

Struggle and Success on the Path to a Positive Reading Identity: A Collective Case Study of Seventh-Grade Readers in a Rural School

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This narrative exploration of a collective case study examined the experiences of five seventh-grade students attending a rural Kansas public school as they constructed their reading identities. Data analysis revealed rural middle school readers have the potential to see themselves as readers, but this potential requires ongoing support in and outside of the school setting throughout the middle school years. The student participants experienced positioning, struggling, and succeeding as they constructed their reading identities. The rural educational environment positively influenced the students' reading identity construction through affirming elementary reading experiences and through schoolwide support for reading. Reading identities were influenced negatively through a focus on extrinsic motivation and a struggle to find a balance between maintaining rigor while reinforcing fundamental concepts. The relationships that are constructed and the care that members of rural communities show to one another as well as individualized instruction that students can receive in small schools all help middle school students develop positive reading identities. However, challenges with teacher recruitment and the threat of school closures that are unique to rural districts can negatively impact reading identity construction.

INTRODUCTION

Students who read for pleasure are more likely to succeed academically (Horbec, 2012), and the more students read, the better they read (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2019). Unfortunately, students' reading motivation often begins to drop significantly as early as third grade (Scholastic, 2019).

To stay motivated to read, they must be interested, be dedicated to the act, and be confident in themselves as readers (Guthrie et al., 2013). Readers' confidence can be impacted by labels assigned to them by their school (Glenn et al., 2018; Triplett, 2007). Glenn and colleagues (2018) discovered teens were strongly impacted by the school telling them they were poor readers in various ways, like assigning them to remedial reading classes. Labeling students as "struggling readers" affects students as early as elementary school (Triplett, 2007). Confidence is directly tied to their perceptions of themselves as readers and to their motivation to read. When educators weaken students' reading confidence, students' motivation to read drops because they do not see themselves as readers anymore.

Interactions and socializations allow children to develop perceptions of themselves—their identities (Gee, 1990). These identities are either assigned by an institution or constructed by the individual (Gee, 2000). Students adopt various reading identities which can be constructed by the adolescents themselves or with the influence of others (Alvermann, 2001). A student may see themselves as a connoisseur of graphic novels or a mystery lover, or they may be labeled by teachers as a struggling, average, or advanced reader. Additionally, individuals' identities are impacted by the cultures in which they exist and with which they interact (Alvermann, 2001; Gee, 2000), and nearly one in five students in the United States were enrolled in rural schools in the 2016-2017 school year (Showalter et al., 2019). Therefore, the rural setting likely influences middle school students' reading identity construction.

METHODS

This research study sought to identify how a rural setting influences middle school students' reading identity construction. Research was conducted in a rural PreK-12 Kansas school with the assistance of five seventh-grade student participants and seven of their classroom teachers, all of whom volunteered to participate and provided consent or assent accompanying parental consent. Student participants sat for one to three interviews each and were observed in their classroom interactions. Teacher participants participated in one or two interviews each or contributed information in email communication.

To understand the overarching question of how a rural setting influences middle school students' reading identity construction, three sub-questions were first investigated:

1. How do middle school students in a rural Kansas school describe themselves as readers?
2. How do middle school students in a rural Kansas school experience constructing their reading identities in and outside of the school setting?
3. What role does the educational environment play in shaping rural Kansas middle school students' reading identities?

The researcher analyzed student participant interview data first to understand how rural middle school students described themselves as readers. Each student participant's transcripts were analyzed separately because each was viewed as an individual case. Interview transcripts were coded using Process Coding (Saldaña, 2016) which utilized gerunds like listening, engaging, and discussing to name observations in the data. After organizing the codes in "tabletop categories" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 230), the researcher created poetic reconstructions for each student participant to better consolidate the codes. Codes were then combined into themes using charts.

Findings showed that participants often displayed characteristics of being readers but did not always perceive themselves as readers. While some participants saw themselves as readers and enjoyed leisure reading, others did not share this perception and did not often read for fun. The student participants also expressed that they struggled to understand the relationship between reading, especially leisure reading, and school. Comparing the individual cases made clear that rural middle school students have the potential to see themselves as readers, but this potential requires ongoing support in and outside of the school setting throughout the middle school years.

Analysis of field notes from observations of the student participants helped the researcher understand students' experiences constructing their reading identities in and outside of school. Observation of students took place in various classes throughout 12 weeks of the 13-week study. These classes included English Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, Science, Family and Consumer Sciences, and Media Technology. Field notes were coded using Process Coding, and codes were organized by participant. Themes were compared to themes generated in coding interview data. Students' experiences were then compared using a matrix of common themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this process, a table was created with participants listed vertically and themes listed horizontally, with coded experiences for each participant listed under each theme. This allowed for easier comparison of experiences to identify commonalities.

This comparison revealed that rural middle school students experience positioning, struggling, and succeeding as they construct their reading identities. Monitoring students for ways they negatively position themselves can inform teachers of a possible breakdown in understanding and engagement. Teachers can support students' progress toward positive reading identity construction by reinforcing positive positioning choices during reading and learning. Educational institutions play significant roles in positioning students for learning

“Educational institutions play significant roles, positive and negative, in positioning students for learning and constructing their reading identities.”

and constructing their reading identities. When teachers and other school personnel are aware of these roles, they can emphasize positive positioning opportunities, encouraging students to take on more positive reading identities. Students of any age in any location will face struggles; what these struggles are may vary depending on the location. The struggles cannot be ignored, nor should teachers structure instruction to mitigate struggle. Instead, embracing struggle along with success will lead to teachers better supporting positive reading identity construction and will lead to students developing strong positive images of themselves as readers.

Analysis of teacher participant interview transcripts and emails, in addition to all previously analyzed data, revealed the role of the educational environment in shaping rural middle school students' reading identities. Transcripts and emails were coded using Initial Coding and codes were then organized into tabletop categories (Saldaña, 2016) and later converted into a diagram for evaluation of how they worked together with previously learned information.

This analysis showed elementary experiences influence reading identities. In this school where reading was still connected to a rewards system at the elementary level, teachers desired a shift to a greater focus on intrinsic motivation to read and learn at the middle school level. Such a shift can improve reading identities but requires a coordinated effort. Schoolwide support for reading can encourage positive reading identity construction. Such support, when focused on maintaining rigor while also providing instruction in foundational elements, benefits construction of positive reading identities.

CONCLUSIONS

This research was designed to ultimately identify what influence a rural setting had on middle school students' reading identity construction. The data indicated that rural settings provide both promises and challenges for students, and the educators who support them, as they construct their reading identities. Small class sizes and more intimate educational settings allow stronger relationships to be built between teachers and students, and they allow teachers to provide more individualized instruction, both of which benefit positive reading identity construction. The small populations and isolated nature of many rural schools presents challenges as well, including rural schools being faced with a threat of closure and struggles to bring in and keep quality teachers to provide a consistent learning environment. Threat of closure especially impacts the school community because the identity of the school itself is threatened. When that is the case, some teachers struggle to provide the necessary support for individual reading identities. Students, too, struggle to determine who they are as those around them face the larger identity crisis.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of this research, three clear actions for rural educators stand out. First, rural educators must provide ongoing support for their students' reading identity construction throughout the middle school years. Educators cannot assume that students come out of elementary school with fully formed identities and understandings of reading applications and importance. Second, classroom teachers should not shy away from student struggles; rather, teachers should challenge students and provide encouragement and appropriate supports through those challenges. Finally, teachers can move students toward being driven by intrinsic motivation by helping students identify and set their own learning goals.

The findings of this research should also lead administrators of rural schools to take action in three areas. First, middle school is an important transition period for students who have unique needs from their elementary and high school peers. All school personnel should be

"Necessary ongoing support for reading identity construction, rigorous instruction, and high expectations can keep rural middle school students' reading identities thriving."

attuned to students' needs in this transition period. Second, because teachers play such an instrumental role in supporting students' reading identity construction in middle school, they need significant support in knowing how to meet students' unique needs. Administrators should take a collaborative approach in working with teachers to identify effective professional learning opportunities that would best allow them to meet students' needs. Finally, building strong community connections can help support students' identities as members of a rural community and thus support their reading identity construction. Leveraging resources of the rural community, including its member, can provide engaging, authentic learning experiences that put students' prior knowledge and experiences at the forefront of their learning.

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