

Activities and Children's Connection Making Abilities at North Florida Freedom Schools

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Introduction

Background

Literacy is a multifaceted concept that is a cornerstone of academic and social success (Theodotou, 2017). The literacy skills that children develop in early childhood lay the foundation for their reading and writing ability throughout their academic careers and beyond (Roskos & Christie, 2011). In addition to academic achievement, literacy is vital in the process of children becoming critical thinkers; for children to become good readers, it is important that they actively engage with the text and make connections to their own experiences (L'Allier & Elish-Piper, 2007).

Reader response theory states that students' personal connections and experiences discussed in groups enhances their engagement with the text; there is research that supports this claim, and employs this technique to engage struggling readers while remaining culturally competent and allowing for sociocultural context to be considered in literacy development (Pittman & Honchell, 2014).

Aims of the Research

There is a gap in the literature regarding the interaction between text connection making (such as text-to-self and text-to-world connections), structured activities that take place outside the classroom, and how engaging in these activities helps cultivate reader response to previously read text. For example, Freedom Schools are structured to include afternoon activities that the scholars participate in that are not directly associated with the books that they read.

Research Questions

After examining the current literature and the structure of the Freedom Schools, I developed questions that stemmed from the gaps in the literature.

- Firstly, do the Freedom Schools scholars' activities contribute to the enrichment of their connection making abilities in books that they are reading at Freedom Schools?
- If so, what are the connections that are made, and which activities are included more in their connection making?

Method

Research Design

This study utilized one-on-one interviews as a method of collecting case study data; observations were also made during the afternoon activities that the scholars participate in as well as their reading curriculum time. The participant group is a convenience sample of consented North Florida Freedom Schools scholars.

The questions included in the interviews addressed the participants' interest in the afternoon activities, the types of activities that they liked the most, and the connections that they were able to make between their activities and the books they have been reading in class.

Participants

The interview participant group consisted of 5 level 3 (middle school aged) scholars from the North Florida Freedom Schools. Two level 3 classes were observed during their Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC) time as well as their afternoon activities.

Data Collection and Analysis

General observations regarding participants' behavior and the content of their reading curriculum as well as their afternoon activities were noted on multiple days. Notes were taken and electronically transcribed. Interviews that addressed the nature of the books and activities, as well as the connections scholars were able to make were also transcribed.

The data from the observations and interviews were coded using NVivo 12 Pro and analyzed for similarities between scholars' connection making experiences and their thoughts on the books they read and the activities they participated in.

Results

Discussion

Every scholar that was interviewed was not able to make connections between the books they read and their afternoon activities. They were all able to discuss the plots of their favorite books (with *Forged by Fire* being a consistent favorite) and recalled some activities that they participated in. One scholar connected curriculum based papier-mâché and timeline making activities that were separate from their afternoon activities to a book they read.

The SLIs occasionally modeled connection making by pointing out similarities between the books and life in general. For example, one SLI connected the content of a video about bus boycotts to a book they were reading during IRC. Although scholars were encouraged to make text-to-self and text-to-world connections during an IRC assignment, many had difficulty connecting their own lives to the content of the books they were reading. This was apparent in this specific class activity in addition to the interviews that were later conducted.

This study is strong in the sense that the interviews allowed for answers provided directly from the scholars; in addition to interviews, the presence of observational methods also allowed for in-depth data regarding their reading curriculum and afternoon activities. These interviews were conducted once towards the end of their experience, so the specifics of the books and activities could potentially have been less fresh in the participants' minds; this could affect their ability to make connections. In the future, this study could be expanded upon using different methods. With consent, multiple interviews could be conducted at the end of each activity. Existing measures that are statistically sound in measuring connection making abilities could also be utilized.

Key References

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The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305B170017 to Florida State University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.