



Reading, Motivation, and the Power of Social Relationships: Learning from Middle School Students in a Title I Reading Classroom

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Abstract

Adolescent students' social relationships have myriad influences on their lives. Therefore, it is important to ascertain how students' social relationships can inform teachers' efforts to create authentic learning experiences and increase student motivation to develop life-long reading habits. This paper examines middle school students' perceptions of reading and the connections between social relationships and reading. Drawing on a series of semi-structured interviews with eighth grades students, this paper discusses the role of social relationships in students' motivation to read. The authors explore the students' perceptions and some share some insight into how social relationships might increase students' motivation to read.

Author 2: What do you think most teenagers think about reading?

Nicole: (pause) I don't know—there are just so many people who love to read. And there are so many people who don't like to read.

Author 2: So think about the kids who love to read. How do they explain their opinion of loving to read?

Nicole: Um, they like usually don't talk about it or really, care about what other people think.

Author 2: So do these people that love to read talk about reading at all?

Nicole: Yes they do. I have some friends like, Lindsay, Nora, Julie, Santana, who love to read a lot of books. And like usually after the CRCT [Criterion Referenced Competency Test] and stuff we were like the only thing we talked about was the books that we were reading. It was pretty fun.

Author 2: What did the people around you think of when they watched you talking about reading?

Nicole: That we're bookworms and we're weird. (Laughs)

Author 2: (laughs) why would they think you are weird?

Nicole: (laughs) because they don't like to read. But that's what makes them weird.

Author 2: Uh, how does what you see other people reading influence what you read?

Nicole: If I see one of my friends who has a good book, I'll pick the book up and say "Hey, what's this book about?" And they will tell me what they've read so far. And I'll say, "When you're finished I would like to try it out."

Nicole (all names are pseudonyms) has recently become an enthusiastic reader. We believe that a significant part of her newfound enthusiasm for reading may be related to some of her friends' positive perceptions of reading and the excitement that is generated by an enthusiastic recommendation for a book. Nicole's experience is similar to one that so many of us have had so many times in the past: Excitedly waiting for a friend to finish a book, so we can borrow it—or not being able to wait and impulsively downloading a friend's recommendation to an eReader. Talking with Nicole encouraged us to explore the connections between social relationships and the reading habits of adolescent students who have been labeled struggling readers (because of their standardized tests scores) and placed in an eighth grade Title I reading class. This paper describes our work with eight students in a Title I reading class at Harmony Middle School (pseudonym) in Georgia.

Our Stance

We approached this inquiry and analysis from a social constructionist model (Charmaz, 2006), where learning is a dynamic interchange between students and teachers. Our intent was to examine the ideals constructed by adolescents in a Georgia middle school to learn about their perceptions of themselves as readers. We believe that language and its usage are inherently social. This belief is grounded in the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), who argued that words are given their meaning by the “social atmosphere of the world” (p. 276). The words teachers and students use in classrooms every day are deeply influenced by social contexts (Bakhtin). As people communicate with one another, the words they choose are colored by the contexts that surround them. For example, a student from the mountains of north Georgia is likely to conjure images of Jack's River Falls when he or she hears the word river. In contrast, a student from Savannah is likely to image a slowly moving tidal river when asked to imagine a river scene. The influences of context and experience extend far beyond the level of individual words. A student who grew up walking the banks of Jack's River hunting with her grandfather may be much more likely to be interested in reading a book like *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1974) than a student who grew up in urban Atlanta and has little to no experience hunting and fishing. There is little doubt that a skilled teacher can find ways to engage both of these imagined students in this text. However, careful attention to students' cultural contexts, specifically their social relationships, can make it easier for teachers to position reading as a social experience. As Ivey (1999) argued, students are significantly more motivated when reading tasks are connected to learning things that are important to them.

Exploring what motivates students to develop a love of learning and reading is not a new research topic in literacy studies (Guthrie et al., 1996; Klauda & Guthrie, 2014; Strommen & Mates, 2004). It is, however, a topic that teachers and researchers must continue to explore as cultural contexts shift, technology advances, and curricular demands place increasing importance upon students' abilities to read independently. Logan, Medford, and Smith's (2011) study of the connections between intrinsic motivation and reading comprehension highlighted the importance of understanding the role of motivation in students' abilities, particularly the abilities of struggling readers, to read proficiently and succeed on standardized reading comprehension tests. Clearly, the goal of reading instruction is to prepare students for more than success on high stakes tests, but the influences of these tests on classroom instruction and culture cannot be ignored.

As high stakes tests and standardized curricula continue to dominate instruction, too many middle and secondary English classrooms have become places where, for many students, reading is simply a formulaic endeavor akin to completing a scavenger hunt (Applebee, 1996; Author 1, 2012; Fecho & Botzakis, 2007). Standardized instruction that ignores intrinsic motivation and individual difference does little to engage students and motivate them to learn for personal reasons (Author 1, 2010). This does not have to be the case.

We argue that it is possible to engage students in effective, authentic instruction in the Language Arts classroom, which can still meet the ever-increasing demands of policy initiatives aimed at producing college and career-ready students like the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS). The CCGPS Text Complexity Rubric (Georgia Department of Education, 2011) includes a focus on matching students and texts. As teachers navigate the complicated task of evaluating each aspect of text complexity (qualitative, quantitative, and read/task match), it can be helpful for to have specific areas of focus to consider. Students' social relationships can be an excellent focus area in this process. Our study was designed to explore the perceptions of reading held by middle school students who fit the “struggling reader” category, and develop insight into their experiences related to the influences of social relationships on reading and motivation in order to make recommendations for improving classroom instruction.

Context

Harmony Middle School (pseudonym) is situated in a small town that is rapidly changing into an upscale

Georgia metropolitan suburb. In the last ten years, the school has seen drastic changes in demographics—shifting from a rural school with students from farming backgrounds to a semi-suburban school with an influx of upper middle class students moving into newly-built million dollar homes. The student population at Harmony Middle has become more diverse in recent years and the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch has declined.

Participants

We recruited participants from Author 2's Eighth Grade Title I reading class. After hearing a brief description of the project, eight students elected to participate (with parental permission). The research project consisted of a series of three semi-structured interviews. For this project, we engaged in what Maxwell (2005) calls "purposeful selection" (p. 89). First, we chose to recruit students from this class because their membership in this "remedial" reading class has given them the label "struggling readers" based on their academic histories and teacher recommendations. Second, the students in this class represented an interesting cross-section of the school population. There were both male and female students from varying social groups that represent a cross-section of the student population in the class. All participants are native English speakers, and they each have a school history of struggling with reading.

Data Generation, and Analytic Approach

We utilized semi-structured interviews, which created opportunities for both the researchers and the participants to "jointly construct narrative and meaning" (Riessman, 2008, p. 23). Since we engaged in dialogue with the participants, we must recognize that we are "an active presence in the text" that comprises the interview situation (Riessman, p.105). Therefore, we argue that the interview process is "unavoidably collaborative" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4). In our view, interviewing is a process that is influenced by the mutual shaping that occurs as knowledge is socially constructed through dialogue. Each of the interview sessions we conducted relied on open-ended questions designed to draw the students into dialogue about their perceptions of reading, their perceptions of themselves as readers, and their social relationships.

We conducted our interviews with the goal of being attentive to each participant's interpretations and experiences. Therefore, our approach to data analysis was largely concerned with identifying themes that illustrated the participants' experiences and perceptions. In order to remain consistent with our social constructionist theoretical framework, we have chosen to situate our data analysis methods

within Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory and elements of phenomenological analysis (Laverty, 2003), specifically Kvale's (1996) meaning interpretation.

Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory provides a means of reducing data into manageable chunks. By reducing our data into chunks, we have been able to focus on tacit themes and issues in the data. Through the use of memos and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006), we interrogated the interrelationships between those explicit and implicit themes and issues. For example, as Author 1 was transcribing his first interview with Barney, he identified "topics of interest/ choice" as a possible category that might be significant. Through the process of writing memos related to this interview, Author 1 was able to identify a category that had the potential to be weak. As Charmaz notes, "theoretical sampling [aided by memo writing] prompts you to predict [emphasis in original] where and how you can find needed data to fill gaps and to saturate categories" (p. 103). By sharing memos with each other during the data collection and initial analysis phases of the project, we were able to ensure that we asked questions in subsequent interviews with each of the participants that would help us explore the relationships between the categories. The follow-up questions we asked during later interviews with each participant allowed us to elicit more robust data. Additionally, we read and reread the interview transcripts from each of the eight participants carefully to ensure that the themes and categories that we identified were present in the data generated through our conversations with all eight participants.

Blending Charmaz's (2006) approach of data reduction with Kvale's (1996) method of meaning interpretation allowed the data to be considered in multiple contexts. The themes and categories we identified during the coding process allowed us to dialogue with the implicit meanings we identified in the data that might have gone unnoticed. However, we needed a data analysis method that would allow us to ensure that we did not decontextualize the data by limiting our analysis of the data to a dialogue between themes and categories. Bakhtin (1981) reminds us "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions" (p. 293). Meaning interpretation provided us with a method for ensuring that we attended to each of those contexts that influenced the meanings we constructed in the data.

We believe that the data we have selected to present in this article accurately represent the themes we generated in our analysis of the interviews with all eight students who participated in the study. In order

to provide the richest possible descriptions of the participants' and their perceptions and experiences in this article, we have chosen to present the data from four participants: Barney, Big Ron, Felicia, and Nicole. In an effort to ensure that these students can be seen as unique individuals, instead of simply data points, we have constructed portraits of each of them using what we learned about them from the profiles they completed during the consent process, the ways they self-identified during the interviews, and the time we spent with them during the course of the school year in Author 2's classroom.

Barney. Barney is a 14-year-old athlete. He stays busy playing football, basketball, and baseball. He attends church every Sunday. One of his favorite things to do is to be outside playing whether in the woods with a .22 rifle or in the creeks with a four-wheeler.

Big Ron. Big Ron is a 15-year-old gamer. He enjoys playing all kinds of computer games with his older brother and his friends. He is repeating the eighth grade and in contrast to Barney's plaid shirts and jeans, Big Ron prefers to wear baggy, black jeans and spiky collars and bracelets.

Felicia. Felicia is a 14-year-old "country girl". She would rather be outside doing anything than inside. She loves to squirrel hunt. She and her mom live with their extended family, as there are many cousins that love to spend time together.

Nicole. Nicole is a 14-year-old "drama queen". She is oftentimes wrapped up in the middle school drama of an adolescent girl's life. She loves to read books that are full of excitement around dating, difficult choices, and gossip.

We have chosen to highlight these four students as they come from different social groups and each talk very specifically about how their social relationships affect their reading practices. While the data is consistent across all participants these four students are the most vocal about their social relationships and reading practices.

Discussion

Adolescence is the time in a child's life when peer groups become one of the most significant elements in the construction of self-concept (Allen et al., 2005; Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002; Wentzel, 1998). Franzak (2006) positioned reading as a socially situated activity instead of "a stand-alone practice" that occurs in isolation (p. 221). This idea dovetails nicely with Wentzel's (1997) work, which found "significant relations" between students' academic efforts and their social relationships with peers and teachers; students

with friends and caring teachers tend to perform better in school.

The Role of Social Relationships

Our work with Nicole and her classmates represents an effort to learn more about individual students' perceptions of reading and experiences related to the influences of social relationships on reading and motivation. Our intent is to contribute to the development of authentic models of learning, which may increase opportunities for the development of curricula based on knowledge-in-action instead of knowledge-out-of-context (Applebee, 1996). Essentially, we believe it is important to consider how students' social contexts can inform the choices teachers make as they strive to foster a love of reading and learning in the English classroom.

Our discussions with the participants demonstrated that social relationships can have both positive and negative influences on the reading habits of students who have been labeled struggling readers. If students engage in discussions of their interests, or participate in activities that involve their interests such as baseball game conversations, they are part of what Gee (2002) labeled an "affinity group" (p. 105). To be a part of an affinity group, one must share an "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices" (p. 105). Many of these group discussions occur outside of classrooms, where students can observe, argue, and contribute in ways that are often not allowed in school. When teachers attend to students' social relationships—or membership in affinity groups—they can find ways to bring those relationships into dialogue with the curriculum by creating opportunities for discussion within these groups. These discussions can be face-to-face or virtual with social media facilitating them and contributing to the building of affinity groups. Instagram, for example, can be a useful tool to facilitate connections between students' interests, social relationships, and skills included in the CCGPS. Teachers can create assignments where students might create profiles related to characters and use Instagram to tag photos and create "a following" among the members of an affinity group. For a recent example of teacher at Pearl Cohn High School in Georgia who has integrated the practice of tapping into an online, affinity group related to John Green's (2012) novel *The Fault in our Stars*, explore the hashtag "#firebirdsfeelalive" on Instagram. Felicia and Nicole both shared a keen interest in Stephanie Meyer's (2005) novel *Twilight*. Author 2 could have capitalized on this affinity group in her class to craft activities like this and help these students connect their interest in *Twilight* with curricular goals related to characterization. Throughout the interviews, these students routinely discussed the power their friends

had in terms of piquing their interests in texts.

Barney, a participant who is, by his own admission, disinterested in most types of reading, stated, “If they’re [his friends] reading a book and it’s something I’m interested in. Then, I want to read it. If they say it was a good book.” Barney’s friends can motivate him to read if the topic is of interest to him. Bakhtin (1981) argued that each word lives “on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context (p. 284). This concept can be connected with the boundaries between students’ social groups, individual interests, and the tasks required of students in schools. Barney, who does not self-identify as a reader, was influenced by friends whose interest in reading certain texts helped him see that he could, indeed, find things to identify with and engage in within a text. Teachers can draw upon the knowledge they gain about students’ affinity groups to increase students’ motivation to read and help them generate positive perceptions of reading.

Big Ron also discussed the influence of social relationships on his perceptions of reading and his reading habits. When asked if his friends influenced his reading habits, he said, “sometimes. I just. They read way better than me an’ I just want to get up to their level.” For Big Ron, his peer group represented a positive image of reading—a reason to actually struggle, do the work, and improve his reading ability. Again, we can see a student looking across a boundary and finding a bridge to that alien context. Big Ron and Barney helped us see Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of heteroglossia at work in their views of reading. As they engage in dialogue with their classmates, their words are always surrounded by a social atmosphere, which “makes the facets of the image sparkle” (p. 277). The choruses of voices that comprise their social circles influences their views of reading and motivate them to reimagine what it means to be a reader. If he can read the more complex texts he has been struggling with, he will have more in common with his peer group. Powerful motivation, indeed.

It would be irresponsible, however, to claim that social relationships represent a silver bullet that will solve the problem of motivating adolescents to read. Barney serves as a powerful example of how social relationships can also have, at best, a neutral influence and, at worst, a negative influence on students’ motivation to read. In spite of his admission that his friends, sometimes, encourage him to read by their interest in a text, Barney pointed out, “You have some people like right across the hallway [the gifted reading class] that would do anything to read. Then you got me and some of friends that would rather be doing something else besides reading.” Barney’s

response indicates that some social groups value reading, which may have a positive influence on the reading habits of the members of that group. However, his response also indicates that if reading is not valued within a social group, the members of that group will seek out alternatives to reading whenever possible. It is important to remember that no instructional tool or strategy is perfect.

Despite Barney’s perceptions that some members of his class rarely value reading, it is clear that social or affinity groups where reading is valued exist outside of the gifted English class. Author 2’s discussion with Barney’s classmate Nicole demonstrates that within her social group reading is valued. In fact, Nicole and her peers spend time talking about the books they are reading and that other groups probably consider them to be “bookworms.” Nicole stated that her friends “who love to read a lot of books” would do just about anything to read and do not “care about what other what other people think.” Felicia’s decisions to read (or not read) books were also swayed by seeing what her friends were reading. She claimed that if her friends “can’t put it (a book) down, it is probably very interesting. So, I want to find out what happens”. This idea of watching others to find out what is being read is critical for struggling readers as they want to read and be seen reading what their friends are reading. Nicole’s response does correspond with Barney’s line of thought and reinforces the notion that peer groups can have power over students’ perceptions, habits, and reading choices regardless of the ability level of the members of those groups. Peers have the ability to persuade students and help them see things that they did not initially imagine were possible. Bakhtin (1981) argued that “when someone else’s ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledge by us, entirely different possibilities open up (p. 345). Our work with Barney, Felicia, Big Ron, and Nicole demonstrates the possibilities that are present when members of students’ social groups share positive perceptions of texts.

Implications for Teaching

There are no easy answers to the question of how to help students who struggle with reading. This is a difficult task because individual children “are all different and they differ on myriad dimensions” (Compton-Lilly, 2008, p. 671). Students are complex beings whose lives and interests are constantly being influenced by their experiences. They are, in many ways, similar to words in that they are constantly being influenced by the context and contexts of their socially charged lives (Bakhtin, 1981). While the experiences of Felicia, Barney, Big Ron, and Nicole offer only a small view of the complexities of the influence of social relationships on students’ motivation to read,

they do serve as clear reminders that relationships matter. The MUSIC model of academic motivation (Jones, 2009) attends to the key role empowerment plays in engaging students in academic tasks. Jones highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for students to express and share their opinions. When students' social relationships are viewed as instructional tools that can enhance learning, many possibilities exist for engaging students in authentic instruction.

Social Networking tools like Goodreads (or Biblionasium for middle school), Instagram, and Twitter offer opportunities for teachers to empower students and make social relationships a central element of instruction. These tools are a natural way to make connections between the CCGPS and students' social relationships. For example, CCGPS standard ELAC8R10 requires students to read and comprehend various types of literature and ELAC8RL2 asks students to provide a theme, follow its development, and provide an objective summary. Both of these standards can be effectively addressed by capitalizing on the social aspect of reading. For instance, students can connect with plot, characters, and setting through the use of Instagram. They can read a text like *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1974), take a picture, write a succinct summary, tag the photo with a hashtag, and then follow the development of the theme as it winds its through the plot by following the hashtag and/or friends' posts. The key, then, is to make the dynamic nature of language and social relationships a central focus when thinking about how to address curricular demands in ways that will be responsive to students' individual needs.

Coda

As avid readers, the word reading often brings to mind an image of curling up alone with a good book. But reading—even for avid readers—is not simply a solitary activity. It is inherently social. We talk about our favorite books with colleagues, make connections between protagonists and people we have met on the streets, and give books as Christmas presents to our loved ones. It can, however, be easy to overlook the important role social connections play in our reading habits when we think about our roles reading teachers and teacher educators. The reading process is complex and myriad factors influence each person's reading interests, habits, and abilities. With so many factors to attend to and the increasing demands on instructional time that accompany high-stakes testing, it's important for us to slow down and take stock of the things that can help us engage students in the tasks of learning to read and developing a life-long love of reading. The CCGPS require reading teachers in Georgia to ensure students read a variety of literature,

and social networks and affinity groups of all types can help teachers meet Georgia Department of Education mandates while also meeting what is, perhaps, the most important mandate—helping students find ways to fall in love with books.

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Georgia Reading Association



GOALS

- Empower members of the GRA and local councils to become effective leaders in the field of literacy.
- Provide quality reading education services to all Georgia educators.
- Recognize exemplary individuals, local, and state literacy efforts.
- Achieve maximum involvement of members at the local, state, and international levels to receive maximum benefits.
- Promote the goals and objectives of the International Reading Association of Georgia.