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Title: Developing symbolic interpretation through literary argumentation

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Abstract

Literature can be a powerful resource for adolescents' psychosocial development as it provides opportunities to experience the world through the perspectives of others and juxtapose these with one's own experiences. However, access to these perspectives requires going beyond literal words on the page to explore interpretive meanings. This mixed methods case study addresses the need to better understand how adolescent students learn to interpret literary works. Specifically, ninth grade students participated in a five-week instructional module focused on symbolic interpretation and coming of age themes in texts with a variety of sources of complexity. The primary data sources were an intentional sample of classroom discussions and essays written pre- and post-instruction. Analyses indicate that students learned to make interpretive claims around symbolism. Textual evidence to support these claims was evident in whole class discussions but less so in the written essays. Students also struggled to reason about why evidence supported particular claims and how the interpretive claims were related to understanding the characters and their worlds. Discussion focuses on the value of symbolic interpretation as a starting point for engaging adolescents in interpretive practices but that developing facility with literary interpretation takes concerted effort over longer periods of time.

Implications

This case study illustrates that literary interpretation is a complex problem-solving task (Lee, et al., in press). Similar to other examples of complex problem solving, learning what to attend to and how to reason about it takes time, models and/or examples of the process, extended and supported opportunities to practice with feedback, and variability in the conditions of learning to strengthen robustness and transfer. The current work also demonstrates the need for shifts in classroom norms, expectations, and participation in discourse on the part of students as well as teachers.

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