Article Review for

Katia Ciampa’s Electronic Storybooks: A Constructivist Approach to Improving Reading Motivation in Grade 1 Students

**Summary**

Ciampa (2012) makes an intriguing connection between the needs of 21st century learners and the cognitive constructivist theories of Bruner (1960), Dewey (1916) and Piaget (1973) by conducting a qualitative study of primary grade students and their interaction with electronic text, in the form of eBooks. Noted as a remedy for potential reading difficulties with older students, she determines that children should be able to choose self-guided and authentic learning experiences rather than teacher-directed, decontextualized activities. eBooks provide motivation by including multimedia extensions of literacy and more interactive choices for children to engage with the story and improve reading habits.

**Theoretical Framework**

The motivational theory suggested by Deci and Ryan (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Wigfield and Guthrie (1997; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) indicate that young and struggling readers need extrinsic motivation, or rewards, in order to meet higher-level reading requirements. The selected eBook series, by Childtopia SL, provides encouragement for correct answers as well as opportunities to correct wrong answers based on its reading material. In addition to the eBook reading time, which occurred for short periods during the participants’ recess and lunch time, the students could connect to the Childtopia website at home and in the classroom during centres time. While the choice of selecting what to read seems to be a student-centered example of active participation, the activities following the reading are the digital equivalent of multiple choice questions, making them a “skill-and-drill” technique closely associated with the reinforcement theories of Skinner (1969) and Thorndike (1932). It is curious that these structuralist behavioural theories, mentioned in the Summary of Findings, get equated with cognitive constructivism, when many of the above cited theorists reject the belief in filling children’s “empty” heads with knowledge. A more authentic experiment might have involved a wider range of digital text, even more multimodal readers similar to Childtopia’s format. When Ciampa returns to constructivism in the Discussion and Implication section, the context has morphed into a sociocultural one despite evidence in earlier parts of her research pointing to a more cognitive approach. It becomes evident with her methodology that she conducts the study in an isolated location (the school library) away from other peers (other children would be outside playing at recess and lunch periods). It would have perhaps been more of a sociocultural case study if observations remained in the classroom during reading time.

**Conclusion: The New Literacy of the Digital Age?**

It may have just been a coincidence that Ciampa gave the section title “New Literacy” to her case study findings, since she does not cite either New Literacy Studies theories like those of Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street, nor the new literacies theories of the New London Group. There is an assumption made that the add-on features of eBooks, such as games and quizzes, will increase the self-efficacy in early reading development, and a triangulation of parent and teacher assessments with the students’ own self-assessment (all via questionnaires) supplement Ciampa’s observation supports this claim. She selects students from a similar demographic background for the case study as they represent a range of reading abilities. The results indicate that three of the eight students who found reading challenging or unappealing now find eBook reading activities engaging. She recommends the eBook reading program, despite a few technical glitches that hindered children’s learning, as both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivator to read digitized texts, according to Deci & Ryan’s (1985) motivation theory. A more truer test of the eBook’s effectiveness in improving reading habits would be to monitor not only the emerging but also motivated readers and how they respond to more traditional reading activities. Restructuring this article to include more recent theories of literacy, digital technology and sociocultural constructivism would guide teachers towards better reading options rather than promote sales of Childtopia’s eBooks.

Reference

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