Engagement with Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes

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***Featured Study***
Engagement with Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes
Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston
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In this article, Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston take us into the classrooms of four middle school English teachers whose primary goal was to help all their students become engaged readers. They allowed their eighth-grade students to choose among a wide range of personally meaningful books, and gave them time each class session to read and discuss their reading with their peers. They also read aloud a young adult book each class session and devoted time to student writing. The result was academically, socially, and emotionally healthier students (including better test scores, as detailed later).

The focus of the article, motivation and engagement in reading, is dear to both of our hearts. We have both taught many students who were resistant to reading, and we both have seen the effectiveness of providing students with books they want to read and time to read them. Yet, we also know from our personal experiences and from talking to colleagues, that most high school and middle school classrooms, and even many elementary classrooms, do little to develop engaged readers—those strategic, active, interactive meaning makers who are excited about books and learning. Instead, students are often required to read the same classic (and often uninteresting, non relevant, and inappropriately challenging) books, read “popcorn” or round-robin style, complete comprehension quizzes, and practice for achievement tests. Further, in most schools and classrooms, students are grouped by so-called ability, across and/or within classes.

The teachers worked together to revamp their reading instruction. Instead of whole class reading in assigned “classics,” the teachers built their instruction around the reading of student-selected young adult fiction with “edgy, contemporary” themes relevant to students’ lives (p. 258). They did this in all their classes—from inclusion to honors classes. No one was singled out as a “struggling reader;” every student had the same opportunities to choose books based on their interest, not difficulty. Each classroom contained 150 to 200 different titles, and the teachers rotated their libraries at regular intervals. Students learned about the books through teacher book talks at the beginning of the year and at regular times throughout the year.

Ivey and Johnston wanted to know what students thought about their experience, so they asked them. Students reported that their book knowledge and world knowledge were expanding, and their test scores showed it**1**. The other outcomes mentioned most by students were:

* **Engaged reading**. Students reported (and the researchers and teachers noted) deep engagement with books and book characters not only during class, but also outside of class—students said they were getting in trouble for reading during other classes and after bedtime. Others even reported reading instead of watching television and playing video games.
* **Talk through and about books**. Students said they talked more about books, both in spontaneous conversations with their classmates, and with friends and family outside of school.
* **Relationships**. Students described changes in their personal relationships that they attributed to their engagement with reading. They often used the books they read as a way to make new friends, deepen existing friendships, and grow stronger and more complex relationships with teachers and parents.
* **Identities/selves**. Many students saw themselves in a new light as a result of engaging deeply with reading. For example, one student identified herself as a bookworm; another student commented that his reading had improved to the point that he no longer considered himself a “slow” reader.  Other students’ comments reflected a similar shift from a fixed performance mindset to a dynamic view of learning.
* **Agency**. Many students in the study reported an increase in agency—the sense that they have the power to make positive changes in their social relationships, academic and personal lives, and in their communities.

The case study of Jeremy, a student with a history of serious behavior challenges, illustrates the powerful effects of engaged reading. Jeremy’s previous experiences with school and literacy had been very negative, and his life outside of school was heartbreaking. At the beginning of eighth grade, he was being considered for a repeat placement in an alternative school because of his disruptive behavior. Jeremy told the researchers that before the year of the study, he “didn’t like books at all.” After a rocky start, Jeremy discovered a book that spoke to him (*Homeboyz*); after reading it, he was in his own words, “on a roll,” reading book after book, boosting his reading stamina, his willingness to persist with difficult text, and his achievement (including test scores). Becoming a reader also positively influenced Jeremy’s relationships and his behavior. Instead of “getting into trouble,” he said, he now “just turn[s] to the next page.”

Ivey and Johnston’s research speaks to us because it demonstrates the power of reading, not just for learning and achievement, but also for developing social skills, student agency, and strong communities. These are things that can’t be measured by a test or written into a curriculum, but we think they are essential for productive and emotionally healthy human beings and for a just society.

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**1** Students scored higher on the state reading assessment than they had the previous year, with an effect size of .27 and economically disadvantaged students' passing rate going from 69 percent to 81 percent.

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<http://www.reading.org/literacy-daily/research/post/lrp/2013/09/13/engagement-with-young-adult-literature-outcomes-and-processes>