**Emma Havrilla**

**Teacher Research Project**

**Introduction**

Every Thursday, as part of my field experience for the literacy cluster, I go to a local elementary school to work with my fifth grade case study student, Alexis (Alias), on reading comprehension strategies. After my first visit with Alexis, I found myself stumped. I had done a literacy interview where I tried to gauge her feelings towards reading and writing and get to know some of her interests. However, during this interview, she informed me that she “hated” writing. She likes to read, but she is extremely picky, so she usually doesn’t like books people buy her, and her only interest is a social media app called *TikTok*. As I said previously, I was stumped. I was expected to bring a book to read with her next week, yet I knew nothing about her interests and had little faith she’d even want to open the book I chose!

After ample amount of panic time, I realized that maybe my interview with Alexis showed me more than I had thought. First of all, she said she hates writing, and honestly, from my observations during her classroom writing focus, I wouldn’t blame her for being burnt out. The only writing I had experienced her doing were forced prompts and reading responses: never student-choice topics. I decided if I made her writing experiences with me fun and more personal, I’d have a better chance of engaging her. Secondly, she said she is very picky about what books she liked. After talking to her more, I realized that her definition of “liking a book” was whether she could understand it or not. The reason she was so particular was because she was often given books that were too difficult for her, so she just wrote them off as being boring or uninteresting. Lastly, her only interest was *TikTok,* a social media app used mostly by young teenagers (I found it to be comparable to my generation’s version of the app *Vine*). While at first, I had no clue how I could turn this interest into a book genre. I began to think about how this may say something about her personality. I decided to find books of the realistic fiction and young adult genre that dealt with drama of everyday life. The reason I find all of this significant enough to share is because all three of the realizations I had from my interview with Alexis had to do with incorporating her interests into my lesson plans.

Accounting for student interests when building a literacy curriculum can be a useful reading comprehension tool. To achieve this, use what you know about your student to help you decide what resources to pull that would engage them most. This is what I did for Alexis. My decision to incorporate her interests into my lesson plans made me curious about the implications it would have on her learning. I wanted to see how Alexis’s reading comprehension and engagement increased when the activities we did were based primarily on her personal interests. I knew from the literacy interview that her experiences with reading and writing prior to working with me had not been doing this, and I wanted to see if I could find a connection between her literacy struggles and a lack of using relevant and engaging materials.

**Research Questions**

1. In what ways does drawing upon student interest affect struggling readers’ meaning-making?
   1. How is student engagement affected by drawing upon student’s interests?
   2. In what ways can student interest be emphasized when creating a lesson plan?

**Literature Review**

Before beginning my work, I reviewed the current literature describing schema theory and compared its similarities to student interest, the best ways to work with a struggling reader and how that label impacts students, and how helping students enjoy literacy will result in an increase in their engagement.

**The Parallel Between Schema and Student Interest**

Schema theory is the process of combing your own background knowledge with what you read in the text (Stott, 2001). Schema is usually very culturally specific and relies heavily on your own experiences, which is why it is commonly used with ESL (English as a second language) students for reading familiar texts. If students are able to read a text more fluently, it will give them more opportunities to successfully practice their comprehension strategies (Stott, 2001). Schema theory used in that context is similar to how student interest can be used to increase a struggling reader’s comprehension by using engaging texts. When students are given resources that draw upon their experiences, hobbies, and family history, they will have more confidence to try new strategies that improve their comprehension. Morrison and Wlodarczyk describe reading as being a “transactional process” (2009). This means that it takes both reading the text and combing your own knowledge to derive comprehension. This definition highlights the parallel between schema and student interest because overall, comprehension increases when students have a familiarity with the content.

**Working with a Struggling Reader**

One of the most difficult things about working with students labeled as “struggling readers” is that there are multiple definitions to what kind of student that describes. Vlach and Burcie describe a struggling reader as a student who has no agency in respect to their learning, which can make them feel like they don’t belong in the classroom community (2010). However, Allington refers to struggling readers as students who are below grade level expectations, which can result in an overwhelming focus on supplemental worksheets (2013). While having multiple definitions can make it impossible to find an easy answer for how to help your student, it just proves how important it is that teachers have a strong relationship with their students so they can analyze students’ needs on a student-by-student basis. For Alexis, I was able to take strategies suggested from both definitions to use when working with her. One strategy that was suggested was doing a literacy interest survey (Vlach & Burcie, 2010). This will aide teachers in finding texts that their student relates to. Another strategy was to spend more time reading and less time doing worksheets (Allington, 2013). Removing worksheets and playing book-based games instead will help increase student engagement.

**Beginning with Enjoyment, Ending with Engagement**

Enjoyment and engagement go hand in hand in a classroom. When students are excited to read a book, they will in turn work more actively and closely with the text. In fourth and fifth grade, students are not typically aware of what kind of reader they are, which contributes to their high enjoyment for reading (Smith, Smith, Gilmore, & Jameson, 2012). This is such an important thing to keep in mind when working with students because we want to foster their passion for reading until they are capable to do it on their own. This can be done by giving students the strategies they need to monitor their own thinking.

**Context and Participants**

This research took place in a small fifth grade classroom of a public school in a Midwestern university town. I was assigned to this school for the field placement requirement of the Literacy Cluster. For this field placement, I was assigned a case study student whom I work one-on-one with in a resource room, once a week for 30 minutes. During our time together, I provide reading and/or writing-based lessons to help her improve on her comprehension strategies and writing techniques. My case study student, Alexis, is a middle class, white, female student that comes from a single parent household. My student was assigned to me because she was identified as needing extra help in the areas I mentioned previously.

**Data Collection**

During this study, I have worked with Alexis 10 different times. In the first week, I conducted a literacy interest conversation, to help get to know the student I would be working with. In the remaining 9 visits, I have created a unique reading/writing lesson plan each week. The first method I used to collect data was the interest conversation, where Alexis shared her opinions of reading and writing and gave me an insight on the types of books she likes. Another method I’m using is video recording. I have recorded three of my sessions with Alexis, where I can re-watch her response to the lessons that incorporate her interests. My data sources also include all of the lesson plans I’ve created, along with examples of her student work that correspond. This will be beneficial to compare her work when the lesson was based off her interests versus when they were not. The last tool I used was an audio recording of a conversation Alexis and I had about what she thinks she should do when she doesn’t understand what she’s reading. This data supports my research question because she talks about how interest plays a large role in whether she understands a book or not. I found her insight interesting and it paralleled my research question. Overall, I will be primarily focusing on two lesson plans while also drawing upon my previous lessons, student work, and my field notes.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze my data, I coded two contrasting artifacts of student work produced by Alexis. Artifact A was constructed in response to a lesson plan that drew upon her personal interests, such as her memories in summer camp, or her love for *TikToks*. Artifact B was constructed in response to a generalized lesson plan that could be used with any fifth grade student and was not catered to her personal interest. Using the student work, my corresponding field notes, and lesson plans, I coded for times where she was actively engaged, seemed uninterested/bored, where there was confusion, and where her comprehension increased. The coding will help me compare the benefits of the two different kinds of lesson plans. Ultimately, I found that Alexis was most engaged when I used resources that drew upon her interests and that her reading comprehension increased along with it.

**Findings**

I found that drawing upon student interest increased both Alexis’s meaning making and engagement significantly. The first time I started incorporating her interests into my lessons, Alexis immediately noticed. For lesson A, I wrote two short stories to be used as her text for the day. The first story was about a girl who went to a sleepaway camp and the second story was about a girl who bonded with a new friend over their love for *TikToks*. When Alexis finished reading the second story, she immediately turned to me.

Alexis: Did you choose these because they’re like me?

Me: Yes. I thought you might like them.

Alexis: It’s so weird, I didn’t know they had stuff written about things I like…

I thought this interaction proved how unusual, yet exciting it is for a student to see themselves in writing. The reading had caught her attention and engaged her in a way that made her excited to do the lesson. I then gave Alexis instructions that she was to find the main idea of each paragraph to help her write a summary about the whole story. She had no troubles with this activity and went to work highlighting and annotating. I was surprised to see this because previously, it had been like pulling teeth to get her to even underline an important detail. Truly, the increase in comprehension can be found just be comparing Artifact A and B. Artifact A is from the lesson plan I described above. It is a short story that has been highlighted, annotated, and summarized. You can tell she was engaged because she normally does not include annotations in her work, especially when unprompted. She also showed that she comprehended what she read because her summary was a clear and concise description of the story. This is in contrast to Artifact B, which is from a similar lesson plan on main idea and summarizing. Except in this lesson, her text was a short story taken from a fourth grade history book about Native American clothing, written at the same level as the text from the previous lesson plan. This short story had very few highlights. The majority of them were from me modeling my thinking to guide her in the right direction. It was clear that she was uninterested as well because following her read through, she asked how much longer we were working that day. Her understanding of the short story was also not up to proficiency because her summary included small, unimportant details rather than the main points. Overall, it was clear that using resources that drew upon her interests and were relatable, resulted in higher success.

**Implications**

Seeing Alexis’s comprehension and engagement increase was a very rewarding result because my goal as a teacher is to always make my students passionate about what they are learning. And I found as I continued to do lesson plans with her interests in mind, she became more passionate and self-motivated. While I didn’t have Alexis choosing her own books to read, I still incorporated a sense of agency through the content of the activities. I chose resources that had topics she was familiar with, making her more confident with the work she was doing. My hope is that this finding will encourage teachers and literacy coaches to consider their struggling reader’s interests when designing lesson plans for one-on-one intervention. One way this can be done is through a literacy interest survey that I mentioned throughout the paper. Explicitly asking your student about themselves and their feelings toward reading can be such a great resource to use when finding texts and activities that will engage them. I think that the best part about my results is that this is such a simple thing teachers can do. As teachers, we are naturally good at building relationships and creating a community in our classroom. This means that chances are, you already know your student well. Maybe you’ve even been to a baseball game or dance recital. Start with the basics of what you know and you will see a huge improvement in students who used to dread intervention time.

**Reflection & Conclusion**

One thing I learned in this process is that results are not always immediate, especially when you are only seeing a student once a week. It took me several weeks to begin seeing consistent progress in Alexis’s reading comprehension. While this was frustrating, it gave me insight to how a literacy coach’s job might feel at times. As a teacher who only sees a student on occasion, you really have to trust that the cooperating teacher is doing supporting literacy activities and make the most effective use of your limited time together. While that was difficult for me to grasp at first, it was the most important lesson because it made me think hard about the value of each lesson plan I created.

One limitation in my study was the fact that I only saw my student once a week, like I previously stated. I think this could make some of my results possibly questionable because I couldn’t account for the kind of week she had been having. Maybe her results were only poor one day because she was exhausted or frustrated from class the day before. Along with that, another limitation was my time frame. I only had one semester to work with her, which is a very short amount of time to find a large amount of progress. In the future, I would be interested to see how successful drawing upon student interests could be if I had an entire school year.

Overall, I found this research to be very interesting. It pertained to a subject that most teachers can relate to: how can we make our students engaged? I think I was able to find a simple solution that provides an amazing result. I know that as a future teacher, this is something I will take with me. I hope I have also provided the same resource for other teachers.

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