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TE 843

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Project 1: Literacy Inquiry Project

Introduction:

My school district is located in a middle-class New Jersey suburb of New York City. The community is a very close knit one, where most individuals live there for their whole life. Many of the teachers who teach at my school even attended that school when they were younger. My middle school consists of the grade levels 6, 7, & 8. The students rotate between their classes in “teams” where there are two teams per grade level. These students see the same teachers throughout the day. At our school, language arts is taught in two periods (which makes one “block”). I teach 7th grade language arts for three blocks and I have about 25 students per class. One of my blocks is an inclusion classroom where I have 10 special education students and a special education teacher in the classroom.

When approaching this project, I began to think about my students and their literacy values. In my classroom I always speak with them about why what they are doing is important for their future, but this is merely my opinion on what is important for them. What do the students feel is the most important for them to learn? Due to the Common Core State Standards, our school’s curriculum has moved from fiction to nonfiction. Is this what is best for the students’ futures? I wanted to see if the students agreed with this change because for me, it is important that students have a say in their instruction. Therefore, my final question for them was if they feel they that they need more practice or more instruction. All of these ideas together helped me create a picture of the types of readers and writers my students are.

In order to get information from my students, I had them complete two different tasks: a list of items that they read & a survey. The first way I received information from my students was by having them keeping a list of all the items that they would read over the next twenty-four hours. We discussed what might be examples of things that we read everyday. I gave the assignment to them on a Wednesday, and they brought it back to class completed the following day. The students also completed a survey on Google Forms, accessed through our Google Classroom, where they answered questions about reading and writing.

These were my questions for the survey:

READING QUESTIONS

1. Is reading important in your life? Explain why or why not.
2. What is the most important thing you read everyday? Why is this the most important?
3. Which is more important for you to read and analyze FICTION or NONFICTION? Explain why.
4. Do you think you read more FICTION or NONFICTION?

PART 1:

24 Hours Reading List

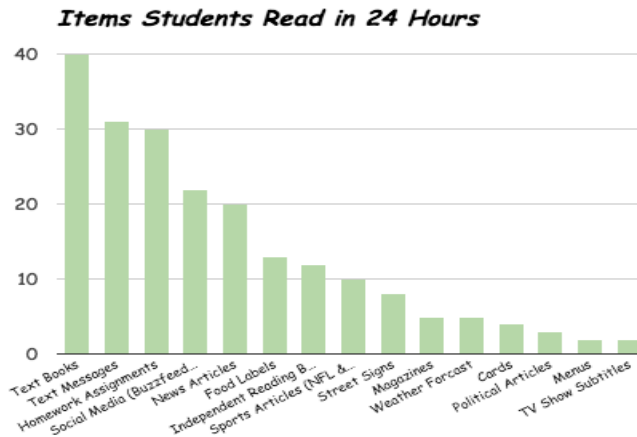
The first data I analyzed was the students' list of the items they read for 24 hours.

Here is a summary of the items my students read:

Text Books
Text Messages
Homework Assignments
Social Media (Buzzfeed, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter)
News Articles
Food Labels
Independent Reading Book
Sports Articles (NFL & NBA)
Street Signs
Magazines
Weather Forecast
Birthday Cards
Political Articles

Menus
TV Show Subtitles

Chart below represents the amount of students who listed each item:



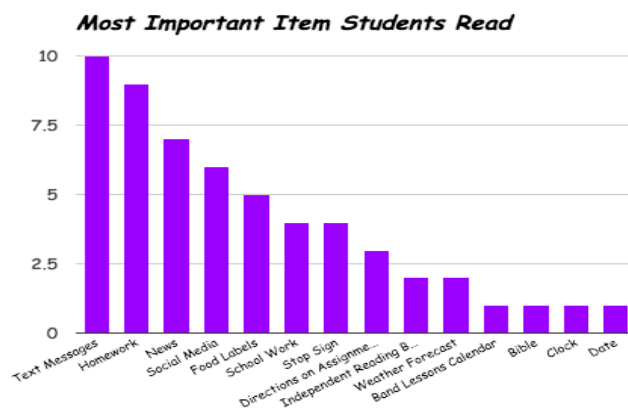
When I began analyzing these items, some of the items the students read were expected, while others were surprising. Every student cited a piece of homework, textbook, or required reading assignment that they had read in the past twenty four hours; I am not surprised that the students reported that most of what they read was found in school. Outside of school, students referenced reading social media including Instagram, Buzzfeed, Snapchat, and many more. I spoke with Student C, and she said that the reason she read social media is so that she is informed when talking with her friends. They discuss celebrities, online quizzes, funny Instagram videos, and what their friends are up to. She stated that it is important that she stays up-to-date with things that her friends are talking about, and this is why she stated this was the most important thing she read everyday. When students wrote about the most important thing they read, they all talked about how the information they received was useful to them.

I found it interesting that 20 of students referenced reading the news. In the classroom we often read news articles through NEWSELA, which takes news articles and modifies them

for a variety of reading levels. Previously, I had not thought that students were interested in current events. I spoke with a few of those students to see what type of news articles were they reading. Student S stated that he read the local newspaper because his father told him that it is important that he understand what is going on in the world. Other students cited reading specific articles, including ones about politics and sports. Student H reads NBA articles because he wants to get tips on how to improve his game for basketball season. Every student connected a specific piece of text they read to how it benefits their everyday life.

Reading Survey

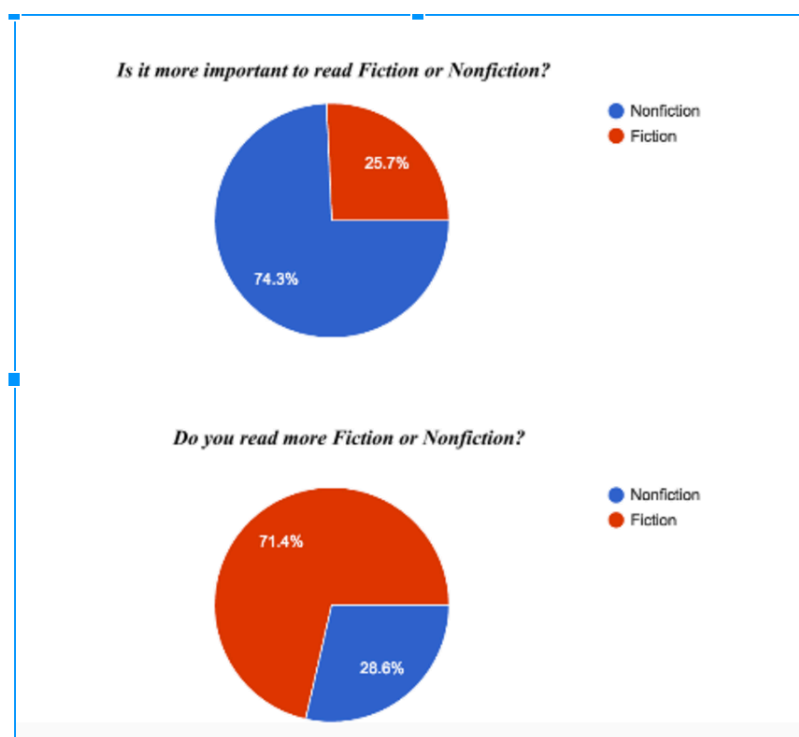
After looking at the results of the 24 hour reading list results, I decided to focus on what the students stated was the most important thing they read.



The most mentioned item that was important that students read every day was their text messages. Overall, the students focused on items where they received information that was useful to them. When each student explained why they felt that item was the most important, they focused on the information they obtained from the source. For example, many students cited food labels as the most important thing they read all day. Student J said the reason it was

important was because, “eating healthy is very important to me, and these food labels helped me make healthy choices. I want to eat healthy so this lacrosse season I will be the best player on the team.” It did not surprise me that the third most item was listed was newspaper articles because of their 24-hour reading list. What was surprising was the disconnect between what the students feel is important and which they read more frequently.

Graphs of Students Survey Results:



In the graphs above, 74% of the students felt it was more important to read nonfiction, but 71% stated that they actually read more fiction. If they feel reading nonfiction is more important, then why are they reading more fiction? I decided to speak with two students about why they said nonfiction was the more important, but they read more fiction. Student T said, “nonfiction is more important is because it contains facts, which is important in our lives. It helps

makes me more intelligent so it is more useful than nonfiction. I read it not because I enjoy reading it, but because I have to read it. This is what I am tested on in school and will help get me into college. Fiction is much more interesting.” I also spoke with Student A, and she said, “I read more fiction because it is more interesting and enjoyable to read than nonfiction. I like reading stories about characters and places that I am about things I am going through in my life.” How can we make students connect with nonfiction like they do fiction? Students must find a balance between fiction and nonfiction.

PART 2:

My goal for the students is to help prepare them for their future, and I want the things I teach them to set them up for success. The results that I collected from my students connect to the Common Core State Standards and the changes our curriculum is trying to implement. The Common Core State Standards has ten standards for reading informational text and nine standards for fiction text. The PARCC Assessment that our students take at the end of the year has made our department try to move more from a fiction-based instruction to more of a nonfiction focus. The students noted that they also see a need to shift to nonfiction because they felt it was more important, but currently our curriculum isn't matching those ideas. Our curriculum is divided into five units, where only one of the units focuses entirely on nonfiction. During this unit students focus on reading and analyzing nonfiction, writing a nonfiction research paper, and writing an argumentative essay. If students feel that nonfiction texts are more important, then why does so much of our curriculum revolve around fiction?

I need to focus on my students' engagement, in order for them to learn the required standards of the curriculum and of the Common Core State Standards. According to “From State Policy to Classroom Practice: Improving Literacy Instruction for All Students” by Mariana

Haynes (2007) in order to improve classroom instruction teachers must understand “the importance of student motivation and engagement” (p. 3). I need to find those nonfiction texts that connect to students lives that focus on the news, current events, celebrities, sports, etc -- all those items that students stated they read outside the classroom.

In “Texts and Adolescents: Embracing Connections and Connectedness” by Alfred W. Tatum (2014) states, “The absence of meaningful texts is problematic because middle school and high school students are striving to find their place in the world as they bump against academic, cultural, emotional, gender, historical, linguistic, and social forces inform their existence” (p. 4). My literacy goals for my students is to give them the tools they need to be successful in the future. Careers today require individuals to read and write everyday typically nonfiction texts. If my goal is to prepare students for the future, then I must give them the tools to comprehend any nonfiction text my students encounter.

PART 3

My job now is to make the students’ own literacy goals into the current curriculum by incorporating more relevant nonfiction texts. By incorporating the “Six C’s (choice, challenge, control, collaboration, constructing meaning, and consequences)” (Turner and Paris, 1995, p. 55), I can foster an environment where students can be actively engaged in the classroom. One of our required texts which we will be reading in a few weeks is *Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys, a historical fiction text. This text is about a girl from Lithuania who was taken from her home by the Soviet Union. Throughout this novel I incorporate a variety of nonfiction about the topic as well as firsthand accounts, but why would this help my students today who are more interested in current events and what is happening in their life? In “The Role of Motivation in Engaged Reading” Guthrie & Coddington (2009) say, “ if students are working toward goals

they believe are important, they place high value on reading and related tasks and hold more steadily to performance goals” (p. 38). For this novel I need to provide the students the opportunity to learn something they feel is important.

This book highlights the horrible acts of Stalin and the Soviet Union to the people of Lithuania. Our students study Hitler and the Holocaust, but Stalin is not the focus of their history instruction. When I have taught this book in the past, many students had questions about these topics, and I would always answer their questions. This year, I am going to have each student prepare a research question that they want to answer (choice). Students will be required to read nonfiction texts that focus on their question which they research online (challenge). While they are researching they must choose reliable resources which as a class we will discuss the qualities of a reliable resource. Each student evaluates their resource on their own (control) and practice this strategy which they can use in future research situations (construct meaning). While the students are working, I will group students who have similar questions together. They can share what they have learned so far with each other (collaboration). In the end students can present their findings to the class in a variety of ways like making a presentation, becoming a person from their research, creating a video of what they learn, or creating an image to represent image (consequences).

This lesson provides students with a way students can “construct purposes for reading that meet personally relevant goals or enable them to engage in useful information” (O’Brien, 2003 p.47). They created the question and met a learning goal they set for themselves. I will give them a few options on how they can report to the class what they learned, choosing the activity that works best for them. I will meet the curriculum requirements by reading the novel and meet my students’ needs by making historical information relevant to them. The information

I have collected from the survey and 24-hour reading list showed me that my students value learning to read and analyzing nonfiction texts. Student engagement is vital in the classroom, and I need to ensure my students are given opportunities to have a say in what they study and learn.