Sustaining pupil engagement in literacy lessons

Authors:
Powell, R., McIntyre, E., & Rightmyer, E. (2006)

[Original title: Johnny won't read, and Susie won't either: Reading instruction and student resistance]

How can teachers keep pupils on-task during literacy lessons?

Why are children highly motivated and engaged in some classes, but not others? What causes pupils to go off-task? To find out, the researchers of this US study analysed literacy lessons in classes of children aged 5-8 years from 13 primary schools in which there was considerable off-task behaviour.

The researchers found that lack of engagement was not simply a case of poor classroom management and discipline, but a reflection of the way in which literacy was taught. A number of key factors led to low engagement. These included pupils experiencing lack of choice, challenge, control over their own learning, and opportunities to work with other pupils. Off-task behaviour was particularly apparent during lessons in which pupils were expected to conform to certain prescribed procedures and undertake closed tasks. Such lessons also had an adverse effect on pupils' feelings of success and the teachers' relationships with their pupils.

This study is likely to interest not only teachers of literacy, but any teacher wanting to enhance the teaching and learning that goes on in their classrooms. It points to the importance of ensuring that pupils are given choice, allowed to share in the decision making, are set open and challenging tasks, and encouraged to work collaboratively with each other. Crucially, the study indicates how these goals can be achieved.

Keywords: behaviour; literacy; motivation; phonological awareness; primary schools; self-esteem; teacher-pupil relationship; teaching and learning; teaching methods; pupil attitudes

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What factors were associated with off and on-task behaviour?

The researchers looked for six factors that previous research has shown are linked to high pupil involvement in literacy:

- pupil choice;
- appropriate challenge;
- pupil control;
- peer collaboration;
- construction of meaning; and
- positive consequences.

They found that in classrooms with a high degree of off-task behaviour (25% of the time or more), all or most of these factors were absent. The researchers' findings indicated that teachers who actively engage pupils with learning give their pupils:

- choice – they allow pupils to select the tasks and texts that they are interested in and find personally relevant;
- appropriate challenge – they provide appropriately tailored tasks which 'scaffold' (provide support and structure for pupils' learning which is gradually withdrawn) pupils' learning and which show pupils their capabilities without frustrating them, (such as guided reading sessions);
- control over their learning – they enable pupils to share in the decision making process, and encourage pupils to set their own goals and take responsibility for their own development;
- opportunities for peer collaboration – they encourage social interaction that enables pupils to learn from one another and support each other's learning;
- activities to help them to construct meaning – they help pupils to make sense of what they are learning (for example, using texts to solve problems, entertain and inform); and
- positive consequences – they help pupils believe in their ability to be successful (for example, through activities such as discussions about books where everyone's opinion is valid, rather than textbook exercises in which answers are either right or wrong).

What kind of tasks and activities disengaged pupils?

A large proportion (82%) of the off-task behaviour took place during lessons where the teaching was characterised by prescribed activities and closed tasks. The researchers defined closed tasks as those that involve correct responses or require single, narrow strategies for success, for example where pupils are expected to learn the mechanics of writing (punctuation, capitalisation etc) through worksheet exercises rather than in their own creative writing.

Lessons characterised by closed tasks lacked the factors that foster engagement with learning (choice, challenge, control, collaboration, construction of meaning, positive consequences). The researchers noted how they were often:

- phonics lessons with no follow-up opportunities for application of skills;
- reading lessons which focused exclusively, or primarily, on round robin reading;

- conducted as whole class sessions in which pupils listened to the teacher or were told to work independently on workbook style exercises.

The researchers suggested that open tasks allowed pupils more freedom and a sense of ownership over their work and learning, and that they are associated with the factors that foster engagement with learning. They gave examples of open tasks, which included:

- encouraging pupils to find answers using sources of their own choosing;
- teaching basic skills in the context of meaningful themes or topics; and
- encouraging pupils to ask questions and discuss their work with each other.

How did lessons involving closed tasks affect pupils?

The researchers noted how when children:

- lacked control;
- particularly disliked prescribed tasks;
- had difficulty comprehending the activity; and
- feared failure;

They not only disengaged from the task, but showed resistance to it. Disengagement and resistance usually occurred during lessons where the activities were closed (such as lessons that involved workbook exercises, reading round the class etc).

The children showed their resistance in different ways. For example, they wasted time to try to get out of doing the task by going to the toilet, colouring, and losing their place. Others merely became restless or inattentive. Some children cried. The teachers in turn reacted to the resistance and a cycle of negativity evolved. The researchers cited previous studies which found that when they met with pupil resistance, teachers sometimes adopted defensive tactics, such as assigning less challenging work, because they thought it would lead to less resistance.

Even young children appeared able to explain why they resisted particular activities. The researchers gave the example of a child who interrupted the teacher as she was instructing two other pupils to ask if he could give water to the classroom gerbil instead of reading. The reason he gave suggested a lack of choice and control over the reading activity:

> 'I didn't want to read. I get tired of reading. I like it sometimes (reading) but not some stories and not doing it for so long'.

How was the study designed?

This study was part of a larger, two-year study on literacy teaching and pupil achievement. The larger study involved 13 schools and 46 classrooms of children aged 5-8 years. The participating schools had received a grant to implement one of several different models of teaching literacy. Some of these models involved following a scripted approach; others were more open. School leaders were asked to recommend teachers who had proved particularly successful at implementing the particular model for at least a year.

The researchers collected data in three ways:

- by observing the teachers for 1-3 hours (depending on the length of the literacy session) and making field notes;
- interviewing the teachers about their practices; and
- completing an observation instrument after leaving the site that helped them to reflect and quantify what they had observed.

To help them analyse the instruction they had observed, the researchers noted and calculated for example:

- the activities in which the children were involved;
- the percentage of time the children spent reading and working on isolated skills; and
- the percentage of time the children appeared to be bored and off-task.

Altogether, the researchers gathered 75 data sets. For the study that forms the basis of this article, the researchers analysed a subset of 28 data sets, chosen because they showed low levels of engagement by the pupils (off-task for at least 25% of the time). They coded and analysed 73 activity settings from these 28 data sets according to a framework they identified in their literature review that comprised six criteria: choice, challenge, control, collaboration, constructing meaning, and consequences. The activities were defined as having a particular focus or learning objective, a beginning and an end, and they lasted between 5 and 55 minutes (20 minutes on average). For example, a literacy event in which a teacher read a storybook aloud counted as one activity; switching to small group guided reading counted as another.

Implications

This study highlighted a number of strategies that help to motivate and engage pupils in lessons. These included providing open-ended tasks that encourage active learning, giving pupils choice, getting pupils to work collaboratively, encouraging them to take control of their own learning, and scaffolding pupils' learning so that they are challenged, but also working within their capabilities.

In completing this digest, the authors began to ask questions about implications of the findings for practitioners.

Teachers may like to consider the following implications of this study:

- What could you do more of to engage pupils in active learning activities (such as discussing ideas with a partner and asking higher level questions) and limit the amount of time spent on passive learning activities in your classroom (such as listening to the teacher and reading around the class)?
- What opportunities do you have to take part in coaching with another teacher? Would you find it helpful to ask a colleague to observe a session and identify examples of conversations where you successfully scaffolded a child's learning and then discuss with you how you might further develop the support you give?

School leaders may find the following implications helpful in acting on the messages in this study:

- The researchers noted phonics lessons tended to be the most prescriptive when they involved closed tasks. What opportunities are there for colleagues to share ideas for teaching phonics in ways that are more meaningful to the children?
- How could colleagues share ideas about ways they encourage their pupils to take control of their own learning, for example by choosing the stories they would like to read for themselves?

Where can I find out more?

'Effective teachers of literacy', Research of the Month (RoM) summary on the GTC website at:
http://www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_curriculum/literacy/

Details of how to challenge and structure children's learning within their 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky's theory which refers to the difference between what a child can achieve by him/herself and what s/he can achieve with the assistance from an adult) are available in another GTC RoM summary at:
http://www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_teachingandlearning/vygotsky1/

Ways of effectively structuring discussion between pupils are discussed in the GTC RoM summary about collaborative group work, available at:
http://www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_managementoflearning/group_work/

Details of the issues arising from an inviestiage focusing on primary pupils who are at risk of falling behind in English and mathematics can be found in a DfES report, available at:
http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFES-00442-2007