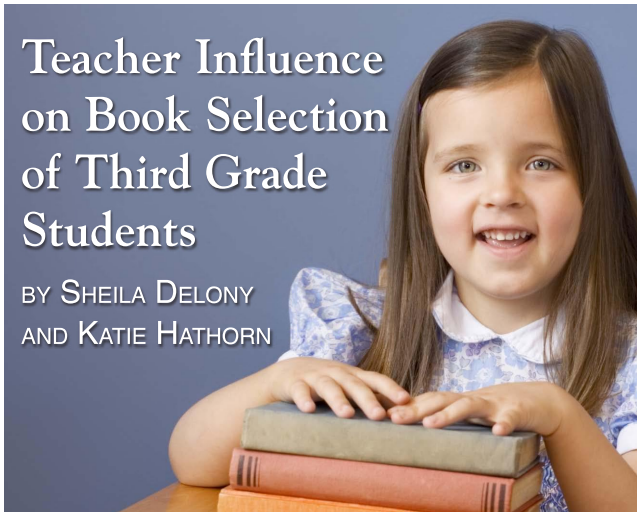

Abstract

This study explored the ways that two teachers taught their students to select books for independent reading and the ways the students demonstrated their understanding of those lessons. Two teachers and 12 third-grade students participated in this qualitative, comparative case study. Results suggest that students who learned to select books based on personal interests and to judge the book's level of difficulty independently demonstrated higher levels of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation to read. Conversely, students who learned to use external criteria for choosing books demonstrated an external locus of control and relied on external motivation for reading.

Much emphasis in research and media is placed on reading achievement, yet few people seem to be asking exactly what it is that teachers and their students should be achieving. While it has become cliché for teachers to say that they want their students to become lifelong readers, Graves (2002) cautions that "increased emphasis on testing and its attendant promise of rewards has led school systems to abandon the reading approaches that are more likely to produce lifelong readers" (p. 2). Fountas and Pinnell (2001) suggest that children who become readers collect books, have reading preferences, and read for varying purposes, including enjoyment. It follows then, that for students to become lifelong readers, they must be effective at selecting books for independent reading.

Motivation and Text Selection

Life-long readers are characterized by attitudes not of obligation, but of enthusiasm and desire towards reading and reading activities. These attitudes are directly affected by a reader's motivation; "even the reader with the strongest cognitive skills may not spend much time reading if he or she is not motivated to read" (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004, p. 299). Because of its importance, teachers must develop an awareness and understanding of reading motivation if they sincerely want students to become life-long readers.

Motivation to read takes two forms in the classroom: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. While extrinsic motivation, including tangible rewards and incentives, can prove to be a powerful force in students' lives (Wigfield et al., 2004), research provides evidence that inconsistencies exist between the goals behind the use of the rewards and the actual outcomes (Biggers; Wigfield et al.). For example, in Accelerated Reader (AR), which is a supplemental reading program, there is heavy reliance on a point system used to motivate readers (http://www.readingonline.org/critical/topping/rolarD.html). The use of the AR program may actually have negative effects on the reader's engagement level due to its focus on prizes, not on the intrinsic benefits of reading (McKool 2007; Pavonetti, Brimmer, & Cipielewski, 2002; Melton, Smothers, Anderson, Fulton, Replogle, & Thomas, 2004, p. 20). As the extrinsic incentive for reading is removed, so is the desire to read (McKool; Melton et al.). Furthermore, it has been noted that the program limits readers in their choice of books; if an AR test does not accompany a book, that book oftentimes goes unread.

In contrast, intrinsic motivation comes from within a reader (Wigfield et al., 2004) and includes a reader's interests, self-efficacy, and affective reactions (Cole, 2002). Readers who are intrinsically motivated consider their interests as they select books and tend to do more recreational reading than their peers (Biggers, 2001; Cole; McKool, 2007; Wigfield et al.). Self-efficacy refers to "what we believe we can do with whatever skill we have" (Jinks & Lorsbach, 2003, p. 115) and is a powerful indicator of performance (Wigfield et al.). Children with positive self-efficacies try more difficult tasks and persist through difficulties, thus prompting them to engage in increasingly challenging texts (Wigfield et al.).

According to Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading, all texts provide cues that prompt the reader to take a predominantly efferent or predominantly aesthetic stance. An efferent stance is reading for the purpose of acquiring information, as in reading to take a test. An aesthetic stance is reading with the purpose of experiencing the text affectively. Intrinsically motivated readers are more likely to choose the appropriate stance with which to read (Cole, 2002). School contexts, however, provide few opportunities for students to read with an aesthetic stance. Instead, students read with the intent of taking information away, regardless of the stance suggested by cues in the text (Sinha & Janisch, 1996). Cole argues that the mismatch of the intended stance and the stance

taken has a direct effect on the affective reactions of readers and can negatively impact their engagement. To be engaged readers, students must select books with attention to personal interests, believe they are capable of reading the books, and take an appropriate stance toward the reading.

Considering the connection between motivation to read and book selection, the purpose of this study was to explore the ways that two teachers explicitly and implicitly taught their students to select books and in what ways the students demonstrated their understanding of those lessons. The focus was to examine the ways that students chose books for independent reading and whether their motivations were intrinsic or extrinsic.

Methods

A qualitative, comparative case study provided the framework for this inquiry into students' book selection strategies. The participants in this study included two third-grade teachers and twelve third-grade students. One teacher and six of her students were from "Lincoln Elementary," which received an acceptable rating from the state of Texas' accountability rating system for the 2009-2010 school year. The other teacher and six of her students were from "Grand Elementary," which received a recognized rating from the state of Texas' accountability rating system for the 2009-2010 school year. The six students from each school were selected by their teachers and included two on-grade level, two above grade-level and two below grade-level students in reading.

Data was collected over a seven-week period in the spring semester. Data collection included an interview of each teacher and each student as well as three observations at each school during the time of the students' independent book selection in the school library. Informal conversations with the students after each observation were recorded in research logs. Analysis began with open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify recurring themes. Next, the researchers identified patterns and relationships and developed broad categories from which conclusions were drawn.

Findings

Mrs. Thompson. According to Mrs. Thompson, the focus of her instruction regarding book selection was based on the readers' preferences and on helping them expand their interests. She began the year by getting the students to talk about their interests and what kinds of books they liked to read. As she met with the students in small groups and individually, she challenged them to think about why they were drawn to the books they liked and what it was about particular authors or genres that was appealing. She believed that these conversations encouraged the students to "see themselves as readers."

From that starting point, Mrs. Thompson began to teach her students about various genres and encouraged them to expand their reading interests. She also taught the students to consider the level of background knowledge that they had about a book and how to determine whether a book was at an independent reading level. All of these strategies were recorded on an anchor chart that remained visible in the room during the fall semester of the year.

Mrs. Thompson assessed her students' book choices by viewing their reading logs and meeting with them in individual reading conferences each week. In general, she was hesitant to restrict the students' book choices. She expressed concern that teachers were sometimes too restrictive and could potentially "ruin the love of reading for kids." There was apparent tension between her desire to allow her students to have free choice and the need she felt to "keep pushing them to grow." As she introduced new genres in her reading lessons, she required students to choose a book representative of that genre in addition to their other book selections. Additionally, if she noticed that a student was consistently checking out books that were too easy or too challenging, she assisted them in selecting more appropriate books. While she encouraged the students to persist with their book choices, she did allow them to abandon a book if they have demonstrated continued frustration or disinterest.

Despite Mrs. Thompson's efforts to teach her students to choose books according to aesthetic preferences, when her students explained what they understood about choosing books, they focused more on the procedural aspects of book selection. Many of the students explained that they could look up books on the computer. They were especially focused on the procedure for determining whether a book was on their independent reading level. All of the students explained that they needed to choose books that were "just right" by using the "five-finger rule," a method for counting the number of unknown words per section of text. Generally, on a page of text, a student should not come across five words that they cannot decode or understand. However, students' explanations of the rule varied. Shelby explained that if you read the back cover of the book and encountered more than five unknown words, it was too hard. Other students suggested that missing one, two, or three words also indicated too much difficulty. There was complete agreement, however, that a "just right" book needed to be one they could read on their own; it should not be

too hard or too easy. Along with variations of the five-finger rule, descriptions of a "just right" book varied. One student explained that if a book is too easy, "you can read it through a breeze" while another stated that in a just right book, there "shouldn't be small words." Still another referred to the "big fourth-graders' books" that they are not supposed to check out.

Despite their inconsistencies in response to how Mrs. Thompson taught them to select books, they did focus on reading preferences when asked how they decided which books to choose. Adrian explained that first he finds a book he is interested in, and then he makes sure it is just right for him. Felicity explained, "if you already read one book, if it's a series, you could read the next one." Each of Mrs. Thompson's students could name their favorite genre, author, and series and used these preferences to choose their books.

When selecting books in the library, Mrs. Thompson's students seemed to be deliberate in going to the section of the library that shelved the favorite genres or series that they indicated in their interviews. While none of the students were observed holding up fingers to count challenging words, they did examine the covers of books and, in most cases, also flipped through the books before making their selections. In general, they were enthusiastic about the books they selected, showing them to the librarian, Mrs. Thompson, or their peers.

Mrs. Martin. In addition to her literature-based reading instruction, Mrs. Martin implemented the computerized reading program software, Accelerated Reader (AR). The program relies heavily on independent reading practice and utilizes test results from online quizzes to manage student performance and provide feedback to both teachers and students. The program begins with the Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR), which administers an independent reading level to each student. Students then choose books according to their independent reading levels and take multiple-choice comprehension tests on the book's content. Depending on their score, the students are rewarded points that may be accumulated throughout the year (http://www.readingonline.org/critical/topping/rolarD.html).

Mrs. Martin began her school year by administering the STAR test. She met with her students individually to tell them their reading range and what level she expected them to be on by the middle of the year and by the end of the year. During this time, she also made sure the students understood the color-coding system in the library; each book in the library is labeled with a colored dot indicating its reading level. For the first part of the year, the students were allowed to check out two books, both of which had to be within the reading level indicated by the STAR test. Eventually, the students could choose five books and one of their choices could be "just for fun," meaning outside of the suggested range. The STAR test was administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. It was also one of the first things Mrs. Martin did when a new student joined her class.

Like Mrs. Thompson, Mrs. Martin also encouraged her students to read books that corresponded with what she was teaching. The class competed in book challenges according to the instructional focus on a particular author or genre. During the challenges, the students were encouraged to read books from that category. Their reading was recorded on a chart and there were "stars and rewards for whoever reads the most and passes the tests." Mrs. Martin explained that she wanted her students to have positive experiences with books. She stated, "I'm pretty flexible as long as they're reading and enjoying what they're reading."

The students' reading choices were monitored and assessed using the Accelerated Reader reports. Mrs. Martin regularly checked the reports to make sure the students were "doing well on their tests." If students were not doing well, 80% or better, on the AR tests, she "pull(ed) those students in to go over the expectations again." In addition to monitoring the AR reports, Mrs. Martin asked questions of students she was "wondering about", but did not personally monitor the students in any systematic way.

Mrs. Martin's students clearly understood the library's color-coding system. Each of her students accurately explained that they should only choose from the books with the appropriately colored dots. They also articulated understanding that someone else determined what level of books they should read. According to Alexis, "the teachers have meetings to see what books we're supposed to check out . . . so the meetings control that in the schools."

In addition to the colored dots and levels, the students expressed an understanding that the levels and tests were related to points that they could earn. Jackson explained that he was supposed to choose "big books" because "they have more AR points."

When describing their reading preferences, Mrs. Martin's students could all name at least one favorite book or series, though their explanations were related to external motivators such as AR points or prizes. Although Alexis spoke about her reading preferences, when asked why she chose her current selections, she replied, "By the dot color, of course." She added that she might also choose a Bluebonnet (Texas award-

winning) book because she could vote and win a prize. Seth stated that he chose his books because he had seen television and movie versions and also because they had "orange dots." James, an English Language Learner, could not articulate his reading preferences, but pointed to the section of Mercer Meyer books in the library and explained that the teacher told him those were good books for him to read.

When selecting books in the library, Mrs. Martin's students primarily looked at the spines of the books. Occasionally, they took books off of the shelf to look at the covers but only once did a student open a book before taking it to the circulation desk. The students frequently asked Mrs. Martin if their books selections were okay. In each instance, she asked what color the dot was and either approved or denied their request based on that information. The students spent much of their time pacing in front of the bookshelves or searching the computer database for particular subjects.

Conclusions

Mrs. Thompson's approach to the instruction of book selection can be characterized by two interconnected descriptors: student independence and intrinsic motivation. In general, Mrs. Thompson turned over the responsibility for book selection to her students. Mrs. Thompson's students chose books based on interest and affective responses to prior reading. According to Biggers (2001), intrinsically motivated readers such as Mrs. Thompson's students, are more likely to do more reading outside of school. While they initially selected books based on aesthetic appeal, they also determined the appropriateness of the book level independently. Even though the students were inconsistent in their explanation of the "five finger rule," it was clear that they believed strongly in the reliability of the test and in their ability to use it. The strong sense of efficacy they demonstrated suggests that they will continue self-selecting books in the future (Jinks & Lorsback, 2003). In contrast, Mrs. Martin's approach was extrinsically focused and filled with incongruencies. Mrs. Martin's students' selections were dictated by test scores and color-coded labels on books. Assuming the accuracy of the STAR test, Mrs. Martin's students consistently checked out books within their independent reading range. However, her students did not articulate an ability to recognize features of that level other than the labels on the books. Furthermore, they believed the parameters for selecting books were all dictated by the teacher, the principal, or the librarian. Efficacy for book selection never had the opportunity to develop because decisions of reading level were made externally.

Since Mrs. Thompson's students were able to make their book selections based primarily on intrinsic criteria, they were also able to approach their books with the appropriate stance. Texts such as an installment in a mystery series were read with an aesthetic stance while a nonfiction book about horses was read from a primarily efferent stance. The students in Mrs. Thompson's class were guided by authentic purposes for choosing and reading books. On the other hand, Mrs. Martin's students were primarily motivated by extrinsic criteria and rewards. As a result, their purposes for reading and subsequent stances were inconsistent. Even when the students chose books based on their interests, they read them for the purpose of remembering enough information to take a test. The contradiction between text and stance (Cole, 2002) was likely perpetuated by the mixed-messages sent by Mrs. Martin. She claimed that her priority was to get the students "enjoying what they're reading," but this message was overshadowed by the rewards she offered for accumulating points. Unfortunately, these students are not likely to continue reading independently once the enticements are removed (McKool, 2007; Melton, et al., 2004).

This study explored the ways that two teachers taught their students to select books. In both classrooms, the students understood, at least to some degree, their teachers' lessons about book selection. One class learned strategies to independently recognize whether a book was on their independent reading level and selected books based on their personal reading preferences. The other class learned to use external criteria to determine whether books were appropriate for them and their books choices were motivated by points and prizes. Ultimately, this study suggests that students who were taught to select books based on personal interests and who were taught to judge the book's level of difficulty independently demonstrated higher levels of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation to read. Conversely, students who were taught to use external criteria for choosing books demonstrated an external locus of control and relied on external motivation for reading. It is imperative that teachers consider the long-term implications of the lessons they teach students about reading. If life-long reading is really a goal, teachers must equip their students with the skills and mindsets that will serve them beyond their years in school.

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