quite clear, students need to be able to identify with the reading material either experientially or ideologically. After all, when texts make little or no sense to children, they become disinterested. If this lack of interest remains for even a short period of time, many students will no longer want to read. Reading will not be a fun activity; instead, it will be considered work.

1. Untapped interests

From teaching first graders, I learned that sometimes hidden beneath layers of frustration, previous failures, and disinterest in readings, there lies an urge to read. A recent conversation with one student, Melanie, sparked this realization. She commented that she hates reading in school because it is boring; however, when she gets home, she loves to read. That made me think that the classroom setting was the determinant in her reading difficulties at school, yet it was not. She continued, “As soon as me [sic] and my sister get home, we read a lot of magazines.” Furthermore, “There isn’t cool stuff to read at school.” I asked, “Why do you all enjoy reading magazines?” According to Melanie, “We like to pick up magazines, start looking at the pages, and find spots with cool stuff to read about.”

Melanie had an intense desire to read, but only texts of her choice. If this type of feeling is widespread within children, why do schools, school libraries, and classrooms have so many books compared to the other “cool stuff” that Melanie discussed? Could those other types of print be used to expand students’ reading interests? Finding this answer seemed crucial to determining how to spark interest in reading within first graders.

2. Background

Since first grade students are just beginning to learn the complexities of the reading process, they need an awareness of other reading materials, besides books, that are also meaningful. Additionally, first grade is when struggling readers may become easily frustrated and begin to dislike reading all together. Rather than setting the stage for students to establish low tolerance towards printed text, indeed it seems logical to give them material that is of high interest — that is reading materials that keep their attention, appeal to them, and allow them to make sense of text (Johnson & Keier, 2010; Walker, 2003).

3. Methods

The conversation with Melanie prompted me to issue a questionnaire to my 25 first graders to determine which types of text were most appealing to them. The survey asked students to circle their answers to questions related to interest and preferences associated with multiple forms of text. Each question was read aloud to minimize their confusion associated with taking the survey. Responses that were not clearly depicted were not recorded nor tallied as part of the data analysis process. Students were allowed to ask questions during the survey completion.

4. Results

The findings were quite unanimous, prompting me to change my conceptualization about teaching reading. A vast majority of the students (17 of 25, or 68%) liked other materials like pamphlets, magazines, and cartoon strips more than books. Reading digital texts (hypertext) was noted as the second most popular medium for reading, as 15 of 25 respondents (60%) noted their preference of reading texts on a computer. Although the data indicate an array of student interest, there were no other survey items with which a majority of students agreed.

After analyzing the data, it was obvious that I should adapt my classroom environment towards alternate texts and digital literacies to suit the children's interests. Soon, I gained approval from administration to subscribe to several magazines and newspapers specifically tailored for young children. Additionally, I added interesting opportunities for students to be encouraged to read print-rich texts. As children become engaged, they more actively participate in reading activities within print-rich environments (Manyak, 2008; Zucker et al., 2009). By setting up three computers in the classroom on children's informational websites, students could read online as well. Now that there were other forms of text for children to read, would it in fact make any difference in engaging them to read at school?

5. Selling the text

Describing the particular magazines related to sports, news, and discoveries seemed influential in sparking an interest to read. Vasquez (2010) concluded that children read what is interesting to them. Furthermore, researchers have found that varied media assist in literacy development (Considine et al., 2009). Still, just because new magazines and newspapers were added to my classroom did not mean that the students would be automatically interested. I had to sell these products and persuade them to read these materials. Prior to telling the students about the available texts, I pulled what I thought were the most exciting articles within them so I could convince them how fun it was to read these texts. After a brief introduction and discussion about the additional texts which were available, my students were excited about having the opportunity to use them. To provide students adequate time, I allocated 15 minutes within the language arts period solely for the act of reading using these types of media. Since there were a limited number of magazines, newspapers, and computers, I established a system in which students rotated between the different stations to ensure every student had equal access to the materials.

6. Changing students' conceptions of reading

Since the new types of texts (magazines, newspapers, and hypertext) were added to the classroom, my students rarely, if ever, complained about reading time. They had reading materials that truly interested and excited them. Guthrie (2000) found similar results, claiming that teachers create contexts for engagement by allowing for meaningful choices as well as interesting texts that are relevant. Although this may seem obvious, many times teachers get caught up in meeting grade-level-expectations or planning elaborate lessons. They forget about the power of allotting time and interesting materials for students to read in class. Others have given up on the idea because students get off task easily; yet, most likely,

those classrooms are not filled with reading materials of the students' choice. I cannot emphasize enough the power and result of asking students what they would like to read. If and when the students say "nothing," prompt their thinking by giving an interest inventory containing questions like: What do you do after school?, What types of sports, music, and activities do you like?, and If you had a wish, what would it be? This exercise will allow students to recognize their interests, and thus, stimulate them to read materials related to these topics.

7. Reflections

In all, my class became interested readers because I gave my students something that they wanted — to read texts of their choice. This is crucial within every classroom, especially where the students are emerging readers. Reading materials or texts are often the determinant in whether students enjoy reading for self-fulfillment or lose interest in reading all together. My class responded well to the approach because they no longer felt that reading was a chore; it was an opportunity to do something fun while they were at school. Unbeknownst to many of the students, they learned to comprehend better, as Malloy et al. (2010) iterate, because they read more often and for longer periods of time while engaged in the material. Essentially, magazines, newspapers, and hypertext provided my students with resources that sparked their interest in reading. Utilizing these reading materials acted as a springboard for enticing students to read books. The overall goal was indeed achieved — students enjoyed reading in the classroom and in turn, learning occurred.

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