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Cecile Somme

Popcorn Reading: The Need to Encourage Reflective Practice

After more than 35 years of teaching, I learned of a teaching practice called “Popcorn Reading.” Ironically, I learned of this practice in my first full year of teaching in a School of Education where I was supervising an intern (student teacher).

The lesson I came to observe was a fifth grade Social Studies lesson. The lesson began promptly when Amanda, the intern, asked the students to open their Social Studies text to page 118. The students did so immediately. Amanda then asked a student to begin “popcorn reading”. I was anxious to learn about this since, as mentioned previously, as an educator with over 35 years of experience as a classroom teacher, special education coordinator, a member of curriculum committees, and later as superintendent with responsibility for all aspects of curriculum, I had never heard of ‘popcorn reading’.

Amanda asked ‘Joe’ to begin the popcorn reading session. Joe read a paragraph and then said, “Popcorn, Mary”. Mary read the next paragraph and then said, “Popcorn, Jenna”. Jenna, read the next paragraph and then said, “Popcorn, John”. And so the lesson continued.

Half an hour into the lesson, I continued to try to look attentive and interested, however, it was very difficult. I looked at the intern who was leaning against a podium and yawning. I couldn’t help but yawn also. The lesson continued in this fashion for another half hour!

During the hour that I observed the students, I must say that they were well-behaved in spite of having to ‘endure’ this lesson. A couple of students played with objects in their desks, one played with his hair, but other than that, the fifth graders were not misbehaving.

At the end of the lesson, I knew that I could not stay longer. I had exhausted my patience. But believing in the potential of people, I decided to let a day or so pass before discussing the lesson with this intern. I met with Amanda for five minutes at the end of the lesson and gave her a sheet with reflection questions, e.g. Was this a typical day? Was this a typical lesson? What were the strengths of the lesson? What would she do differently? I asked Amanda to reflect on these questions and we would meet later that week (Friday) to discuss the lesson.

On Friday, I met with the intern in a comfortable setting and asked her what she thought of her lesson. Her first response was, “It was horrible! It was so boring.” I then asked her why she thought the lesson was horrible. Amanda stated that she was bored and recognized that the students were bored and were not engaged and that she should have provided a more engaging lesson. When I asked what she might have done differently, she didn’t have too many ideas. I asked her why she taught the lesson as she did, and her response was, “That is how my mentor teacher teaches Social Studies.” I did not comment on this but asked her to review the objectives of

the lesson. Were they met? She agreed that they had not been. We discussed how they could have been met without a textbook and with the students being actively engaged.

I must say that the lesson I observed that Wednesday morning was the worst that I had observed in my more than 35 years in education. But, I decided to use that lesson as a case study, from then on, for students in my education classes. That spring and each semester, thereafter, I asked the education students in my classes how many had heard of ‘popcorn reading’. I was surprised to learn that EVERY American education student had heard of it and was a participant in such lessons during their elementary and secondary years.

In some cases there were minor variations. For example, the teacher might ask a couple of questions during the popcorn reading session. I asked the students how many enjoyed these lessons. What were their feelings? More than 98 percent had negative feelings about this reading practice. Many said that that they really did not enjoy reading; many said that they were embarrassed to read out loud. A couple of students mentioned that most of their lessons in high school were taught that way. Of course, I thought that they were exaggerating.

Whenever I am ‘teaching’ my students, I ask them to think and to give the reason that I am using the particular strategy or approach. I emphasize the importance of being a reflective practitioner and the need to think critically.

When I was invited to a session with English professors held a couple of years ago, I decided to talk about popcorn reading. I began with that approach and then asked the seasoned educators to tell how they felt. Their responses were similar to the education students. I was even more surprised to learn that all knew of popcorn reading. One said that it was used in California. Interestingly though, no one in that room that day supported the approach. One asked an interesting question, “What are the origins of popcorn reading?”

Since I had not expected these English professors to even know of “popcorn reading”, I decided to do some research - thinking that there would be little information on “popcorn reading”. Was I surprised! I learned that “popcorn reading” is also called, “combat reading.” I wonder why!!! According to Wolsey (2010), “Readers actively work to catch other students on the wrong word or otherwise not reading along with the group.”

In addition, I learned that there are some slight variations of the “popcorn reading” approach. “Touch go reading” is when

As policy dictates more and more what teachers need to teach, we should be mindful of the need to be practitioners that constantly reflect on our practices and decisions in the classroom.

the teacher walks around the room with a baton or similar item and taps someone on the head. This signals that that student is now to read orally. "Popsicle stick reading" refers to the idea that each child's name is on a popsicle stick. The teacher pulls a 'popsicle stick' and the student whose name is on the stick reads until the next name is pulled. In 'round robin oral reading', the teacher, at any juncture, calls out a student's name, and that student is to read.

A few months ago, I was asked to teach a reading strategy to students in the Masters of Elementary Teaching program at a university in Maryland. I decided to use popcorn reading after setting up a safe and comfortable environment and indicating that anyone who was not comfortable doing popcorn reading could "pass." I then asked the students to give their feelings and thoughts about this approach in small groups and then in the large group.

Comments were such:

"This was the worse torture for me. I am dyslexic. Not only was I embarrassed when called upon, but I got absolutely nothing out of it."

"I can't believe that such an ineffective teaching strategy is still used today—especially with all of the research indicating that it is harmful!"

"As a strong reader myself, I hated when my teachers made us do popcorn or round robin reading. It was boring and I could not keep my mind on what was being read. Often, I could not hear what some students were reading."

"I am really surprised to see people still use these outmoded reading strategies! When we consider how precious time is and that American students lag behind many other nations in achievement levels, let's use our time wisely!"

"I hate popcorn reading! I am one of those bored, read ahead, and frustrated with slower readers."

"Popcorn reading and such strategies are boring and embarrassing. They do not improve comprehension or fluency and may turn students off of reading."

Rachel Lyash (September 14, 2008), in her Children's Literature Blog says, "When it comes to popcorn reading, I dreaded it. I'm not shy, but I hate being called out. I like to know what I need to do ahead of time in order to properly prepare myself. I am very ADD and my mind wanders extremely easy. Popcorn reading was my worst enemy because I always seemed to be called on right after my mind had slipped off to the book I was reading or my favorite TV show. Then I had to scramble to find the place in the reading, and if I wasn't sitting near a friend, I was out of luck and had to prepare for embarrassment. I don't think these activities had much effect on my fondness of reading... I can definitely see how multiple dramatic effects with either round robin or popcorn reading can have negative effects on a child's desire to read."

Comments on reddit.com include the following:

"(It is) legal torture for some people who hate reading out loud."

"I remember doing popcorn reading in middle school and it sucked. Hearing that it's still done in some college blows my mind."

"Look for someone who isn't paying attention. They are most definitely getting popcorned."

"Popcorn reading is one of the sure-fire ways to get kids who are already hesitant about reading to really hate reading for the rest of their lives."

"It was always fun when the whole class would troll one kid and everyone would pick him or her repeatedly."

"I would always try to call on the kid paying the least attention so he would have to be like, 'Where are we?' Got them every time."

In conclusion, I decided to write this article as a reminder that, as educators and professionals, we must always examine why we do what we do. Is it an effective practice? What are the potential benefits? What are the weaknesses?

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Cecile Somme has graduate degrees in curriculum, elementary education, business administration, and K-12 educational administration. She has taught at all levels—elementary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate. She retired as superintendent to teach full time at the university level. She is presently teaching graduate students at the University of Wisconsin–Superior.