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THE IMPACT OF STUDENT CHOICE ON READING

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Abstract: As the world around us becomes more accessible, so do our students' options to engage with that information. With the increased disconnect within the classroom, many educators are

seeking ways to re-engage students. Research supports the use of choice for reading within the classroom to increase engagement. The article establishes the impact of student choice on reading in a 21st-century classroom through the use of a volume log with built-in research elements into the individual students' areas of interest in topics, authors, and genres of reading to encourage reading goals to increase throughout the school year. Through choice, students have an opportunity to build their joy in reading, establish authentic reading lives, and gain skills in an academic setting through the use of book talks, reading speed rounds, and reading stations.

Keywords: student choice, reading, education, engagement

As adults, our desire to read relies largely on the prospect of choosing what we want to read. It is unrealistic to believe this does not also play a part in a child's desire to read. Why then do we tend to limit our students' reading by also limiting their choices to what we desire they read? As teachers focus on state standards and prepare students for the future, student choice often becomes nonexistent. This leads children to be disinterested in books, in stories, and in reading in general. The International Reading Association (2014) conducted research in the United States and the United Kingdom which suggested that "variation in reading achievement is related to motivation, engagement, and enjoyment of reading" (p. 2). Students who fully engage with reading of their choice often retain more unfamiliar sentence structures, enrich their vocabulary, and deepen their content

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knowledge (International Reading Association, 2014). Providing student choice could positively impact the amount of reading in which a child will willingly participate.

Choice allows students to become invested in their education and enables them to thrive and achieve at higher levels (Dabrowski & Marshall, 2018). Through the implementation of choice within the classroom we honor students' needs for belonging, autonomy, and desire for engagement (Glasser, 1997). Furthermore, students build and exhibit good work habits that have a positive impact on their overall learning (Denton, 2005). In addition to these benefits, Glasser (1997) identified students' ability to develop their own understanding and connections between academia and their own opinions and belief systems when provided opportunities to select their own reading materials.

Independent learning experiences are created when students are allowed to make choices regarding their own interests in education. Choice is rooted in psychology and nurtures a healthy development of autonomy for students (Dabrowski & Marshall, 2018) as well as motivation, healthful functioning, and performance outcomes (Patall et al., 2010).

Advanced technology has provided instant access to students' interests and choices. According to Skeeter et al. (2016), "[Students'] technology-rich world is robust with opportunities for decision-making and choice, but when they enter the classroom, the opportunities for choice are much more limited" (p. 6). Providing options in learning gives students a sense of responsibility and happiness in their work. Students who are more joyfully engaged are better able to process the material and retain the content and skills they used (Loertscher & Willis, 2006).

Allowing Choice When Reading for Enjoyment

According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (n.d.), "Reading is a primary way to come to know things. Every time we read and comprehend a text, we add to the knowledge that helps us make sense of further texts" (para. 4). Selecting one's preferred reading material encourages engagement in the materials and enables the reader to attain a higher level of understanding of the written word. With this connection to the text, the reader creates learning routines suited to their own abilities and interests. Opportunities for choice are necessary for relationship building and student buy-in to occur (Skeeter et al., 2016). Students who choose their own reading selections can read and hold academic conversations with more depth and complexity without struggling to create connections and master skills (Collie & Brown, 2015).

Although reading in schools is required, including choice increases the joy of reading, which prevents a disconnect for students (Skeeter et al., 2016) and creates an authentic relationship between the reader, the book, and the content area. The more a student engages in reading, the more they want to continue to be involved in reading, leading to independence and goal-setting possibilities. Traditional classrooms focus on implementing whole-class novels where the teacher guides students through the process of learning. Gallagher and Kittle (2018) recommend there should be a balance between "independent reading, book clubs, and core texts, so students have a choice in what they read 75 percent of the time" (p. 12). Additionally, by providing student choice, we can overcome the issues that prevent students from becoming motivated to read, such as decision paralysis and disinterest (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018). Reading choice allows students to "follow their strengths, interests, or even instincts" (Pritchard, 2018, p. 38) to find literature

that creates motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, for their engagement.

Ways to Implement Choice

Demonstrating how to slow down and engage with the book as a conversation versus a one-sided story is essential for students growth in reading (Kittle, 2013). While there are many ways to approach academic discussions within the classroom, it is crucial to focus on the end goal: engaging students' conversations based on interest-based books.

Book Talks

One way to approach these meaningful conversations is by establishing time in class to discuss different books both academically and non-academically. The approach used in many secondary courses is called a book talk. Book talks are an opportunity to discuss a self-selected book with the classroom and typically covers:

- The author's name
- Genre of book
- Synopsis without spoilers
- Why they would enjoy reading the text
- Who would also appreciate reading the text

These areas provide students with guidelines on sharing their books with the class or in smaller groups. Kittle (2013) maintains that it is essential to create the process carefully as reading should not be a chore that you engage in hesitantly; we want students to approach reading with a sense of joy, curiosity, and interest. Additionally, guiding students in the process encourages them to make lists or summarize the types of books they have enjoyed in the past (Kittle,

2013). When starting the process of getting a book talk up and running, the first step is modeling. To start, teachers will need to consider the type of books they read when they were their students' age. Then, they will select books from their childhood or include current high-interest books to share with students. Establishing the process is essential before moving on to the next step. Once established, the teacher can begin including books from their own reading life. During book talks, challenge students to jot down information about the books shared. When students are allowed to create a preferred book list, it provides research opportunities into other books they may find pleasurable (Kittle, 2013). As students become adjusted to book talks, then conversations will feel less one-sided or flat. Through book talks, students will find peers with similar reading interests, which will allow for groups to meet. When students engage in the love of reading, their engagement with academic reading will be much more substantial and easier to obtain (Maguire et al., 2020).

In these thematic groupings, the prospect of interacting with different genres of books gives students the ability to learn, remember, and engage with new knowledge to form connections with previous knowledge and assist in layering further information onto the foundation of older information (Pritchard, 2018). Book talks can happen as a whole class or in small groups; to begin this process, students may do best by engaging in smaller choice options at the beginning, such as with newspapers, social media posts, and magazines (Federici, 2019). Students need to be given information about what choice is, how to use choice as a benefit, and how to apply skills learned to their choice novels (Federici, 2019).

Reading Speed Rounds

Another valuable way to implement choice in reading is by having speed rounds with first chapters of novels or stations with particular genres. Students can move throughout the room during focused periods to explore genres of interest and several options





within those genres. Introducing student choice in a supportive and collaborative environment by emphasizing individual book consumption engages the love of books which is essential to create a sense of community and joy (Federici, 2019). Providing students with an opportunity to engage in the non-academic exploration of genres with a variety of chapters or mentor texts allows students to remove the heaviness of academic expectation and turns this portion into more of an adventure with their friends to find books that interest them. Chunk this station approach so as not to overwhelm students and to provide ample time for exploration. Consider your students' interests area; if students in your class prefer nonfiction books, then starting here would create more buy-in than selecting from the classics. If we focus on their interests, we will find that engagement increases students' interest as it creates a sense of authenticity and a deeper understanding (Federici, 2019).

Reading Stations

According to Nations and Waite (2013), reading centers, also known as literacy stations, provide students with opportunities to have hands-on access to reading materials in a non-pressured environment with the intention for exploration. Using stations provides students time to preview short stories or first chapters of books in various genres without any need for completing the entirety. Creating stations that stay in your room so students can reflect when they are not sure what to read next is another helpful tool to keep the conversation going (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018). Gathering materials can be organized through professional learning communities, classroom libraries, and reaching out to your school librarian. Providing students with opportunities to share out their own book choices can also result in including those in your reading stations for other students to explore that vary by table.

Having a student plan will allow the educator to create stations that will grow students in both their reading lives and in academic subjects. This plan should include a theme, a topic or focus for the centers, directions for self pacing, and an activity for completion. Every station does not need to be focused on skill mastery; however, it does need to have a collection of books for students to explore and books should vary per table.

To implement reading stations, first compile a large collection of books within each genre. Ensure that books cover multiple levels for students of various abilities. Next, determine the size of the groups and arrange seating to support your group sizes, and make sure there are at least two options for each student to select from. Providing this option will insure that there is at least one book during this rotation that the student can engage with while completing the task

you have provided them. Tasks could be as simple as constructing feedback on whether the student recommends the book, or it could be mastery focused where the student is dabbling with the book while applying skills from a lesson that the teacher has modeled.

Concluding Thoughts

With the growing distraction of technology, it is imperative that opportunities to engage in choice are provided for students and embedded within the curriculum at all levels of instruction. Ideally, literacy instruction should not be limited to the language arts classroom alone; however, it is a great starting point for any educator seeking to include additional literacy exposure. Choice can be provided through library visits, book talks, speed rounds, and reading stations to expose students to a multitude of different genres, authors and topic areas. Through this exploration of text, students and teachers are collaboratively engaging in literacy and building a community of readers as well as establishing a pattern for life long reading. This builds a deeper connection with and understanding of the text in any content area.

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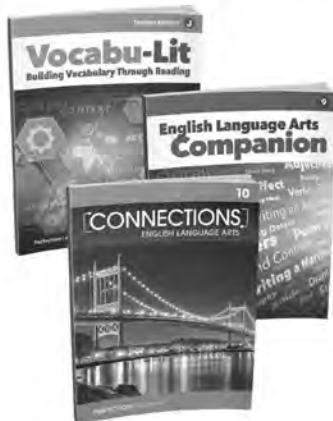
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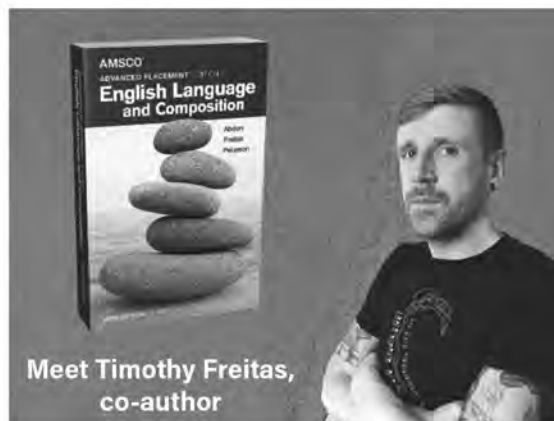
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