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Neoliberal Reading Interventions and Student Needs

Abstract

This article discusses reading programs within the context of Neoliberalism and the extent to which they address student needs. The rise of such reading programs in the market economy has come at the expense of placing the burden of reading development solely on the shoulders of students after restricting their academic and personal growth. The article explores how this has been done without any consideration regarding the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students; and without taking into account the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes. Without a doubt, this has affected the ability of students to think critically about their school curriculum and their position in society.

Keywords

neoliberalism, accelerated reader, hidden curriculum, leveled readers, reading motivation, cultural identity, equity, social justice, English language learners, immigrants, refugees, authentic text, shared reading

Author Statement

Mahbuba Hammad is a recent graduate of the EdD program at CSUSB. Her research focuses on the advancement of literacy skills and motivation to read among Arabic language learners; literacy as a matter of equity and social justice; and literacy's role in fostering student identities relative to their families and communities.

Neoliberal Reading Interventions and Student Needs

Control of economic factors are transferred from the public to the private sector under the policy model of economics and social studies known as Neoliberalism (Investopedia, 2010). As a form of governmentality, Neoliberalism arose in the 1970s as a result of the progressive and radical positions assumed in the field of education and the media at the time (Davies & Bansel, 2007); and which places the burden of success on individuals. According to Davies and Bansel (2007), neoliberalism removes value from the social good and allows for economic productivity to be perceived as coming from the transformation of education into a product that could be bought and sold as any other good, instead of it coming from governmental investment in education. Through this phenomenon, Davies and Bansel (2007) argue that people become so seduced by their individually perceived powers of freedom that they forgo significant collective power; reigniting the liberal emphasis on self-advancement, self-worth, and self-esteem, thus dismissing the collective responsibility for the marginalized and vulnerable. This is something that has become evident in the commercialized approach to reading instruction through leveled books at various elementary and secondary schools in the United States and abroad.

The reading level framework

The reading level framework was first introduced in 1946 by Emmett Betts in his book *Foundations of Reading Instruction* where he spoke about the 4 levels of text difficulty; the: 1) basal/independent level, 2) instructional level, 3) frustration level, and 4) probable capacity level. The first three are based on students' ability to

decode and comprehend text while the probable level is based on listening comprehension and is the highest level for comprehension (Halladay, 2012).

The good news about leveled texts is that they make reading less frustrating to students. The bad news is that reading programs featuring books rated on a readability scale or on a leveled spectrum are often imposed on teachers by administrators who chose to invest in them. The focus of such programs becomes generating better results for schools and hence, teachers become so engrossed in encouraging students to read as many leveled texts as possible, that they lose sight of the outcomes of reading. Schools focus on the quantity of books read, rather than on reading comprehension strategies and word solving (Brabham & Villaume, 2002).

According to Glasswell and Ford (2011), given past experiences, it is evident that commercial materials have and can contribute to less teacher reflection and scrutiny of reading practices. This is due to teachers becoming dependent on the leveled reading material which affects their professional judgment (Shannon, 1992). This dependency allows the materials to become the main focus of teachers (due to the illusion of a scientific cachet) rather than the readers themselves (Pearson, 2006).

The Accelerated Reader Program

The Accelerated Reader Program (AR) is an example of such commercialized educational material. It is a literature-based program designed by School Renaissance and is one of the most highly used programs (used by more than 36,000) in primary and secondary literacy curricula in the United States and abroad (Milone,

2014). The program works by having students read books of their choice as long as they fall within their individual reading level and are part of the Accelerated Reader (AR) program. The reading level of a particular student is determined by the company's STAR reading comprehension test. The company's ATOS Graded Vocabulary List (KG-college level) includes more than 100,000 words based on data gathered for more than 2.5 billion words from 170,000 plus books (Milone, 2014). The words in the vocabulary list are categorized according to the grade level at which they are most likely to be understood by students. Renaissance has Accelerated Reader Reading Practice Quizzes for these books. After reading the books, students are required to take the automated quizzes, and upon successful completion, students are allowed to move on to the next level and earn reward points for the books that they read (Milone, 2014).

The literature on AR

A review of the literature on AR as conducted by Smith and Westberg (2011) revealed that although the company's website states that its program's effectiveness has been proved by 155 studies, only 129 were conducted by independent sources, and only 20 of them were published in peer-reviewed publications. Although the studies vary in purpose and design, there is no indication of the extent of the independence of these studies from the company itself. Smith and Westberg (2011) were not able to locate the 129 independent studies mentioned on Renaissance's website. The company has not published any of the studies reporting negative findings on the AR program as found through the literature review process (Smith & Westberg, 2011). The findings of their literature review are similar to those

of Biggers (2001). The lack of product regulation by the government is evident through this example, where the accuracy of the information presented on the company's website could not be confirmed by several studies and where consumers base their decisions on the presented information.

In their focus group study on 1,095 students' attitudes toward AR, Smith and Westberg (2011) found that students in third to eighth grade viewed the program as containing too many processes that did not leave them with enough time to read. Students also reported that the AR point system influenced their reading choices, limiting their ability to read more than one book at a time, and influencing their pace in order to finish. Students did not read for the pleasure of reading, but rather for wanting to earn the promised rewards. It was also found that students limited themselves to only reading AR books until they met their point target, after which, they would read something they liked. As to the quizzes, students expressed that questions were too specific, either too difficult or easy, and that the thoughtful reader strategies learned in class do not help them on the quizzes. The focus group participants acknowledged the act of cheating on quizzes by: writing quiz questions to later pass on to their friends, taking quizzes just for the fun of it, or by completing quizzes related to movie adaptations of books and which they have seen. Participants' recommendations for program improvement included: 1) greater availability of books and quizzes, 2) improved rewards or no rewards at all, 3) removal of points associated with books, 4) enhancement of quiz questions, 5) ability to self-adjust reading goals, and 6) deletion of quizzes if they need to stop at a given point once commenced (Smith & Westberg, 2011).

The findings of Smith and Westberg (2011) are in line with those of Huang (2012) who conducted a mixed methods study of the effectiveness of the Accelerated Reader program on middle school students' reading achievement and motivation. The study was completed over the course of a semester and included 211 students in sixth to eighth grade who participated in semi-structured interviews. Students had to complete a reading pretest and a posttest; and classroom observations were conducted. Huang (2012) found that the AR program did not improve students' reading scores and did not promote intrinsic reading motivation for middle school students. However, the program did increase the amount of time that students spent reading.

In light of these results, Huang (2012) points out that the STAR exam does not include oral reading comprehension elements nor any teacher observation of students' reading behavior; and that it does not account for students' admittance that they would guess what they believed was the correct answer on the exam. Biggers (2001) and Pavonetti, Brimmer and Cipielewski (2003) concluded that the STAR test is not a valid and reliable method of assigning students' reading levels. Yet it is important to mention that Huang (2012) did not actually compare students' standardized reading exam scores after being exposed to the AR program.

As Biggers (2001) points out, although AR is presented as a program to differentiate reading instruction for students, it is not an actual literacy instructional program since teachers do not provide direct instruction in reading strategies. In recounting the experiences of a former student, Schmidt (2008) reflects that the purpose of reading for him was not to learn something new or to enjoy the books but rather a number driven process.

Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) hold the view that the exaggerated emphasis on leveled books has resulted in the unnecessarily narrow selection of books available to students to read. Schmidt (2008) discusses the inability of students and their families to choose books that are outside of the realm of AR and which do not have points and quizzes associated with them. Wanting to conform to the system and peer pressure, students limit themselves to books they can use to compete in the classroom. The irony in this is that, although students are free to choose a book of their choice to read, they are limited by the available selection in the AR program. The adherence of schools to such a strict reading program implementation thwarts students from reading other books considered as literary classics and must reads simply because they may be below a student's exact reading level. And since AR books are not categorized according to age appropriateness, many students are likely to end up reading content that is inappropriate for their age. In this sense, Renaissance makes it the responsibility of teachers and parents to decide whether or not a book is appropriate for a particular student.

As American writer and National Book Award finalist Susan Straight argues, there is an inherent problem with choosing to read books in the AR program according to their point system, and the inability to choose books according to a rating system based on moral values instead. She goes on to argue that readers get the perception that *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (44 points) is 3 times better than *To Kill a Mockingbird* (15 points) which in turn is only 2 times as good as *Gossip Girl* (8 points) simply because the AR system assigned more points to *Harry Potter* (Trelease, 2013). The morals and lessons

instilled by these books are not taken into account. Biggers (2001) argues that AR instills an extrinsic motivation drive in students, something that is strengthened by the competitive reward system, rather than an intrinsic one genuinely coming from the heart.

Trelease (2013) raises the concern that with programs such as AR, class discussions decrease in number and quality, simply because they would give away the answers to quizzes. This concern is valid given that through these processes, reading comprehension instruction is limited in the classroom. Student exposure to literature becomes confined to books imposed by AR. And without thoughtful and intentional discussions and activities, student ability to critically think about book messages diminishes. Perhaps this exposes the hidden curriculum of reading programs whose strict implementation results in the labeling of good readers versus struggling readers (referring to those who do not read the assigned books and do not succeed on their quizzes). According to Battraw (2002), hidden messages form a part of the culture of reading at schools, specifically secondary schools. She argues that while the overt message may be that reading is important to succeed on state examinations and in society in general, this message is compromised by hidden messages in regards to the nature of the reading process and the place of reading in everyday common life.

The interviews conducted by Battraw (2002) with high school students using AR as part of their curriculum at a suburban and predominantly immigrant school reveal tensions among the stated goals of reading instruction and the actual reading experiences of students. Interviews revealed the tension amongst the formal curricular view of reading and that of students who experience the program,

mostly English learners. Battraw (2002) goes on to recommend that teachers need to emphasize the reasons that motivate them to read themselves such as emotion, pleasure, interest, privacy and comfort; for the culture of reading includes social relationships and individual mental constructs. Yet as Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) point out, unfortunately, the focus on book leveling is supported by the belief that diversity of students' cultural, social, and experiential backgrounds can be whitewashed by matching readers to books according to their level.

Extrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivational incentives to read such as points or pizza parties will not mold students into lifelong readers, because their reading action is tied to a temporary reward. While there is no doubt that there is evidence citing the success of reading programs such as AR, the problem is that unless such programs become culturally competent, minority students will not be allowed to succeed because their personal narratives and background factors are not necessarily reflected in the literature.

Instead of blaming the reading process and program for the lack of advancements, students end up being labeled as a result of their actions. If students are not able to see themselves in the literature they read, or if they are not given the opportunity to critically discuss narratives presented in the literature, they will be less likely to develop an intrinsic motivation to read inspired by the want and need to challenge the status quo. In other words, as suggested by the findings of Battraw (2002), students will continue to view reading as: school centered, a chore, required, formalistic, structured and something to be done through compulsion by punishments and

threats; something that is necessary for the future, yet not pleasant in the present.

A Renaissance representative wrote a letter to the editor of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* in response to a study it published entitled “Accelerated Reader: What Are the Lasting Effects on the Reading Habits of Middle School Students Exposed to Accelerated Reader in Elementary Grades?” (Goodson, Tardrew, Kerns, Pavonetti, & Ciplewski, 2003). In it, he denounced the study as seriously flawed, not satisfying the U.S. federal definition of a scientifically based research as described by the No Child Left Behind Act. The letter also described the tone of the article as biased against Accelerated Reader, suggesting that schools have adopted AR because of its aggressive marketing campaign.

No child left behind

The reference to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) by Goodson et al. (2003) is not surprising, for as Torres (2005) explains, NCLB is actually a neoliberal educational reform that places great emphasis on accountability through standardized exams. Hursh (2007) states that the NCLB advocates for the perception of the public that they have no other choice than submitting to the discipline of the market economy instead of working within the processes of a democracy; something that the authors of the article rebutted regarding the letter to the editor (Goodson, 2003). Torres (2005) also explains that *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education placed the blame of the 1980s economic recession on schools, rather than on the actual policies of the Federal Reserve Board and the act of outsourcing jobs to other countries. Hence, neoliberal programs such as NCLB place the burden of accountability on schools with the

primary focus of producing through the educational system competent students who would allow the U.S. to compete in the global market economy alongside other countries. And when companies such as Renaissance claim that their programs are bound to demonstrate an improvement of students’ reading scores and motivation to read given that schools implement it properly, the responsibility of improvement and hence success is solely placed on the shoulders of school administrators, teachers, students and families. The company is therefore released from any liability.

Bowles and Gintis (2002) suggest that the personality traits of individuals, rather than their skills, are the determinants of success in a labor market. Thus, it is important to highlight that a mere test score does not reveal all of the capabilities and various forms of capital possessed by students, something that is overlooked through the NCLB strict emphasis on test scores. Apple (2004) comments on the fact that in the U.S. and abroad, schools are placed in a hierarchical ordering according to their place in the market and thus reputation and prestige; and that they are valued by the amount of students who pass national exams. As he points out, this ordering does not take into account the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes; and that this is more important in the U.S. where the variance in school achievement is explained by poverty more than any particular school reform.

The letter to the editor referenced in Goodson (2003) exposes another part of the hidden curriculum of reading programs; they are part of a business model after all, and such companies want to sell their product. It is important to highlight that there is nothing wrong with a reading program being part of a business model, for after all, how could education thrive

without a supply and demand for resources needed by students and teachers? And if it was not for reading interventions, how would we as educators help students succeed?

The social good

The problem arises when the value from the social good is removed from the product, at which point its goal becomes to benefit from profits at the expense of the public's interest and wellbeing. In this case, the removal of the social good is evident in the program not taking into consideration the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students, and not recognizing the importance of the development of critical thinking skills amongst readers at an early age where they are allowed to openly reflect on the status quo and their positioning in society. Such critical thinking skills are what ultimately allow students to change their social position within the storyline or change the storyline altogether (second order positioning) or position themselves through a metadiscursive process (third order positioning) (Wagner & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2009). A critical literacy education involves curricula designed to address the issues of social inequality at the local and global levels (Rogers, Mosley, & Folkes, 2009).

Even if teachers are expected to use programs such as AR in the classroom due to their adoption at the school level, they can still implement various reading activities and techniques to meet the sociolinguistic, cultural and equity needs of students. Having access to leveled texts in a classroom is a great resource; it is a matter of properly implementing their use as a tool; and supplementing instruction with culturally authentic and diverse texts.

For instance, through shared reading activities, students are able to enjoy daily

literacy opportunities regardless of their reading levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2019). Shared reading fosters a community of readers for it entails a whole group instruction, where students and teachers read aloud text that is beyond students' ability to read (Fountas & Pinnell, 2019); or beyond their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers guide and facilitate conversation about the message and language of the text and encourage students to participate in a meaningful discussion about it (Fountas & Pinnell, 2019). In addition, teaching points are made by teachers by selecting a part of the text they would like to revisit through several subsequent readings (Fountas & Pinnell, 2019).

Overall, there needs to be an alignment between school administrative expectations and the experiences of teachers and students. Teachers are encouraged to increase the scope and depth of in-class discussions and activities on texts read. Through the unconditional support of their administration, educators need to be intentional about focusing on culturally authentic and diverse literature that reflect the equity and social justice needs of ethnic minority students; especially English language learners, immigrants and refugees. Across time, preserving and taking pride in self-identity has been at the forefront of struggles. Hence, students need to feel recognized and empowered through their school curriculum to resiliently carry on the daily struggle of preserving their identity and that of their communities with honor.

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