Increasing Reading Engagement and Comprehension in Secondary, Urban Adolescents

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Abstract

Reading comprehension and application of that reading are vital skills but often areas of concern in secondary schools. Many people can read a text to understand the basic content but are not able to critically evaluate texts. Students in low socio-economic areas score statistically lower on standardized reading tests. Students need engaging activities and relevant texts to develop necessary reading skills and be able to apply what they read to the world around them. Strategies to help students are a strategic vocabulary system, guiding or framing questions, dialogic conversations among peers, reading with a writing connection, and providing a variety of texts. All of theses elements must work together for students to be successful in reading and develop critical thinking.

The Problems with Reading in Secondary Classrooms

Reading comprehension and application are necessary skills in the world. Yet, many high school students do not read the text books assigned to them. William Broz (2011), a former high school and Education Professor, discusses how students do not need to read classic literature books to answer quizzes and essay prompts about the books. Broz (2011) states that when students are not reading then, "nothing very important to develop your students' reading and interpretive abilities is happening" (p. 15). The challenge for educators is to engage students in reading through relevant texts and engaging activities that require higher level thinking. To achieve these goals, areas that students struggle with must be identified, a vocabulary plan must be implemented, and incorporating engaging texts and activities. Secondary students must go beyond simple understanding of texts to applying the themes of texts to their lives and the world.

The Effects of Poverty on Reading Comprehension

Often students from low socio-economic areas struggle the most with reading. In a 2006 survey, fifty percent of African American males dropped out of school (Tatum, 2009). African American males often mask their academic struggles to protect themselves from what they perceive as "hostile, uncaring environments shaped by uncommitted educators," (Tatum, 2009, p. 15). Everett (2016), an Education professor, reflects the same concept in her research, which addresses how to help black, male students excel in school through recognizing and creating metaphors from literature. Specifically, students do not believe teachers see them for who they are or who they want to become.

In addition, less than fourteen percent of low income students are reading on grade level. The shocking number of adults and students who can only read to comprehend reveals the need

for more engagement in reading (Gallagher, 2009). Similarly, Beers and Probst (2016), education researchers, state that poverty level and ethnicity are linked to lower reading test scores. These scores then lead for remedial programs that they argue are not effective for engaging and improving reading comprehension (Beers & Probst, 2016). Tatum (2009), an Education professor and curriculum writer, encourages educators to remain resilient against the effects of poverty. Specifically, not to let any problems make poor learning experiences, whether it is a lack of funds or a lack parental involvement. Educators then must teach students how to be resilient to the negative forces affecting their lives. Everett (2016) echoes the same idea, saying that students feel teachers see them as unsalvageable or not worth saving. Tatum (2009) argues that providing authentic and engaging literary experiences will provide students with the resiliency to persevere. Therefore, providing students with texts relevant to their lives and activities that require critical thinking will increase overall reading comprehension.

The Need for Relevant Texts and Engaging Activities

Students need engaging activates and relevant texts to improve their reading comprehension. Dr. Julie Bell, Education professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, stated that getting students engaged in reading, teaching them strategies to read, and providing authentic activities that engage students with the text is vital to reading development in adolescents. She described activities to involve students, such as acting out scenes, discussing challenging topics through various formats, and creating projects A potential project is choosing three gifts to give to a character and justifying why the gift is needed with text evidence (J. Bell, personal communication, November 29, 2017). For students to be engaged with texts, they need a relationship with the teacher and strong instruction in skills and strategies, as well as powerful texts. After reading a challenging text, students should question beliefs and expectations to

reflect about themselves to think critically about the text (Beers & Probst, 2016; Tatum, 2009; Burke, 2006).

Everett (2016) states that allowing students to work with engaging reading that they can create metaphors to their own lives is pertinent to students' success. Tatum (2009) suggests that African American males are waiting for educators and administrators to effectively provide a quality education. He suggests several texts to help students develop their own literary lineage and discover more about themselves. Literary lineages are literary pieces that help to shape African American male's views of themselves and the world around them (Tatum, 2009). These texts allow students to relate and make connections between literature and themselves. Educators must critically evaluate the most valuable texts for their students (Tatum, 2009). This evaluation means looking at student abilities, environments, and interests to select texts that will fit their needs. One way to differentiate for students is to create literature circles to meet individual students needs. Ultimately, educators must consider what each group or individual student needs to be successful and provide them the support and encouragement to succeed.

Vocabulary Strategies

To help students in low socio-economic areas engage with relevant texts and activities, they need to understand the language used. To help students understand language, Marzano and Pickering (2009), education researchers, state that teaching vocabulary in a strategic way is necessary. Students, who do not receive direct instruction in academic vocabulary, score in the fifty percentile on standardized tests. However, students who receive direct vocabulary instruction test in the 83 percentile on state tests. Marzano and Pickering (2009) go on to say that many students from low socio-economic classes have less interaction with academic vocabulary

and struggle understand what test questions are asking them. Students need a systematic approach to vocabulary instruction. The first step in creating a vocabulary program is to identify the key terms needed for any given subject, then to create a list for students to slowly learn (Marzano & Pickering, 2009).

The six step process for implementing vocabulary is: step 1 to "provide a description, explanation, or example of the new term;" step 2 is asking students to restate the description, explanation, or example in their own words; step 3 is to construct a graphic representation of the word; step 4 is to "engage students periodically in activities that help them add to their knowledge of the terms;" step 5 is to periodically ask students to discuss the terms; and step 6 is to incorporate games to review vocabulary (Marzano & Pickering, 2009, p. 11-13). In the initial descriptions, teachers can use a variety of techniques, such as tell a story that uses the term, use video or computer images, have student investigate the word and present their finding, incorporate current events with the word, describe mental images, or create pictures of the word. The reason for these activities versus a dictionary definition is because it provides a natural starting place for students to learn a term. Then students will write the term, a description of the term and draw an image for the word. To engage in other activities with the words students can highlight a component of the word, identify synonyms and antonyms, draw a picture, list related words, write cautions or reminders of common confusions, and translate into a different language. Several review activities are to have students create associations with other words, comparing terms (through Venn diagrams, sentence stems, double bubble, or a matrix), classifying terms, or solving analogy problems. Games provide a great opportunity for brain breaks and movement. One game to incorporate is jeopardy, where each answer is a word from their vocabulary list (Marzano & Pickering, 2009). Students must respond using the word in a

question with enough context to show the meaning. Students can also engage in charades or Pictionary with the words. Another game is like catch phrase, where students are in groups of 3-4. Each group has one talker who knows the word and must have the other students guess the word by listing related words (Marzano & Pickering, 2009).

Guiding and Framing Questions for Reading

Along with specific vocabulary instruction, essential and framing questions help students focus while reading. The texts need to be framed with essential questions that provide a chance to engage with relatable topics and create platforms for action. Essential questions should engage students in dialogue, create internal conflicts, and require multiple perspectives (Tatum, 2009; Burke, 2006). Tatum (2009) suggests starting lessons with less "teacher talk" and focusing on engaging with a text. To help students engage with a text and monitor their comprehension as they read, educators can pull out an exciting passage from a story and remove a couple of words to leave blanks. Students then become interested from the intriguing passage and make educated guesses based on context clues.

Then educators must develop framing questions that guide the students while reading (Beers & Probst, 2016; Broz, 2011; Burke, 2006; Gallagher, 2009). Guided questions help to focus students' attention. They argue for students to reflect on what is in the text, what they think about it, and what their heart reaction is to the text. The goal is that students start to relate and make connections between all texts. Particularly, they want students to reflect on how a text might change them as a person (Beers & Probst, 2016).

Along with framing questions, Gallagher (2009), an education teacher and researcher, says to be careful not to over or under teach challenging texts to students. He advocates for

teaching classic novels and other challenging texts. He suggests giving students guiding questions, explaining key vocabulary, and providing background information before reading. Then allowing students to read a section of the text and write a brief reflection. After the initial reading, he says to find a smaller passage that exemplifies part of the guiding question for reading. Students then do a close reading of that section and discuss the implications. Trying to close read the entire book will ruin the book for readers and not guiding them through difficult sections will also disengage readers (Gallagher, 2009). As well, short stories and long texts develop two different parts of the brain (Burke, 2006; Gallagher, 2009; Tatum, 2009). Therefore, students need interactions with novels and short works of literature.

The Need for Dialogic Conversations

With the relevant texts and guiding questions, teachers need to work on creating true dialogic conversation among students in classrooms (Beers & Probst, 2009). They state that asking students questions that do not have one answer and require them to work, think, and process the question is a necessary skill. Also, the process allows students to actively engage with a text. This type of conversation in classrooms is often a difficult skill for teachers to master and takes careful planning. Many structures, such as philosophical chairs or gallery walks exist to help develop stimulating conversation among students. Beers and Probst (2016) discuss how many classrooms do not have dialogic conversations because the teacher feels students cannot handle the freedom. However, they argue that all students need to engage with the texts through oral communication and that the communication skills can be taught. Although the conversations might be messy, students learn best through oral communication and benefit for processing information with their peers.

One way to create conversations in the classroom is by having students create discussion questions or ideas to small groups (William Broz, 2011). The groups then go around so that each student asks questions and answers each other's questions. Each student individually writes a reflection on the conversation at the end of the discussion. Students could do a short journal response to independent reading based on a guided reading. The journal reflections have specific page numbers to show the text passage students are referencing (Broz, 2011). The discussion questions and journals allow students to engage in an authentic conversation about topics that interest them.

The Need for Reading and Writing Connections

Yet with reading, students also need a writing connection. The original text should be used as a mentor to evaluate a component of strong writing, such as word choice, voice, momentum etc. Then students need to write incorporating that component and based off the reading. Connecting reading and writing is vital for students to develop in both areas (Tatum, 2009; Anderson, 2005; Julie Bell, 2017). Mentor texts provide lessons that blend reading and writing together. Jeff Anderson (2005), English teacher and researcher, explains the importance of mentor texts and how to incorporate grammar minilessons with texts. For students to understand what they are reading, they need to evaluate quality texts for their grammatical and stylistic choices. This understanding then improves students writing. Anderson, says teachers need to explicitly teach word syntax, usage, and rules. When students fully understand words, and are not struggling with the language of how to read a text, then they will be able to develop stronger reading abilities. Specifically, students need to understand the patterns of language to quickly interpret texts. As well, Anderson describes that teaching reading comprehension, grammar and writing must be done together. He states that students' minds work like a web, but

they only "attend to a certain number of things at one time" (Anderson, 2005, p. 10). This means that teachers must incorporate grammar and writing with reading for students to develop in all three areas. Anderson also suggests reading texts aloud to help students recognize the flow of a text and pointing out certain sentences to evaluate. He has a sentence of the week that displays a specific grammatical structure. This allows students to consider how something is read and how to structure their writing. Students then need to see the same technique multiple times to apply it. Additionally, students should keep track of reading that stands out to them (Anderson, 2005; Tatum, 2009) Wall charts are one way for teachers to display reading and writing expectations and decorate their room; teachers write rules for reading and writing then add examples from mentor texts (Anderson, 2005). The wall charts help remind students what they learned and take accountability of their learning.

Providing a Variety of Texts on One Topic

Another suggestion is to bring in several articles on one topic and create a "topic flood" to engage students in a concept with modern day events. This is exceptionally valuable with classic texts to evaluate the way themes are still present today. Gallagher argues that students must engage in deeper thinking about the texts. As well, he says that we need to provide a "dearth of interesting reading materials" (2009, p.893). He suggests incorporating an article of the week for students to read through and evaluate. The article can be related to the current unit or unrelated. He has students read the article the first time only identifying words or phrases/concepts that were confusing. Teachers then need to explain how they overcome confusion in a text and model their thinking for students. Students do not know how to deal with confusion in reading comprehension, so they continue reading despite not understanding important components of the text (Gallagher, 2009).

Conclusion

Meeting individual students needs also requires strategies to improving reading engagement and understanding. However, secondary students should be gaining knowledge that is relevant to their lives from texts. Schools are cutting out silent reading time to incorporate more reading programs based on state or national standardized test scores (Gallagher 2009; Tatum, 2009; Beers & Probst 2016). Providing students, the opportunity to read books of their choice, for entertainment, will increase reading comprehension more than mass produced programs that may only increase test scores temporarily (Gallagher, 2009). Gallagher states, "if students are taught to read and write well, they will succeed on mandated tests. But if they are only taught to be test-takers, they will never learn to read and write well" (2009, p. 526). Secondary students often know the basics of reading but need support to continue developing as lifelong readers and learners. Through specific vocabulary instruction, guiding questions, dialogic conversations, and writing connections, secondary students develop a deeper understanding of texts and improve their reading comprehension.

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