

An Inquiry into Literacy Engagement Practices at a Rural, High-Poverty School

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Abstract

Much research on literacy of urban students of poverty exists; however, the limited studies of students of rural poverty has created a “hidden achievement gap” (Azano, 2015, p. 267) in the United States. Educators need studies that focus on marginalized students becoming proficient in literacy; furthermore, literacy engagement was a significant problem of practice at my rural, high-poverty school. My practitioner research question—How do I engage high school students in literacy at a rural, high-poverty school?—addressed this problem. My inquiry revealed that the following practices impacted students’ behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012) in literacy:

- accountability, built through routines and provisions, (teacher) investment in assignments, and collaborative groups and discussions;
- building relationships, through praise, (student) sense of ownership, and open communication and student voice;
- and seeking relevance to student interest through challenge, future preparation, humor and entertainment, and (student) choice.

Keywords: literacy, engagement, practitioner research, teaching and learning, rural poverty

Inquiry Purpose, Background, and Rationale

In my practitioner research study, I explored teaching practices that effectively engaged students of rural poverty in literacy. At the time, little research was available on student engagement in literacy through instruction driven by the newest state standards. Additionally, there had been minimal research on literacy practices in rural schools (Azano, 2015), and teachers at the school where I served as reading coach were seeking deeper understandings of these practices. My practitioner research question—How do I engage high school students in literacy at a rural, high-poverty school?—addressed these issues as I examined my teaching practice in my AP English class.

I was witness to what Azano (2015) describes as a disconnect between policy and the limited resources and research on how to improve literacy teaching among students of rural poverty. Policy requires teachers use assessments of state standards as primary data for determining students’ reading and writing abilities. At my school, these scores were low and disheartening for teachers, parents, and students alike. As I gathered and applied my learning as both reading coach and teacher, I hoped to elicit change of our teachers’ and students’ deficit perceptions that low state assessment scores are the determiner of literacy competence (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009).

I used data beyond that of the state assessment to seek answers for improving student engagement in literacy. I looked for instructional shifts teachers could implement to increase student

confidence and achievement. Focusing on practice elicited teacher ownership, which I had deemed necessary after two years as my school's reading coach.

Through this inquiry journey, I placed hope in the possibility that these findings might serve “as a catalyst to uncover and discover hidden assumptions and issues about teaching and learning that pervaded [my school]” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 63). I saw a need for this study in the transience, homelessness, disengagement, and lack of basic necessities such as shoes, backpacks, and notebooks among our students. A study of how I engaged high school students of rural poverty in literacy provided me the opportunity to look for real solutions to daily instructional challenges teachers at my school faced. I could then use experiences that had the credibility of the here and now to learn from my students and share that learning with my colleagues.

Problem of Practice

As a reading coach and teacher passionate about student learning, I could not ignore the lack of literacy engagement at my school at the time of this study, and my school's standardized test data further exhibited a critical need for attention to this problem. The 2015–16 Florida Standards Assessment data reported only 38% of our 10th grade students scoring proficient in English Language Arts (ELA); 2014–15 reported 47% proficiency. Both years, my school fell second to last in my school district in ELA. The district averages for proficiency in 10th grade ELA in 2015–16 were 44% and 51% for 2014–15, each well above the averages for my school. This information and a review of literature helped situate my study in both local and national contexts, as experts in the field of inquiry call practitioners to do (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

Broadly speaking, literacy and student engagement were pressing topics of student achievement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Langer, 2001; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009) and, when addressing literacy outcomes, context matters (Azano, 2015; Guthrie, 1996). Many student engagement studies in literacy had focused on urban contexts, and to make populations of rural poverty invisible is to ignore their unique issues (Azano, 2015; Gurley, 2016). While schools of rural poverty differ from their urban counterparts, they face the same achievement gaps across their diverse populations (Azano, 2015; Williams, 2003).

Gurley (2016) reports that many discussions of students of rural poverty are ones of “irreverent humor and contempt” (p. 589), rather than of the urgent concern focusing on urban populations (Azano, 2015). These negative discussions likely influence rural school climate; positive perceptions of school climate have been found to be predictive of achievement and future for rural youth from high- and low-poverty communities (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). With these considerations and because student engagement is of interest to 21st-century educators (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012), inquiry focused on literacy engagement teaching practices among students of rural poverty brought important additions to the conversation.

Educational Context

I served as reading coach at a Grades 6–12 combination school seated in a rural town of approximately 1,200 people. I was responsible for ensuring students received high-quality literacy instruction and teachers received professional development that helped them meet students' academic needs. Progress monitoring data and administrators' classroom observations at my school revealed a critical need for making changes in our classrooms. I witnessed students asking why they had to read and write, while teachers were asking why students would not just do what they were asking them to do.

The question at the core of these observations came to how we could better engage our students in literacy. I therefore engaged in inquiry in my Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class with 13 students from Grades 10–12. While students in my class were

generally characterized as higher performing than the average student at our school, most of them scored at or below average on state assessments in ELA. Several 11th or 12th grade students enrolled in this class were there because they did not score college ready on the Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT). Four of the enrolled students had yet to pass the 10th grade Florida Standards Assessment of English Language Arts, and the four 10th graders in the course needed to meet this graduation requirement that spring. I anticipated that this class's multifaceted student makeup had the potential for a variety of insights into literacy engagement in my context.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

As I launched this practitioner research, I recognized the importance of understanding the literature associated with my research question. The following sections summarize important literature, defining literacy and establishing best practices researchers have found result in effective literacy engagement.

Defining Literacy

I focused my classroom and lesson designs on the learners within my context (Guthrie, 1996), with the purpose of exploring teaching practices that engaged my high school English students in "high literacy" (Langer, 2001, p. 838). I adopted the term "high literacy" because it includes basic reading and writing skills as well as student engagement in deep reading, writing, and discussion about course content. High literacy" requires students to put their "knowledge and skills to use in new situations, and to perform well on reading and writing assessments" (p. 838). I added to this definition academic literacy (Guthrie, Klauda, & Morrison, 2012), which specifies the literacy necessary to read proficiently. Student engagement is embedded in this high academic literacy, which aligned it with the teaching practices I studied. The following sections further clarify these terms.

Student Engagement in Literacy

Researchers have found student engagement is a multilayered intersectional construct, with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement at its core (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Behavioral engagement centers on students participating in "academic, social, or extracurricular activities" (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012, p. 764), positive interactions that align with classroom community norms (Guthrie, Klauda, & Morrison, 2012). Emotional engagement hinges upon student reactions to people and places in school, as well as whether students feel a positive, motivating connection with school (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Finally, cognitive engagement is students' willingness to put in effort and time to think through what they must do when facing difficult tasks (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Guthrie et al., 2012). These three categories guided my inquiry.

Literacy Engagement Practices

Student participation is the most significant means for developing literacy proficiency (Guthrie, 2004; Langer, 2001), and participation encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). The teacher plays a crucial role in building a classroom environment that provides choices and opportunities for students to participate in realistic and relevant literacy activities (Guthrie, 1996; Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2013). Further, Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) found that discussions are key to participation and developing understandings in English across low- and high-achieving students of urban and suburban middle and high schools.

An Inquiry into Literacy Engagement Practices

Student engagement in literacy can come from providing multiple opportunities for students to be self-reflective, to have choices in their learning paths, and to use technology to meet learning goals (Guthrie, 2004; Hardré et al., 2009; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). Lively, purpose-driven discussion increases student achievement in literacy (Applebee et al., 2003; Langer, 2001).

These studies guided my instructional choices during my inquiry, but were specific to urban and suburban schools, indicating a need for inquiry in a rural school. For the purposes of this inquiry, the definition of rural poverty therefore came from the 2015 U.S. Census Bureau, which considered areas of 2,500 or fewer residents as rural (Gurley, 2016); “poverty” refers to not having necessities for survival and maintenance of “human dignity” (Bradshaw, 2007, p. 4). The poverty threshold for 2015 in a family of two adults and two children was \$24,036. With this definition and the above understandings, I found Fredricks and McColskey’s (2012) engagement framework to broadly fit the “how” of my research question.

Method

Through practitioner inquiry, I considered best practices of literacy engagement in my classroom. My research question—How do I engage high school students in literacy at a rural, high-poverty school?—guided an exploration that would help me generate knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014) to gain new insights and share them with the teachers at my school.

“The purpose of engagement in inquiry by classroom teachers is to improve classroom practice [through] implementation and change” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 9). My inquiry considered teaching methods and classroom activities that authentically engaged students in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in my ELA classroom during one unit of study. Throughout this process, I was committed to equity and deepening understandings of practices that engaged students of rural poverty in literacy. This qualitative research method served to empower the participants within my context and gave voice to their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

Inquiry lends itself to extensive opportunities for gathering and using data to produce new knowledge about teaching and learning that can be applied both locally and beyond (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Fredricks and McColskey (2012) recognize the value of using multiple qualitative methods to study student engagement, focusing on contextual factors through observation and delving into the experiences of the students. Thus, I gathered several types of data in this study, as an array of data types is dynamic (Creswell, 2013) and helps shape the practitioner inquiry journey.

I collected data during the second semester of my AP English class: a research journal, detailed lesson plans, student work, and anonymous Google Form exit tickets. Five questions associated with student behaviors, emotions, and how I was responding to their engagement guided my journal responses. Student work artifacts added to my journal reflections, as well as captured individual and cooperative work students produced within our community of learning, an imperative piece of literacy engagement (Guthrie, 1996).

I aimed to embody the elements of what Langer (2001) found among the most accomplished students of English classrooms: a highly engaged teacher, with highly engaged, academically-focused students. My lesson plans evidenced standards-driven instruction; student work and exit tickets provided students voice and a lens for considering my instruction through their eyes.

Data Analysis

I used formative and summative processes (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014) for analyzing data throughout this qualitative study. Formative data analysis, an important element of practitioner action research, provided daily and weekly insights that shaped my teaching decisions and revealed new possibilities within the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). I engaged in summative analysis when I completed data collection.

Formative Analysis

Throughout the study, my research journal and lesson plans served to inform my instruction and initial reflections on my students' literacy engagement. Each week, I revisited my research journal and lesson plans to think about teaching and student behaviors, inductively coding the data (Miles et al., 2014). These data informed my "instructional decisions and next steps in [my] inquiry" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 158). Single word coding (Miles et al., 2014) associated with "engagement" and "disengagement" helped me to focus on my research question of how I engaged students in literacy.

Summative Analysis

When I moved into the summative phase of analysis, I engaged in the "Data Analysis Spiral" (Creswell, 2013, pp. 182–183) to develop a written account of my learnings. This process included first organizing, and then engaging in an iteration of reading and coding my data. In the first cycle of coding (Miles et al., 2014), I coded the data openly, jotting notes in the margins of my research journal, lesson plans, student work artifacts, and exit tickets to begin to characterize them.

I later reconfigured the codes descriptively (Miles et al., 2014), dividing them into engagement and disengagement codes, keeping track of any code changes. I found patterns that I divided into categories/themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people, and/or theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014). Next, I developed ways of representing or providing visuals for my findings (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014) and mapped the pattern codes for themes associated with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). These processes allowed me to write the narrative of my findings.

Summary of Key Findings and Impact on Practice

For this study, I sought to transfer learnings from my teaching practices to my coaching role. My data revealed that I engaged my rural, high-poverty students in literacy through the following:

- maintaining systems of accountability through routines and provisions, investment in assignments, and collaborative grouping and discussions;
- building relationships through praise, developing student sense of ownership, open communication, and providing students voice; and,
- seeking relevance to student interest through challenge, future preparation, humor and entertainment, and providing choice.

The combination of accountability, building relationships, and seeking relevance to student interest moved students from behavioral to emotional and cognitive engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012) in our daily reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks.

Accountability

I kept students accountable in several ways, and my actions as a facilitator of student learning fueled my attempts to keep students behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively engaged in literacy. I combined my high expectations for student engagement with consistency in routines and provisions, as well as collaborative grouping that worked to balance good behavior with

appropriate levels of challenge depending on skills students needed to practice. In other words, the previous assignment's engagement drove how I grouped students for the next one.

Lesson plans and students' work revealed that I built accountability strategically and invested in assignments and classroom community. I arranged my classroom and lessons in ways that made it difficult for students to avoid behavioral engagement. I posted an agenda daily, provided reminders on our Google Classroom, and provided the tools necessary for achieving our tasks. Furthermore, I was accountable myself through presenting reading and writing models of work students would complete and giving timely, thorough feedback on assignments. In my research journal, I noted students' verbal appreciation for my personal investment in their assignments; in written responses, they alluded to this investment as providing motivation for them to engage.

As I graded work across the study I responded to levels of engagement and understanding by grouping students purposefully and planning questions to probe their thinking. For my students of rural poverty, successful class discussions required small group discussions first. When I asked in an exit ticket about engagement in my class versus past classes, one student put it this way: "In this class, there are more class discussions. I enjoy having more interaction with my teacher and my classmates as well. In my past English classes I have fallen asleep due to no interaction." In addition, several students noted that knowing we would go over material motivated them to engage in homework and try their best to understand it. These comments evidenced accountability and behavioral and emotional engagement. The frequent verbal and written feedback I gave students also pushed them to cognitively engage in the work.

Relationships

I built relationships with the students in several ways. I facilitated independent free writing assignments for them to reflect on their identities as readers and writers as they considered their understandings of language and composition. Student work evidenced that these writings encouraged engagement. I found that all students used these opportunities to share their feelings about their learning and some gave specific assignment feedback. Communication like this was an important piece of building relationships, and this element ranged from handwritten notes to text messages, emails, and appointments, depending on student needs and access.

I also provided Friday morning coffee and occasional snacks in appreciation of hard work—as we continued that hard work. I praised students individually and publicly and guided them to develop senses of ownership of the class as critical thinkers; I communicated frequently with them to help them develop individual voices and continue to make progress. On students' written work, praise in the feedback served as encouragement together with harsher, constructive feedback.

Another way I praised students was using the "Wall of Awesome." This wall of names was located to the left of our projection screen. I modeled its use and students began recognizing themselves, each other, and even me for things such as giving help with assignments, sending reminders, making copies of lost handouts, making excellent improvements, and having fun discussions. Students responded to the praise through improved efforts and with our stronger relationships came increased engagement.

Relevance

Periodically, I used anonymous exit tickets and journal prompts to ask students what motivated them to engage in our literacy activities. Students characterized their motivation to engage in four different ways: when class activities brought challenge, prepared students for the future, were entertaining, and provided students opportunities to make choices. Ensuring class lessons were relevant and interesting was a significant part of engaging students. I tapped into their interests

and drew relevance through news stories, memes, YouTube videos, and commercials, especially alongside challenging texts.

Relevant activities moved students from behavioral to emotional and cognitive engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). My data showed that rather than provide students a choice of whether to engage, I provided relevant assignments with guided choices of how to engage. Broadly speaking, the types of choices I afforded were: choice of topic; choice of how to approach the assignment; choice of what the product would look like; choice of when to complete the assignment; choice of whether to do something for personal practice; and, finally, choice of groups or group roles.

Inquiry Implications and Actions

I applied my new understandings of literacy engagement to both my teaching practice and my role as reading coach as I planned to work with teachers in my school. I learned that accountability, building relationships, and seeking relevance to student interest among my students of rural poverty resulted in a classroom where literacy engagement happened much more frequently than disengagement. I used my findings to inform upcoming professional development and coaching sessions that I would facilitate. To impact teacher perceptions, I knew I needed to communicate that strategies for reading, writing, speaking, and listening on their own might not be enough for our high school students of rural poverty—we must use these strategies alongside carefully planned engagement each day.

This inquiry led me to envision coaching conversations that included using relevant pieces of my data and findings to challenge teachers to determine how their experiences might align with or differ from this work. My inquiry could serve as a foundation for teachers to move toward specifically identifying problems of practice in their own classrooms, so I developed handouts that characterized literacy engagement to share with my teachers as I led them in their inquiry journeys.

Today, literacy engagement remains relevant, as does this practitioner research. I apply the knowledge of inquiry and engagement I gained to my current role as the administrator of research in a large K–12 school district of students of both rural and urban poverty. Here, I pursue research partnerships with universities and K–12 practitioners to contribute to the fields of online and blended learning and aim to grow our school district’s practitioner research presence in Florida.

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