Finding Their Voices: A Narrative Inquiry of Sixth-Grade Lumbee Males Who Struggle with Reading

Abstract

Research Questions

Based on existing middle grades research, this study addressed a gap in middle grades literacy research concerning American Indian students who struggle with reading. The study addressed four research questions: 1) How do sixth grade struggling readers identified as American Indian males transact with a text in an online collaborative literature study unit? 2) How do sixth grade struggling readers identified as American Indian males transact with other students when participating in an online collaborative literature study unit? 3) What concepts concerning identity are revealed in the narratives of study participants? 4) To what extent do narratives of struggling American Indian male readers reveal concepts of agency when participating in a collaborative online literature study?

Significance of Study to the Field of Middle Level Education

Advocates of the middle school concept support developmentally appropriate instructional approaches (National Middle School Association, 2010), including the use of digital learning environments (Downes & Bishop, 2012) for middle grades students. Based on a review of existing middle grades research, this study addressed sixth-grade American Indian students who struggle with reading, which, to date, had not been focused on in middle grades literacy research. Targeting six male students from the Lumbee tribe in the southeastern United States, the study applied Transactional Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995) as a theoretical lens in describing transactions struggling readers have with a text while participating in an online literature study housed within a wiki site.

Research Design

The qualitative study was designed as a narrative inquiry collective case study. Sixty-one sixth grade students participated in instructional activities developed for this study. Purposive sampling was used to identify six participants who were Lumbee males who struggle with reading. As part of a social studies unit on ancient Egypt, students created, posted, and viewed multimedia projects related to a shared reading of *The Red Pyramid* (Riordan, 2010) and participated in discussion threads built within each page of the wiki site. Narratives were gathered and created from the six participants. Data sources included: (a) researcher field notes, (b) semi-structured interviews, (c) student journal entries, (d) student work products submitted online in a wiki site, and (e) online threaded discussions posted to pages within the wiki site. A multifold analysis process was used, beginning with open coding of data sources and continuing with *a priori* coding based on the Transactional Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995).   Finally, all narrative data sources were examined by conducting a significance analysis process outlined by Dauite (2014) to guide the narrative inquiry. Narratives were gathered from semi-structured interviews, reading response journal entries, multimedia products

created and posted in the wiki, and the online threaded discussions throughout the various pages of the wiki.

Findings

        Through the data analysis process, four themes related to the students' textual transactions were identified: (a) connecting, (b) conversing, (c) collaborating, and (d) comparing. The four themes were further divided into eight sub themes: (a) making personal connections (b) bridging ideas across multimedia formats, (c) participating in online discussions, (d) discussing through offline conversations, (e) working through partnerships, (f) using strong agency with technology to engage with peers, (g) considering male readers to female, and (h) contrasting personal reader agency with peers. The themes and subthemes were derived through student dialogue within interviews and the online threaded discussions, as well as the multimedia projects students created and posted to the wiki site. Researcher analysis identified differing levels of student engagement with the text and other students, the development of collaborative teams to complete assignments, and a strong sense of self-efficacy concerning the use of technology to create multimedia projects.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

        The six students focused on in this narrative inquiry demonstrated high engagement in reading and in participation on the wiki site. In fusing their individual stories into a collective narrative and reviewing the story as a whole, three major conclusions from this research are presented related to *engagement*, *agency*, and *identity*.

        Student engagement as a result of accessing funds of knowledge. One of the strengths of the students in this study was the level of engagement in reading tasks, product creation through collaboration, and literature discussion, both online and off. When students view reading as unimportant and having little value in their lives, engagement becomes a challenge. Engagement is affected by the value placed on perceived value of reading (Durik, Vida, & Eccles, 2006). When factoring in the notion that student engagement is a powerful element of success in academic reading (Alvermann, 2001), and that it is further suggested to be the most important factor (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), then the challenge is to convince the reader of the importance of the reading event. This may be accomplished when coupled with instruction that provides reading materials that are of interest to adolescents (Allington, 2011). During this study, the text when coupled with professional audio read-aloud was engaging to these six students. Exciting action and relatable characters provided avenues for these students to make personal connections to the text and assisted in building and sustaining their interest.

        Student agency through the affordances of technology. Whereas agency concerning reading tasks and engagement tended to be low for the students in this study, agency related to video production and the act of posting those videos to the wiki site were was high. Self-efficacy, which undergirds the concept of agency, supports motivation and can influence learning (Bandura, 2001). An asynchronous site, like the wiki used in this study, has the

potential to build agency in students who struggle with reading by allowing them time to read and process other responses and to craft personal answers (Wolsey, 2004). Finally, educators who take the time to assess students' strengths, including the competent literacies they bring from home, may build on student agency to foster a rich empowering learning environment.

   Student identity through building on strengths. Finally, for practice, the six students in this study were propelled from the status of struggling readers to that of technological experts as each demonstrated skill in creating multimedia projects and posting those to the site. Each of them helped peers who struggled with the technology, thus, acquiring the status of expert within the classroom context. The identity shift within the context of the reading event gave the students courage to participate with others in discussions and activities related to the text. This study supports the idea that educators can help students rewrite reading identities through created partnerships that engage them in the process of developing as readers (Hall, 2012).

   The research conclusions build on middle school education philosophy by suggesting a reframing of schooling for students such as the Lumbee students in this study. This reframing should recognize local culture, literacies from within the home, and build on individual strengths within the classroom community. Further research concerning reading comprehension as a result of online literature study is needed. Specifically, texts that are relevant to the lives of American Indian students, including characters that represent their culture, are vital for their academic engagement and finding their voices as readers. .

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