

Using Feedback from Struggling Readers Reveals a Built-In Lesson

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Keywords: Struggling readers; differentiated learning; reading strategies; computer-aided instruction.

Introduction

Students in K-12 are rarely asked their opinions concerning their class curriculum. In particular, struggling readers are usually placed in a specific, highly scripted program, which neither acknowledges these students' ideas nor the teacher's expertise. As these students progress from grade level to grade level and through program to program, the probability of anyone asking about their views becomes even more unlikely. Strauss and Corbin (1990) stress the importance of seeking the opinions of students and teachers.

The qualitative methodology of grounded theory was used to research the question: How do struggling readers in an 8th grade "Reading/Enrichment" class feel about the interventions and delivery methods used in their class curriculum? Grounded theory involves interviews, observations, and conversations to understand what is occurring in a particular situation and with the people in that situation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research question lends itself to grounded theory because the process involves an emphasis on comprehending the subjects' feelings.

Method

Sixteen 8th grade students (seven boys, nine girls) participated in this study. The students were from a school population that consisted of 1470 students. Over 70% of the student body was below poverty level. The 16 students were placed in a Title I class and had 5th grade or lower reading levels.

Multiple methods were used to assess student opinions of the interventions and delivery methods used in the classroom. Daily observations of the students were conducted by the author. For example, students provided reactions to a reading software program or commented to the author about wanting to do something fun, that is, not read. In addition, students completed the Barsch Learning Style Inventory (Barsch, 1991) and two reading surveys.

The Barsch Learning Style Inventory consists of statements that students label as often true, sometimes true, or seldom true of their learning. Based on their responses, students are categorized as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners. In the two reading surveys, the students answered questions concerning their reading preferences, including questions about what they liked to read and the number of books they owned.

In addition to the class-level measures, individual interviews were conducted with two students to obtain richer information about students' reactions to reading materials and teacher practices (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

In addition, the interviews served as a way to follow-up on student responses from the class-level measures.

Results and Discussion

The results of the Barsch Learning Style Inventory, Reading Surveys, and observations of the students' behavior gave a picture of this 8th grade class as struggling readers who displayed various affective behaviors because they, for the most part, said they do not like to read. On the other hand, interviews and other conversations revealed that many of the students did enjoy recreational reading. In addition to their predominately auditory learning style providing a good description of their behaviors, it also helped the teacher to provide classroom instruction that incorporated their learning style. In particular, games where they were able to talk and hear repetition of the target learning items were successful.

Considering the data collected and a desire to give students a say in the classroom pedagogy, some adjustments were made. Students had many opportunities to voice their feelings. Some curriculum changes were made, such as literature choice (reading plays). However, students' suggestions to just talk and not read could not be implemented as the aim of the class is to provide reading instruction.

The results of this research suggest that students' opinions about interventions and delivery methods are important to gather not only for informing instruction, but also as a way of letting students know that their feelings are valued. Other findings include that differentiated learning needs to be used to enable students' success in the classroom. Teachers' delivery also needs to be positive and provide repetition. A theme to consider is that classroom research provides a deeper lesson for students via the modeling of self-renewal and its accompanying hard work. This built-in lesson should be explicitly shared with students, especially struggling learners, because it is a life lesson that impacts more than a Reading/Enrichment class.

References

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