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Infusing Media into Middle Level Literacy Education: Teachers' Development of Action Research Projects

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There exist specific challenges to literacy learning in middle level reading education that center around their knowledge and applications of media forms to enrich, or saturate (Olsen, 2002). These challenges include teachers' attitudes, which often tend to disapprove of the use of media and nonprint over traditional texts, and their lack of familiarity with instructional applications using media. Still, the use of non-print resources for literacy education are mandated by national standards and an unwritten social/political agenda underlying critical literacy education. In an effort to meet these challenges head on, the focus of this study of teacher development of action research studies focusing on integration of media into literacy lessons set the following purposes forward: completion of case studies; increased knowledge and familiarity of use; future integration of media into literacy lessons. The inquiry questions that drove this study were: How professional development in the use of media (non-print, technology, and alternative textual forms) will affect applications for literacy instruction targeting middle level education; How effective do practicing teachers judge their instruction to be in critical media literacy lessons; How does students' achievement vary as a result of media integration?

A Theoretical Framework for the Project

Teachers need to understand that middle school students are a diverse population and that they will benefit from educational programs that offer variety in content material and presentation style, and that stay current with popular culture (Hagood, 2000). They often overlook the subtle problems caused by students' struggles with vocabulary difficulties due to dialectal differences, second language acquisition, or mild communication problems, causing them to be at a disadvantage in classroom literacy activities (Heath, 1983; Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1994). An understanding and application of the basic principles underlying individual learning styles and multiple forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1988) will support teachers successful facilitation of middle level students' literacy learning. Teachers' modifications for these individual difficulties may be appropriately created through integrated assignments involving media and non-print materials (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000).

The use of technology tools can serve as an emerging and effective method for accomplishing literacy goals for students with language differences and language difficulties. For example, magazine advertisements evoke emotional engagement

as they develop and explore new vocabulary (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Hobbs, 1998). There is a deeper language of text within media (i.e., Design) and alignment with New Capitalism (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2000) that may attract the attention of middle level learners and engage them in active learning forums. New standards for reading professionals mandate integration of technology tools and media materials into literacy instruction (IRA, 2003; NCTE/IRA, 1996). Use of language technology tools can serve as an emerging and effective method for accomplishing literacy goals for struggling middle level students. The use of case method learning through development and sharing of research projects provides opportunities for teaching and learning through application of theory into practice, activation of problem-solving skills, and immersion in authentic and relevant experiences (Elksnin, 1998).

The development of an action research assignment in a class titled, Teaching Reading at the Middle Level, was focused on two challenges: teachers' mixed attitudes toward the use of media and nonprint over traditional texts, and teachers' lack of familiarity with instructional applications using media (even though use of these resources is mandated by national standards and an unwritten social/political agenda underlying critical literacy education); and the importance of the use of case/class method learning through development and sharing of research projects providing opportunities for teaching/learning through application of theory into practice, activation of problem-solving skills, and immersion in authentic and relevant experiences.

Development of the Action Research Projects

The assigned project required graduate students to develop action research projects that focused on integrating lessons using media and critical media literacy into middle level reading instruction. The narrative paper that was required included a lesson plan detailing the application of a media literacy activity

in a middle-level classroom. The lesson plan was on one of five areas of literacy instruction, including reading comprehension, young adolescent literature, factors contributing to struggling middle school readers' learning, reading strategies and instructional materials, and factors contributing to students' personal and social growth. These projects were shared in class discussions to support collaborative development of case studies and to encourage problem-based learning through case methodology. Results indicated new learning for teachers and students in the areas of media use and applications, and provoked reflective changes in educational practice.

Participants included approximately 30 graduate students in a reading methods class at a 4-year university in a Midwestern state. The teachers had varied teaching experiences with using media, and consisted of a diverse population of backgrounds and cultures. In their classrooms they had limited access to technology, limited experiences with and access to media, and time constraints for using resources other than traditional materials (i.e., basal texts) in their classrooms. Procedures included development of action research projects based on application of a media literacy activity in their own classrooms which were to be research-based, focus on literacy instruction, documentation of assessment of student achievement, and documentation of new learning for teacher and student.

Data collection included an online survey of middle level media use (pre/post), lesson plan creations, classroom applications, reflective notes, and statement of outcomes and implications of the case studies (action research projects). Teachers were provided with suggestions and models of media materials such as video, magazines, advertisements, artistic displays, computer software, online factual information sites. Data analysis was of a qualitative design – including coding of responses and application descriptions. Formative assessment data included mid-semester assignment to describe classroom implementations/practice and class discussions, coding of reports and themes of discussion. Summative assessment included the post-implementation

survey of technology use and the scores for implementation assignment.

Lessons Learned

Results from ongoing data analysis, including the survey of media use, and notes from students' reflections during and after the implementation of action research projects, indicate that in the area of technology use, middle level teachers were aware of media but do not use it frequently to complement their literacy lessons. They were reluctant to create lessons integrating media in literacy activities. Quantitative data from the survey individual action research projects indicated that media projects and applications have increased awareness and use of creative project development that appears to be challenging to teachers and motivating to teachers and students. Excerpts from teachers' written instructions and students' explanations indicate new uses of technology knowledge (e.g., power point applications, software use, internet searches), non-print materials (e.g., art projects, teacher-made videos, and audio materials), visual literacy approaches (e.g., newspaper articles, comic strips, academic and recreational magazines) for classroom literacy and media literacy instruction. Lesson plans generation indicated reflective consideration of practical classroom applications for new extensions to lessons such as in critical media literacy, interpretive/reflective components for reading comprehension, and genre study of media forms.

Implications of the Study

This series of action research projects immersed graduate students in the use of media materials that have been shown to be important to middle levels students—for their psychological, social-emotional, and cognitive growth, and for their literacy development. The progress and interest that the teachers observed in their students was encouraging in that they now experienced a level of engagement on the part of the students that they had not expected in literacy activities, and eye-

opening in that they learned of students' hidden talents and interests in the area of fine arts and computer use. Another outcome that the teachers informally recalled was that through the rehearsal of using action research, this series of activities introduced more practical methods for them in their everyday instructional and assessment approaches, such as focusing topic development, keeping track of semester-long data in classroom, and modeling new technological tools.