

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study documents the observed and reported experiences of twenty-two sixth grade students and their teacher as they apply flow theory within a language arts inclusion classroom in a suburban middle school. This study defines flow theory according to the research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who found that optimal experiences in life are characterized by one or more of the following factors: (1) skills balanced with challenges, (2) complete engagement, (3) goals are clear, (4) feedback is immediate, (5) sense of control, (6) loss of concern for self, (7) sense that time flies, (8) desire to repeat the activity. Csikszentmihalyi used the term “flow” to represent the positive feeling associated with engagement in an activity leading to the intrinsic desire to pursue that activity. The author questions how current reform efforts pressuring schools to implement traditional teaching and testing methods impact the quality of classroom experience. The study explores how the teacher monitored and evaluated the learning environment to create flow experiences for students to help them explore the intrinsic rewards associated with learning. The study engages students as co-researchers to define flow, analyze experiences for flow, and contribute to the implementation of enjoyable learning activities. The study suggests that the teacher influences flow in the classroom by providing rules and structure, understanding student interest, monitoring need, listening to student

voices, and designing learning activities with flow factors in mind. The study also suggests a presence of two types of curriculum; a “flow based” curriculum, controlled by the teacher and a “non-flow based” curriculum, dependent upon traditional textbook, skills based methods. The co-investigation suggests additional flow factors such as real life connections, novelty, social opportunities, and student voice, to increase the quality of experience for students. The author questions mandated curriculum and calls for a review of the quality of school experience in relation to flow and empowerment of educators to seek alternative ways to meet curricular standards by viewing classroom experience according to flow theory to promote the joy associated with learning.