In the final written post for our Summer Blogstitute, Peter Johnston (Choice Words, Opening Minds) shares the results of a study he conducted and asks us to ponder important questions about the amount of instruction students receive, the level of engagement with the text they read and with each other, and what this all means for teachers, students, and schools in the era of Common Core Standards.

**Powerful instruction — powerful engagement**

What would happen if, rather than focusing on teaching reading strategies, we focused instead on getting students engaged? I can tell you what happened in four eighth-grade classrooms. At the beginning of the year, the teachers simply introduced their students to a range of edgy young adult fiction and told them to read what they liked, no strings attached—no book reports, comprehension questions, or other controlling strategies, and less teaching in front of the class—but there were only one to three copies of each book.

What happened? The students read like crazy (averaging forty-two books each in the first year). They pushed themselves to read complex texts. They began talking about their books—with peers (including those they would not previously have imagined talking with), with teachers, with parents and family, at home, in school, and in class. They sat up in bed and texted each other about books. Talking about books at lunch became normal, not nerdy.

All these conversations about personally and morally complex issues changed relationships—among students and with family members. Trust increased. Behavior problems decreased. According to students, parents, and teachers, students became more open, less judgmental, more responsible, more empathic, more mature, more thoughtful about and in control of their own futures, and happier—yes, happier! I know that being happier isn’t part of the Common Core Standards, but shouldn’t it be? The teachers were happier too, and, isn’t that important, given that a recent MetLife Survey showed that in the past two years the percentage of teachers who report being very satisfied with their work dropped from 59 to 44, and those thinking of leaving the profession rose from 17 percent to 29 percent? Oh, and—I almost forgot to mention—the students’ test scores also increased, and more of them passed the state test. But really, that’s just gravy, unless you consider the happiness of the administrators and the school board members (we didn’t think to gather those data, though).

This is a summary of a well-documented study that my colleague Gay Ivey and I recently completed. It is only one study, but it involves a lot of students, it has been replicated, and it is consistent with a bunch of other research, so I think it raises a lot of questions. For example, what does it mean that students learned more with about half as much in-front-of-the-class teaching (which students could ignore if they were engaged in a book)? How should we weigh these changes in student development relative to achievement on state tests? How should we think about the absence of these achievements from the Common Core Standards? What does it mean when apparently reducing instruction but focusing on engagement actually increases the breadth and depth of achievement? What does it mean that, with only one to three copies of any particular book in a classroom, students manage to share common reading experiences and, over time, common books? What does it mean that students were reading mostly narrative fiction yet were more successful on the state test, which is largely about nonfiction? What does it mean that, because there are only two or three copies of a book, students keep track of exactly who has read each book so that they can talk about it with them—even if they don’t really know them yet—and thus get to know each other in deeper and more
personal ways, expanding their circle of friends? What does it mean that these are aspects of mental health, protective factors against high-risk drug, alcohol, and sexual behaviors, and depression? A recent study by Geoff Kaufman and Lisa Libby showed that, when people are fully engaged in a book, they lose their sense of self and take up residence in the characters. When that happens, they become changed in some of the ways our eighth graders were changed. But they have to be fully engaged—essentially “lost in the book”—which requires that the book be personally relevant and probably means that reading for twenty minutes won’t do it. What does this mean in the context of efforts in the name of the Common Core Standards to displace the amount of narrative text students read with nonfiction?

In the context of these studies and current increases in teacher-student ratios, we might also ponder the question, When does less instruction from a teacher actually improve learning—or, what makes instruction powerful besides the sheer volume of it? How important is collaboration among (and, hence, purposeful assistance from) peers? Does the relationship between student and teacher make a difference—particularly who is in control of the learning? Might what students are doing when teachers are not teaching them matter more than what they are doing when than when they are with the teachers?

Ponder these questions in the course of your summer reading. I will be.