

## **Context**

My research was conducted at a year round elementary school in a suburb of Raleigh, North Carolina. The student population is very diverse, representing many ethnicities and socioeconomic classes. My class is made up of 24 students; five speak English as a second language and four have special education needs. This class has been together every year since Kindergarten, with only a few students added to or removed from the roster, creating interesting group dynamics and very close relationships. Furthermore, this class had difficulty in Kindergarten and first grade due to mid-year teacher changes. Many students started this year well below grade level and extremely unmotivated. This is what led me to my research question and project.

## **Question and Rationale**

As a second grade teacher, I want to make sure I am instilling a love of reading in my students and building a strong foundation for lifelong literacy. This is imperative because without literacy skills, students will struggle academically for the rest of their years in school. It is also critical because these skills will help them function and problem-solve in society as adults. The first step in creating literate citizens is helping students see how enjoyable, helpful, and exciting reading can be in their elementary years. When this school year began, some of my current students came to me having already given up on reading due to their difficulties with it in kindergarten and first grade. I noticed them making considerably less effort than other students I taught in previous years. They seemed wholly unmotivated and uninterested in learning to read. These students are the ones that my research revolved around. The

guiding question for my research project was: How can I engage reluctant readers in my class and motivate them more so that they become eager readers?

My first step was to learn how the students perceived themselves as readers as well as how important they considered reading to be. I interviewed them, and not surprisingly, the results showed that while most students attributed importance to reading, they saw themselves as poor readers and did not enjoy it. This confirmed my observations that many students in my current class were closing themselves off to reading because of low confidence and fear of failure. This led me to believe that because reading was so difficult for them, they were giving up altogether to eliminate the possibility of not achieving success as readers.

### **Project Description**

I decided to work with six students for the purposes of this research. These students were chosen because their running record levels were the lowest in the class and their reluctance to read was the highest, based on my own observations. I used student choice, sustained silent reading time, graphic novels, and struggling reader dyads to motivate my reluctant readers. Each of these choices was based on published research, as outlined in the next section and was carried out for a span of six consecutive weeks. I analyzed the effectiveness of these motivators through student surveys, my own anecdotal notes, library checkout data, student reading journals, and parent questionnaires. Each of these components is more fully outlined in the following pages, and the results of the research and consequential implications for teachers are also explained.

### **Ideas Drawn From Research**

My next step was to seek out information that could give me ideas for ways to engage reluctant readers. One extremely useful source was writing by Gutchewsky (2001), who found that allowing students to choose what they read more fully engages them, even empowers them: "letting students choose what they read helps engage even the most reluctant readers" (page 80). Furthermore, Gutcheswky argued that giving students sustained silent reading time to enjoy the books they choose can lead to a love and stronger enjoyment of reading. These ideas were further developed by Worthy (1996), and were perfect for my teacher research.

I began to give students 20-30 books to choose from when completing assignments. For example, if the learning goal was character analysis, the students could read and then analyze the characters in a book chosen from a basket of many that were on their independent level. I found this to work extremely well as students began to take ownership of their own learning. I also added 15 minutes of sustained silent reading time to the class schedule. I was able to do this by having students take their snacks to recess so that I did not need an extra time slot for snack in the afternoon. During this time, students could choose any book in the entire classroom. I immediately began to notice students loving reading more. This was evidenced by their reading journals, in which they wrote how they felt about their reading each day. Student entries became much more positive and exciting. One child even wrote "I cant wate for tomoro wen I can read unuthr pijin book. Its my favrit prt of the day." (I can't wait for tomorrow when I can read another pigeon book. It's my favorite part of the day).When I had conversations with them or recorded their reading behaviors in my research journal, there were more and more positive than negative entries over time. I noticed these in simple ways, from how they

approached the books (skipping or speed-walking instead of slowly trudging as they had earlier in the year) to how eager they were to talk about books they enjoyed with their classmates (they began to look forward to this instead of doing it half-heartedly just because I made them as they had earlier in the year).

Another article by Lyga (2006) introduced me to the motivational benefits of using graphic novels for young readers. Lyga helped me understand that students who are not often attracted to traditional texts are drawn to graphic novels because the comic-style text and engaging pictures make them seem more readable to struggling decoders. I had always perceived graphic novels as being for more advanced readers, but this article helped me see that hundreds of these texts are extremely engaging, motivating, and helpful to primary readers as well. I immediately enlisted the help of our school media specialist to find these types of highly engaging texts and get them in the hands of my reluctant readers. She made a special display of these books in the media center, and I was able to procure some for my classroom. I used these books as read-alouds to introduce my students to these texts, and the texts immediately accomplished the goal I intended them to: the students seemed to be unable to read them fast enough. They quickly found favorite authors and series, and suddenly our classroom was constantly abuzz with the sounds of students sharing and trading graphic novels. These books seemed to light a fire in some of my students who had not seemed to enjoy reading earlier in the year; suddenly these students were ravenously reading. I was thrilled!

Another idea I tried came from Patricia and Lori (2006), who suggested that struggling

readers benefit from working with other struggling readers of different ages:

“The tutoring model capitalized on the strengths...students bring to the teaching role, including cultural familiarity, oral communication skills, empathy, resilience, and creativity. Tutor’s sensitivity to the needs, abilities, and struggles of the younger students, and their facility in the oral and nonverbal communication norms of the community, enabled them to take chances and implement new reading strategies effectively” (page 387).

To see if this would be effective, I began a reading buddy program with a fifth grade class at my school. Each of my reluctant readers was paired with a fifth grade reluctant reader. Each day, these students read together for ten minutes. Ultimately, I did see that all of the children involved benefitted from this. These benefits were evident in their reading journals, as well as in my own research journal. I took notes describing their attitudes, demeanors, and body language when working with their buddies. Over time, they grew more relaxed with one another and seemed to genuinely enjoy each other’s company as readers; they seemed to truly bond over the books. After speaking with the fifth grade teachers, I discovered the older students seemed to look forward to the shared reading as much as the younger ones. It was heart-warming and encouraging to see how excited the children were to work with their buddies each day. One entry in my research journal spoke of a student’s disappointment that his buddy was absent: “Today J asked me if he could have double reading time with T tomorrow since T was absent. I can’t believe he is begging to read! This tutoring thing really seems to be working”.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Throughout this whole process, I recorded observations of the students engaging with texts, and analyzed the books they checked out from the library to see if the numbers of books

they were reading were rising. By providing choice, silent reading time, graphic novels, and older buddy readers, I began to see my reluctant readers reading more often, for longer periods of time, and with much more positive attitudes.

I wanted to include parents in this process in hopes that it would further motivate students, so I had parents complete a brief questionnaire about at-home reading habits. I then invited the parents to keep a reading journal with their child. In this journal, the student would write a few sentences about what they read that day, and the parent would respond with thoughts and questions. It was quick, painless, and housed in the student's homework folders. While not all parents participated in this, many did, and those who did seemed to have positive effects on their children's reading habits, as evidenced by their excitement over the journals and their eagerness to choose a book their parent(s) would enjoy.

Throughout this process, I conducted student interviews asking the same questions each time from the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna and Kear, 1990). While I did not use all of the questions in the survey, I carefully chose some that were geared to finding out how students perceived reading itself, and how students perceived themselves as readers.

Here are the questions I asked:

1. How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?
2. How do you feel about reading for fun at home?
3. How do you feel about getting a book for a present?
4. How do you feel about spending free time reading?
5. How do you feel about starting a new book?

6. How do you feel about reading instead of playing?
7. How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?
8. How do you feel when the teacher asks you questions about what you read?
9. How do you feel about doing reading in school?
10. How do you feel about learning from a book?

With each interview, the students seemed to have a more positive view of themselves as readers and seemed to become more convinced that one day, they could be capable readers. While there was still some poor self-concept by the end of the research, there was definite improvement in the way each child viewed him or herself as a reader. The first time I questioned students, the average number of positive responses per student was 3. By the end of my research, the average number of positive responses had risen to 6. While there is still much room for growth, there was definite improvement.

The journal was a helpful way to collect data because it helped me remember small thoughts and feelings I had from time to time that may have slipped my mind had I not journaled; being able to analyze them later offered deeper insight into what I was investigating. However, I found the student interviews to be the most helpful, because they were direct links to student thinking. They helped me know if the children enjoyed reading, what they were reading, how they felt about what they were reading, what else they would have liked to read, and how much they were reading. These interviews were conducted one on one, with students freely speaking and me recording their responses. The ten questions were springboards; the students often answered them and then expounded on them, offering much more additional

details and insights. The student observations were important because they gave me a glimpse into how the children were interacting with the texts one on one. Typically when I observed them reading they were unaware, so I could really see how much they were engaged without the danger of them saying what they thought I wanted to hear and marring the data. Analyzing their checkout record in the library let me know what types of books they enjoyed so that I could be sure to provide them with similar books in my classroom. It also gave me some idea of how much they were reading, and if they were choosing to read more over time.

### **Findings**

Through my research, I have learned that motivation to read is highly influenced by student choice; when allowed to choose what they can read they are much more likely to be fully engaged. Furthermore, carefully choosing read-alouds that students genuinely enjoy sends them running to the bookshelves to find other books by the same authors. Graphic novels are often good choices for struggling readers, as they motivate them to persist through a text, even when it is difficult. I have also learned that pairing reluctant readers with older buddies has a positive effect on their motivation to read and delve more deeply into texts. Finally, I have learned that including parents in the process of motivating the child also has positive effects on reading motivation.

### **Implications**

My research has definite implications to my own teaching as well as that of others. The main one is that it *is* possible to motivate reluctant readers; it is a matter of pairing the right child with the right book. When a child is struggling and is not expressing any desire to learn to

read, continuing to give him or her the same types of texts makes the problem worse; it simply confirms their beliefs that reading is boring and irrelevant to their lives. Teachers should think outside of the box, pairing students with texts that may interest them more than what they have previously been exposed to. Once their attention is grabbed, they are hooked, and that is the best way to turn a reluctant reader into a motivated one. Teachers must become skilled at getting to know their students well so that they can pair them with books that interest them. By listening to students, they can give us tools and information that can help us accomplish our goal of teaching them.

Another implication is that parent involvement can be a huge motivator for some students. Teachers can choose to make parent reading journals an option for all students from the start of the year. The benefits of parents participating in student reading are great for reluctant readers, and I feel they would benefit on and above grade level readers as well. This is something I will absolutely do in the future.

This whole process has helped me learn valuable lessons about myself. First, it really is worthwhile to do something that takes a little extra time when the payoff is big and the rewards are worth all the time and effort. In the past, I have avoided things like teacher research because they seemed so daunting and time-consuming. Now I have learned that, for me, it really can be worth it. Second, I need to always do what is best for my students, not necessarily what a pacing guide mandates. Had I stuck to our county pacing guide step by step, I could not have given myself the time, freedom, or flexibility necessary to meet the needs of these struggling readers. Finally, I have learned that I thoroughly enjoy collaborating and

brainstorming with my colleagues, even though it also can be time-consuming. I have been able to share what I have learned with other teachers at my school, and this has inspired many other teachers to pair with other classes for buddy reading. I am happy to know that my work not only benefitted my own students, but may be benefitting others as well. Despite all that I did learn, I do have more questions and much more room to grow. While all the reluctant readers made some progress toward becoming eager readers, there are still some with enough reluctance to make me uncomfortable. I need to continue finding ways to encourage, engage, and motivate them.

#### References

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