

Looking for a struggle: Exploring the emotions of a middle school reader

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Struggling readers often feel alienated from teachers and frustrated by social comparisons. However, it is possible to create contexts in which struggling readers experience success and begin to redefine themselves.

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psychology explaining that emotions are a result of our individual interpretations of particular situations or contexts, I was convinced that studying a student's emotions could provide clues about how that student is interpreting the tutoring context. I was also convinced that understanding the emotions of a struggling reader could benefit other tutors and teachers as well.

The purpose of this case study was to explore a middle school student's emotions in the tutoring context in order to better understand the "struggles" facing a struggling reader. The study revolved around a sixth grader, Mitchell; his mother, Joan (both names are pseudonyms); and me—his reading tutor. When we first talked about the possibility of tutoring for Mitchell, Joan's eyes welled up with tears. She reported that Mitchell had struggled with reading since the early grades but had learned some compensatory strategies that had helped him. Now in the sixth grade, Mitchell was reading at a third-grade level, and according to Joan reading had become increasingly frustrating for him.

The terms *struggling*, *frustrated*, and *tears* immediately brought to mind an array of negative emotions. As a tutor, I was interested in exploring the emotions of this struggling reader. Could Mitchell's emotions offer clues about how to help him? After reading literature in cognitive

A cognitive explanation of emotions

According to research in cognitive psychology, emotions emerge from a conceptual appraisal process in which an individual infers and interprets to make sense of a situation. Initial or primary appraisals are made concerning the personal relevance of the situation, followed by secondary appraisals concerning perceived control over the situation (Lazarus, 1991; Smith, 1991). Emotions such as happiness or pride are linked to primary appraisals that a situation is beneficial to the individual. Emotions such as anger or fear are linked to primary appraisals that a situation is harmful to the individual. Differentiations between challenge and frustration, pride and gratitude are distinguished by secondary appraisals. For instance, pride and gratitude have identical primary appraisals of personal benefit, but they are distinguished by the secondary appraisal of

accountability. Pride is a result of perceived self-accountability. Gratitude is a result of perceived "other-accountability" (Parkinson, 1994; Smith, 1991).

This appraisal process may help to explain some of the emotions encountered in previous literacy research. For example, Oldfather (1994) discovered a range of feelings associated with students' experiences when not motivated for literacy learning. Students openly expressed anger and helplessness. Some students' statements were direct appraisals that learning situations were out of their control and that they were not accountable for their frustrations. For instance, one angry student explained, "Teachers kind of get on your back and everything. I really get mad" (p. 13). If we use the appraisal process to interpret this student's anger, we know he perceives the learning context as somehow harmful, or not beneficial (primary appraisal), and that he perceives another as accountable for the situation (secondary appraisal). Also in Allen, Michalove, and Shockley (1993), one student's pride was evidenced in his comments: "I'm learning to read!... Want me to show you?... Want me to read it to you?... ooh, this is my favorite part!" (p. 71). Another student was grateful to those around her for their assistance: "I read big words. Ms. Willis and Ms. Shockley read books and I read and they tell it when I don't know a word. I learn if I read. Ms. Shockley, Ms. Willis, and my sister, my eleven-year-old sister will help" (p. 105). In their quotes, these students revealed that the ability to read is personally relevant and beneficial (primary appraisals), but they differed in their secondary appraisals of accountability. The first student saw himself as accountable; he expressed the confidence and excitement that often accompany feelings of pride. The second student consistently mentioned those who helped her; she expressed gratitude toward her teachers and her sister.

A social explanation of emotions

These cognitive explanations of emotion did help me to understand our tutoring interactions; how-

ever they only seemed to scratch the surface of the emotional issues surrounding Mitchell's struggle to be a successful reader. Thus, after analyzing data for only a short period, I realized that there were themes that were better explained by social theories. In essence, I realized that Mitchell's struggle was not just a result of his individual interpretation of one particular context—Mitchell's struggle was being socially constructed in a variety of contexts and in numerous relationships.

Social constructionism emphasizes that knowledge is formulated between participants in a social relationship (Hruby, 2001). This theory is somewhat different from the social constructivism attributed to Vygotsky, in that *constructivism* can be considered a cognitive description of knowledge and *constructionism* can be considered a social description of knowledge. Emotions have likewise been described from a social constructionist perspective. Scheff (1997) explained that emotions are created within our social relationships. He described feelings of enjoyment and pride as associated with relationships of solidarity. He described feelings of shame, fear, anger, and indifference and associated them with alienating relationships. By situating thoughts and feelings within social contexts, social constructionism provides a framework for understanding how interactions in a classroom can influence a student's emotional responses and how a student's struggle can be socially constructed.

Literacy research framed by social constructionism (Hinchman, Bourcy, Thomas, & Olcott, 2002; McCarthey, 2001; Moje, 2000) has detailed how particular contexts and particular relationships help to construct students' literacy identities, including notions of struggle. McCarthey (2001) concluded that students who identify well with school and with teachers tend to be more successful in school literacy practices and those who find their identities defined by other aspects of their lives may not be as successful in school literacy practices.

Procedures and methods

This qualitative study took place in the context of tutoring during four months of biweekly, one-hour sessions. All data collection took place in and around the tutoring context or in the small university snack shop where parents often waited to pick up their child. Written retrospective narratives and interviews informed me of what took place in Mitchell's reading history before I began to tutor. Other data sources included field notes (i.e., theoretical, methodological, tutorial, and personal), artifacts, and ongoing tape-recorded interviews. Triangulation of perspectives was an important aspect of this case study. The emic perspectives of parent and student or what may be termed *lay theories* provided a richer, more intersubjective explanation of the emotions in this context (Mathison, 1993).

Constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used for data analysis. Although constant comparative analysis originated in the context of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss), it has been used in a variety of educational studies as an analytic induction method—even in studies not intending to develop grounded theory (Merriam, 1998). In this study, constant comparative methods were not used for the purpose of developing theory but for their systematic approach. This approach involves closely attending to data sources and noticing what patterns emerge (open coding), noting categories or themes, and then beginning to describe the properties that exemplify each category by comparing and contrasting subsequent data.

Constant comparative analysis provides an opportunity to recognize and use the recursiveness of the research process. As categories are identified, a type of theoretical sampling takes place in which emerging concepts influence subsequent data collection. At the same time, data is revisited in order to clarify the categories and subcategories. The findings are then discussed in relation to theories from the original literature review and in relation to new theories to explain unfamiliar categories

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, one category or theme that emerged during data collection was Mitchell's socioemotional relationship with teachers. I sought other explanations because this category was not best explained by the literature in cognitive psychology. Visiting the social constructionist literature provided a richer, more colorful, and thus more credible, interpretation of the data (Lather, 1991).

Other measures were also taken to provide credibility. Triangulation of perspectives, triangulation of data sources, and member checks (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998) validated emerging categories. Member checks consisted of open-ended interviews in which I asked for feedback or clarification regarding emerging concepts, as well as informal conversations throughout to share my own thoughts about what I was interpreting.

Findings and discussion

Cognitive explanations: Looking for a struggle

As I began to notice particular patterns of emotion in the tutoring context, I was perplexed when I did not see or hear any evidence of a struggle. I assumed I would hear negative emotions expressed, such as frustration, anger, or disappointment because of Mitchell's reading history. Joan explained that Mitchell had always struggled with reading and that he had worked with many tutors. She said, "He is always falling apart when he works on his reading, writing, and spelling.... He often cries." Even during our first meeting together, when some students seem apprehensive about working with a new person, Mitchell seemed relaxed and somewhat relieved that our initial meeting was focused on conversation instead of testing. Likewise, throughout our semester together, Mitchell expressed positive emotions about tutoring:

Mitchell: [interview] I like funny books like this, and like *Matilda* [Dahl, 1998, Puffin], they make me laugh!

Cheri: [field notes] Mitchell and I laugh a lot! We both love this book!

Joan: [interview] I've noticed that I hear you both laughing when I pass by your office.... I thought, well they sound like they are having a good time!

Fun, laughter, and enjoyment were expressed in the context of tutoring. For example, one afternoon as Joan and I were discussing Mitchell's progress over a cup of coffee, I told her how much I enjoyed getting to know Mitchell and that "he is fun, interesting, and thoughtful." She said that "he always really enjoyed tutoring" and that "he looked forward to it!" These contextual responses of fun, laughter, and enjoyment indicate primary appraisals of personal benefit.

All three case study participants also consistently commented on Mitchell's obvious pride and success in reading tasks. During one session I recorded my thoughts as Mitchell reacted to his obvious success on a spelling assessment:

[Mitchell is pleased. I can tell as we go along by his expression...he is obviously excited!]

Cheri: What do you think about that? You spelled 17 out of 20 words correctly and distinguished between the short vowel *a* and short vowel *e*!

Mitchell: [with a coy grin on his face] I'm good!

Cheri: Yes indeed!

Mitchell also began to experience some pride in his successes at school. He came to my office a little early one day and excitedly reported, "When I have reading or spelling at school I've noticed that I am reading the big words a lot better! I have also noticed when I am spelling...that I am not getting mixed up." According to the emotion appraisal process, pride and success can be linked to secondary appraisals of self-accountability.

Emotions and motivation in literacy contexts

What aspects of tutoring may have influenced Mitchell's appraisal of personal benefit, resulting in feelings of fun, laughter, and enjoyment? What aspects of tutoring may have influenced Mitchell's appraisal of self-accountability resulting in feelings of pride and success? Several aspects of tutoring contributed to Mitchell's positive feelings, such as having opportunities to make choices, participating in activities that were personally relevant, working within his instructional level, and having opportunities to experience success. These aspects were apparent in my notes from our first meeting:

We spent the first 20 minutes talking about Mitchell's upcoming soccer trip.... We talked about the kinds of books Mitchell likes to read. He mentioned *Matilda*, so we discussed Roald Dahl and compared the movie *Matilda* with the book.... The last 30 minutes Mitchell read aloud three different passages from the Qualitative Reading Inventory—second-, third-, and fourth-grade passages. He seemed relieved that I asked him to read "easy stuff" before we moved on to the passages that were more difficult.

I continued to focus on choice and personal relevance throughout the semester. Each book that we read together was a book that Mitchell chose to read, based on his own interests. We spent a lot of time laughing over books like *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* (Sachar, 1988, Yearling), *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* (Cleary, 1990, HarperTrophy), and *Matilda* because Mitchell liked funny books. We also spent time reading soccer magazines and newspaper articles about World Cup Soccer. Writing opportunities came from these readings, such as writing predictions about what would happen in the next chapter or writing about a favorite soccer player. Writing opportunities also arose from personal narratives such as a fishing trip in which Mitchell caught a huge shark. Personal letter writing and letter reading were a natural part of Mitchell's desire to keep in touch with his friends and family—

these were a vital part of our concentration on reading, writing, and spelling. For example, Mitchell wrote a letter to his mother. We looked for spelling errors in his first draft, circling a few obvious mistakes. We then used those particular spelling patterns to create a word sort together by writing words in columns, cutting them apart, and sorting them again into appropriate columns.

Oldfather and Wigfield (1996) explained that students feel motivated for literacy learning when they

experience learning environments as places to pursue personal interests, as places in which they can achieve at least some degree of self-determination and participation in shaping aspects of their own learning agenda, as places in which their ideas and their literate actions are taken seriously. (p. 101)

Unfortunately, Mitchell perceived most of his experiences of reading, writing, and spelling at school as “not very interesting.” He reported a literacy history of boredom, anxiety over testing, competition for points and grades, rarely getting to choose what he read, and always reading “hard stuff.”

Reading, writing, and spelling within Mitchell’s instructional level certainly benefited his feelings of success. Through ongoing assessment such as running records, spelling inventories, and writing samples, I was able to be attentive to his growth so that tasks were challenging but not frustrating. Morris (1996) identified “diligent, unrelenting attention to instructional level” as essential to success in tutoring. I also realized early on that Mitchell had difficulty recognizing and celebrating his own successes. Each week I asked him to focus on what he did well, such as reading with expression, breaking down big words by looking at syllables, or sorting numerous words into the correct word-pattern column. Asking Mitchell to be attentive to his successes no doubt contributed to his feelings of pride—for once, he had an opportunity to think of himself as a successful reader.

Social explanations: Contexts and relationships of struggle

Social relationships were very important to Mitchell, and his mother and I both noticed that he had unique socioemotional strengths. Joan commented, “Mitchell will make it in this world.... He always has good friends, he’s often the leader of his social group, [and] he’s very popular with the other kids.” Comments like these from his mother and my ongoing notes about Mitchell’s emphasis on social relationships caused me to query, “Mitchell talks about his friends a lot; playing with friends, wanting to finish his work so he can talk with friends, how he hopes to have good friends when he moves to Alabama, do most kids talk about their friends this much?” When we were able to use this strength through writing letters to friends and family, writing personal stories, and reading books that highlighted relationships (i.e., *There’s a Boy in the Girls’ Bathroom*), Mitchell flourished.

Social comparisons at school. Mitchell’s socioemotional strengths were often portrayed in his ability to empathize with his peers. Throughout our four months together, Mitchell expressed concerns about the social comparisons made in his literacy experiences. He expressed concern for himself but also for his peers. For example, Mitchell reported “feeling bad” in years past when he “never got the prizes” offered by Accelerated Reader. However, he also reported that he “felt bad for his friends” from other classes who weren’t good readers because they never got their points and they “hated Accelerated Reader.” Mitchell relayed a history of concerns over Accelerated Reader. He was happy to finally have a teacher who treated students “fair” when it came to Accelerated Reader points. In an informal audiotaped interview he explained that he was really happy that his teacher set goals that everyone could reach:

Mitchell: Other classes have to do more. I think they have to read a bunch of books for points to get...like cameras and other big prizes like

that...and some kids can't read that many and they don't get prizes.

Cheri: Does everybody get the points they need in your class?

Mitchell: Yeah, last time we all got the points we need...we all got [an ice cream] bar!

Mitchell also reported some embarrassment about the color codes that were used on Accelerated Reader books to mark their level. He said his friends always knew when he got a third-grade book, and that sometimes he checked out "books that are really too hard" because his friends were reading them. Unfortunately, other social comparisons plagued Mitchell's reading history as well. When I asked him to tell me more about reading third-grade books, Mitchell immediately reported frustration over always being in the "low reading group." He seemed to be angry about this issue when he talked about it. When I asked Mitchell to explain how these reading groups made him feel, he replied, "I just...I really don't know what to say...it just made me feel dumb."

Although there have been studies reporting positive effects (McGinn & Parrish, 2002; Topping & Paul, 1999), Accelerated Reader has also been criticized for its competitive reward system (Biggers, 2001; Stevenson & Camarata, 2000). Extrinsic rewards and incentive programs like those offered by Accelerated Reader have also been criticized for decreasing students' intrinsic motivation to read (Carter, 1996; Gambrell, 1996; Pavonetti, Brimmer, & Cipielewski, 2003). Likewise, ability grouping has received a wide range of criticisms, from lack of effectiveness to negative emotional effects on students (Allington, 1983; Slavin, 1986). Although teachers and researchers in the early 1990s (Allington, 1992; Berghoff & Egawa, 1991; Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992) suggested an alternative to ability grouping with the use of flexible groupings, teachers and researchers continue to debate the issue (Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Stluka, 1994; Wilkinson & Townsend, 2000; Worthy & Hoffman, 1996).

Socioemotional relationships. One-on-one tutoring gave Mitchell and me the time to develop a positive and supportive socioemotional relationship. This was essential to Mitchell's success in tutoring. We began each tutoring session by catching up on our daily lives and recording our personal thoughts in our notebooks. He shared stories about fishing trips and soccer matches. I shared stories about hiking trips and books I was reading.

Mitchell had positive and supportive socioemotional relationships with his friends, his family, his coach, and his tutor. Mitchell described talking with these people in a relational and personal way. For instance, Mitchell said his coach was "like a friend 'cause he's nice and jokes around with me and my friends...and talks with me and my friends." He likewise described his mother as his friend. Joan and Mitchell continuously expressed pride in each other's accomplishments. It is interesting that enjoyment, fun, laughter, and pride were expressed about these relationships. Scheff (1997), explaining the importance of our socioemotional relationships from a social constructionist perspective, relayed that feelings of enjoyment and pride in relationships evidence solidarity and interdependence.

Scheff (1997) described a type of "We-ness" associated with relationships of interdependence. Unfortunately, the relationships that could not be defined by this "We-ness" were Mitchell's relationships with most teachers. The talk that Mitchell associated with many teachers was directive in nature but not relational. When I asked Mitchell to explain the difference between his coach and his teachers, he poignantly replied, "The teachers that like you as a person...they also think you are smart. They talk and laugh and talk to you in the hallways and stuff. Then there are ones who don't really talk to you at all. You don't know what they think of you." Mitchell's interpretation of his interactions with most teachers involved anger, fear, and indifference. Mitchell shared with me that he was often afraid to ask his teachers for help because "they'll get mad like you

didn't listen or something." Joan concurred that relationships with teachers had been "a constant battle."

As I tried to make sense of Mitchell's thoughts about certain relationships with adults, I began an open-ended interview to make sure I was getting the message straight. Even after four months of developing camaraderie, I was jarred by his candor.

Cheri: Mitchell, I wanted to ask you some questions today because I want to see if I'm getting the message straight here, OK? [Mitchell nods.] You've told me a lot about your coach and your teachers. How is your coach like your teachers? Or how is he different from your teachers?

Mitchell: [He pauses and seems to be thinking about it.] I have seven teachers, right? Only one, my third-period teacher, he's the only one that I can remember ever joking around with me and my friends and stuff. That teacher is like my coach—then all the other teachers, they just don't like teaching so they don't kid around and stuff...that's different from my coach.

Cheri: So, are you saying that your coach likes coaching soccer, but most of your teachers don't like teaching?

Mitchell: Well, they are always in a bad mood...getting mad...and yelling at kids...like they don't like being around you.

Cheri: So, your third-period teacher is like your coach? [Mitchell nods.] How else are they alike?

Mitchell: They joke around and talk...and they try to make it fun.

Cheri: Are they trying to be friends with you?

Mitchell: Yeah and like, the sixth-period teacher, she definitely doesn't want to be friends. She doesn't care if all the kids hate her!

Cheri: Well, does your coach like what he is coaching? I mean, does he like soccer? [Mitchell nods.] But what about your teachers...do they—

Mitchell: [Mitchell interrupts with an answer before I finish the question.] They don't like what they teach and they don't like teaching.

Social constructionism and literacy identity.

Mitchell's anger and fear evidenced his alienation from school literacy contexts. Similar to McCarthy's (2001) findings, Mitchell did not identify with school or with teachers and had not experienced success in school literacy contexts or in relationships with teachers. Although Mitchell did not see himself as a successful reader or writer, he saw himself as a successful soccer player. McCarthy (2001) concluded "teachers need to provide students with opportunities to connect their literate selves with other aspects of their identity" (p. 145). When Mitchell's interests (i.e., soccer, socioemotional relationships, humor) were incorporated into our reading and writing activities, Mitchell began to redefine himself as a reader and writer.

McCarthy and Moje (2002) further highlighted how contexts can influence our identities, including the way we are positioned by people and practices. The social comparisons made in school literacy contexts made Mitchell feel dumb. He expressed anger, embarrassment, and frustration associated with reading groups and Accelerated Reader. Because there were no social comparisons in our one-on-one tutoring context, Mitchell was able to focus on his own successes and recognize his own improvements. Likewise, a one-on-one context gave us the opportunity to develop a positive and supportive socioemotional relationship.

Because Mitchell made meaning through relationships, he perceived the amount of and nature of verbal interaction between himself and teachers to be a key factor in his understanding of who he was as a learner. It is possible that teachers differentiated their feedback to Mitchell because he has had difficulty in school. There is research supporting the fact that teachers respond differently to those who are struggling, including more directives and less relational feedback (Allington, 1983). Phelps and Weaver's (1999) research, exploring the public and personal voices of adolescents in literacy classrooms, revealed that relationships with teachers have a major influence on students' willingness to participate in

classroom dialogue. These researchers discovered that students did not speak up when they feared ridicule from the teacher. Qualitative accounts of successful literacy instruction include descriptions of teachers who take time to build personal relationships with individual students (Dillon, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oldfather, 1994).

Create a context for success

This study offers insight into the context-specific and relationship-specific emotions of a literacy learner. A student's feelings of enjoyment tell us that he interprets his experience as personally beneficial. Feelings of pride tell us that he sees himself as accountable for his successes. Feelings of anger and frustration signal that he sees that someone else is responsible for his lack of success. If a reader is feeling a struggle then he or she interprets the situation as not beneficial, and the reader interprets that someone else is accountable for the experience. Likewise, this study identifies the specific aspects of tutoring that contributed to Mitchell's feelings of enjoyment and pride, such as having opportunities to make choices, participating in activities that were personally relevant, working within his instructional level, and focusing on his successes. As a tutor, I was able to create a context in which Mitchell did not experience feelings of struggle.

Also, this look at one middle school reader's emotions helps us to understand how feelings related to struggle, such as anger, frustration, and fear, can be socially constructed in particular contexts and in particular relationships. It is unfortunate that Mitchell experienced a literacy struggle at school and with teachers. The social comparisons made through reading groups and Accelerated Reader made Mitchell feel dumb. Lack of personal relevance in reading and writing activities made Mitchell feel unmotivated. Relationships with teachers made Mitchell feel fearful, angry, and alienated.

This study questions the notion of struggle and our practice of labeling students as struggling

readers. If we consider that Mitchell was a successful literacy learner in one context and a struggling reader in another context, then we are challenged to create contexts in which a student experiences success. According to McCarthy and Moje (2002), "When we consider identities to be social constructions, and thus always open for change and conflict depending on the social interaction we find ourselves in, we open possibilities for rethinking the labels we so easily use to identify students" (p. 230).

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