# Increasing Student Engagement and Success In Reading: a Reading Workshop Unit For Grade 7 ELA

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INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS IN READING:

A READING WORKSHOP UNIT FOR GRADE 7 ELA

by

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DEDICATION


To my friend and mentor, Jon Warnert. My dream of becoming an English teacher began

in classroom E150. Teaching alongside you, years later, even through something as crazy

as a worldwide pandemic, has been an incredible experience. Through hours of planning,

teaching, and grading, here you are, still helping me and still teaching me. I will always

be grateful for the inspiration you first provided and the kind encouragement you gave

me throughout my difficult journey to this capstone completion. You should know that I

never could have achieved this dream without your genuine support and honest guidance.

Thank you for teaching. Thank you for everything.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER ONE**

**Introduction**

**Overview**

This chapter begins with my experiences as a new teacher and how these experiences have propelled my interest in pursuing this project as I continually reflect on and adapt my practice. My capstone project will include designing a reading unit that will focus on creating both an increased level of student engagement in the reading and discussion of texts as well as increased student success on summative assessments through the use of student choice of texts and a reading workshop model. Increasing student engagement has become more crucial than ever in the current world of hybrid and online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Middle school students, who struggle with organization and responsibility in a normal classroom model, are now facing exponentially more difficult circumstances as they navigate learning in a much more digital and individual way than ever before.

As both a student and a teacher, I have observed that a strong connection to the reading material, in some way or another, is key to building student buy-in and engagement in thinking deeply, discussing, and writing in ways that allow students to make meaning and learn from texts. My personal background and experiences as a teacher have inspired me to create this reading workshop unit capstone project and study how it can help to better serve students in middle school English/Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. This chapter draws connections among recent classrooms and teaching

experiences that have influenced and informed my passion for exploring how to build student engagement through the reading workshop model, as I ask this essential question: *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* The conclusion of this chapter explores my experiences in collaborating with colleagues to make this project a reality for my students.

**Early Teaching Background**

***Student Teaching***

In my first authentic teaching experience as a student teacher, I co-taught courses of on-level English 11 and Advanced Placement (AP) Language and Composition to students enrolled in grades 10, 11, and 12. The high school where I completed this student teaching experience was in a second-ring suburb of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) in Minnesota. The school served approximately 1,700 students in grades 9-12 and had a minority enrollment of 41% (consisting mainly of African American and Hispanic students), which was higher than the Minnesota state average of 33% minority enrollment. The state reading/language arts test proficiency scores for the school's population of students was at 64% (meaning 64% of students scored at or above proficient levels), which is higher than the Minnesota state average of 60% (Public School Review website). It is also notable that 40% of the student population received free or reduced lunch.

As a prospective ELA teacher, I was excited to see how this student population experienced both a regular, on-level English course as well as more challenging,

advanced language courses such as AP Language and Composition. I looked forward to teaching new, relatable, current literature to these students. My assumption was that ELA courses had continually adapted to the times and had adopted new literature over the years since my own high school experiences in ELA courses. As I began to assist my mentor teacher in presenting and teaching those same familiar "classic" texts I remembered from my high school curriculum—texts which were mainly written by white male authors in centuries past and collectively known as *the literary canon*—I began to see and hear these students show us that these books were neither accessible nor relevant to them and their experiences. They were living in different times, with different struggles, and saw each of those texts as ancient, irrelevant, uninteresting and unintelligible.

My new students were trying to help feed their siblings, work jobs until midnight, overcome abusive pasts, and contend with other types of trauma. Why should they care about Dickens? Why should they put forth the mental effort to comprehend and analyze works like *The Odyssey*? We struggled through reading and discussing *Twelve Angry Men*, and even that text, with all its connections to racial inequality, implicit bias, societal responsibility and true patriotism, was only vaguely relatable, distant in time, and too different in language for them to build meaningful connections and truly engage. The required novels seemed too far removed from their own lives for them to appreciate the elements of the literature to which they were asked to relate their own experiences.

Not surprisingly, student engagement was very low. Discussion was practically impossible, no matter how the mentor teacher or I posed a question, began a debate, or

organized discussion groups. I began to wonder if it were not the students' lack of drive, but rather a lack of their connection to the texts. One day, while we were attempting to discuss implicit bias as we read selected scenes from *Twelve Angry Men*, students who had hardly spoken over the course of the class began to participate in the large-group discussion, and vehemently! I was shocked. Throughout the day it became clear that this was a topic that meant something and felt "real" to these students. They were more engaged, more thoughtful, and much more willing to discuss and even debate.

### *First Teaching Position*

The following semester, as a newly certified teacher, I became a long-term substitute, teaching at a different second-ring suburban high school in Minnesota. I led several courses of regular, on-level English 9 and two courses of Enriched English 9. This high school had an even larger student population with even higher reading/language arts proficiency scores (72%). However, the student demographics were vastly different:  This high school had a minority enrollment of only 13% (mainly African American and Hispanic students), which was much lower than both the state average minority enrollment of 33% and my previous school's minority enrollment of 41%. Notably, this high school's free or reduced lunch population was only 12% (Public School Review website). Therefore, I anticipated that as a much more privileged population of students, they would be prepared to study more "classic" works as a group. However, I quickly discovered that they, too, struggled with engaging in, comprehending, and defining a purpose for reading texts including *The Odyssey*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Romeo & Juliet*.

The realization finally came to me: This was not simply a question of economical, societal, or cultural privilege equalling ease of success in literary study, but rather of something more. This was more a question of relevance—cultural and societal and linguistic relevance—than anything. How, then, could I as a teacher improve *every* student's interest in and relation to the texts? Both the classic, canonical texts and newer, culturally relevant texts? How could I help these students see their lives and problems reflected in the literature? How could I help them see *why* we write, read, and relate to literature as a human race?

Therefore, between two more traditional units on canonical texts *The Odyssey* and *Of Mice and Men*, I chose to try a short "book club" unit with my ninth grade English students. I went to the English department's book closet and started counting out how many novels were available if I were to place students from each of my classes into groups of five or six and offer them a range of book choices for the next four-week unit. After calculating how many books would be needed and organizing my thoughts, I was able to offer a selection of books for each class and allow students to *choose*, albeit from a selection I provided, which book they wanted to read and discuss with a group of classmates. This opportunity for choice, I hoped, would provide students with a reason to engage in the books and discussion about them with their groups. I also hoped the reading workshop-style book club meetings would allow for more engagement and student voice in the classroom, making me more of a guide or facilitator and less of a lecturer. I found that these hopes were somewhat well-founded. Student discussions seemed more thoughtful and were certainly more student-directed. I felt that, with more planning and

knowledge on my part, and perhaps even more choice and buy-in on the students' part, in the future I could create a truly engaging and student-driven experience with a reading workshop model that would build students' reading, writing, thinking, and speaking skills in a much more meaningful way.

My goal, since then, has become to answer the question:  *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* This capstone project will outline curriculum and suggest texts to assist teachers in middle school classrooms in incorporating more culturally diverse texts within a reading workshop model that supports students in building both a love for reading and the skills needed for improvement in comprehension and analysis of literature.

**Current Teaching Context and Rationale**

Currently, I teach seventh grade English in the same second-ring suburb as my first long-term substitute position, though at a middle school consisting of grades 6, 7 and 8. The student population is roughly the same as the district high school; 10-12% minority enrollment, 12% free or reduced lunch (Public School Review website). The students are much younger than those whom I previously have taught, and I am frequently learning that I need to adjust my teaching approach, attitude, and expectations to match their needs and abilities as seventh graders. The students are joyous, excited, and eager to learn, socialize, and grow. My colleagues and members of the administration are experienced and learned professionals who generously share their wisdom and support. What I am most academically excited about at this school, however, is to incorporate a more  student-centered approach to teaching reading.

The ELA curriculum is new and experimental throughout the district; the seventh-grade ELA teams are piloting Lucy Calkins' Units of Study for Reading. This model of teaching reading and writing consists of a brief 10-15 minute mini-lesson and then transitions into independent reading and writing time for students. During this time, the teacher moves about the room, conferring with students about their reading, writing, and the mini-lesson material for the day. This time may include a mid-workshop teaching point of clarification or extension. The lesson ends with a whole-group discussion or share of what has been learned or explored that day—essentially allowing the students to take the mini-lesson skill and attempt to apply it to their own reading or writing (Cherry-Paul, Cruz, & Ehrenworth, 2020).

What this district-wide piloting of the Calkins' model means for me is an opportunity to study the best way to implement this reading workshop model in my own classroom. Analysis of the reading workshop model allows me to investigate how I will design and implement a unit that is based on Calkins' model, using strategies and plans from her unit workbook *Investigating Characterization: Author-Study Book Clubs* (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Wischow, 2018). This unit design and implementation will be done in an entirely online format, as our district seeks to preserve student and staff safety during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and has moved to distance learning at the time of this newly designed unit's implementation. In designing this online unit, I hope to offer students some choice regarding their texts, increase the level of student engagement with the texts as well as with each other, and create more active and successful readers. Designing and implementing this unit will help me to answer the question: *Can*

*student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?*

If I can apply the principles of Calkins' reading workshop to my own teaching, adapted for online learning, I will be able to better understand the best practices of the workshop model and design an online learning unit that will assist other teachers in applying her well-researched strategies in their own classrooms during this difficult time. This project aims to promote deeper student engagement in reading since I, as a teacher, have so clearly seen the need for it in a wide variety of classrooms and student populations. Choosing texts of high interest has been shown to increase student engagement and comprehension. As an avid reader of many literary classics, I want to ensure that my students eventually can build their comprehension of, appreciation for, and engagement in more canonical texts of high merit, even if of lesser interest to them.

Students now need, more than ever, the ability to comprehend and appreciate complex text as they enter high school and collegiate education. This can only be achieved through a slow-and-steady, high-interest literary climb in middle school that engages them thoroughly and actively in critical thinking and building essential comprehension skills for the future.

**Summary**

This chapter has discussed the experiences I have had as a teacher that have led me to ask an essential question: *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* First as a new student teacher and then as a newly certified teacher in a long-term substitute position, I

discovered that students seemed unable to connect with or actively engage in the texts they are asked to read. I concluded that students require more high-interest, self-selected literature as middle schoolers in order to slowly lead them into the more demanding, complex, and often less engaging texts of high school and college. My unit plan for this capstone project will assist those teaching seventh grade ELA in expanding their approach to teaching reading to include a reading workshop model that truly draws on student strengths and interests in order to build strong reading skills and increase engagement, even in an online learning environment.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

**Introduction**

It seems that contemporary reading instruction has changed little over the last few decades. Throughout the "reading war" between phonics supporters and whole language enthusiasts, there have been many studies and many swings back and forth on the spectrum of reading instruction. However, it was determined by the NEA Task Force on Reading that the most common sense approach to reading instruction would be a balanced one: "It is analogous in several ways to a balanced diet. Completeness in both diet and reading is achieved by providing diverse components in ratios that are not necessarily equal" (NEA Task Force, 2000, pp. 5-6). In coming to this conclusion, the implication is that ELA teachers need to implement not just one practice of teaching reading, but rather a blend of methods that work best for individual students.

Teachers must examine how they are delivering traditional methods of teaching reading and evaluate their effectiveness. The traditional whole-class novel approach appears to be less than effective and even lacking when it comes to student engagement and comprehension in many current classrooms. Therefore, the research question *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* must be explored. This literature review will explore the effectiveness of student-selected texts as well as proven teaching strategies that guide

students toward deeper engagement, improved comprehension, and greater success in reading.

The goal of this chapter is to provide a review of the body of research that connects the themes of student reading engagement and success in reading in order to answer the research question. First, this chapter will examine the reading workshop model and the research that shows the value of its approach alongside that of the more traditional whole-class novel or literature anthology approach. Second, this chapter will consider the opposition to the reading workshop model—or, more specifically, Calkins' Units of Study approach—and conclusions on this front. Third, an examination of the literature supporting the need for student-selected texts for both independent reading as well as for study within the classroom as a means of increasing student engagement. Fourth, a review of the research showing how increasing student engagement will result in greater student success in reading assessment. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a brief overview of the main goals of this capstone project: to increase student engagement in reading in order to promote student success in reading achievement.

**Reading Workshop Overview**

In order to understand the value of the reading workshop model, one must understand its setup and justification. Many scholars and teachers credit Lucy Calkins, Founding Director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University and creator of the Units of Study, with the design of the reading workshop model (Feinberg, 2007, p. 27). Reading workshop is a method of instruction that features a mini-lesson technique to teach reading skills, strategies, and methods of analysis while

also allowing students choice in their individual reading materials based on their interests

and reading levels rather than on the one-size-fits-most approach that occurs in more

traditional instruction using a whole-class novel or literature anthology. While there are

many and varied approaches to teaching a reading workshop model, Calkins' Units of

Study model includes a few key elements. First, students make choices, including which

books they will read and how much they will read each day, as well as which

classmate(s) they will work with in partnership or a small group. Next, students are

guided through a particular reading strategy during the mini-lesson featuring a short

mentor text. Frequent read-aloud sessions of mentor texts are interspersed throughout the

unit, where students learn a particular reading strategy as they actively listen before

practicing the strategy themselves (Cherry-Paul, Cruz, & Ehrenworth, 2020). These

read-aloud sessions of mentor texts anchor the reading workshop model, allowing

students to experience a high-level, shared text, but in a way that allows much more

freedom of choice and interpretation than would a whole-class novel (Cherry-Paul, Cruz,

& Ehrenworth, 2020). Following the read aloud, students discuss both the new reading

strategy and their own independent reading texts. During this time, the teacher is free to

confer with individuals, partnerships, or small groups in order to offer individualized

instruction and support as readers practice their new comprehension strategies (Calkins &

Ehrenworth, 2017, pp. 49-58).

  The workshop approach allows students to more actively practice and apply

reading strategies directly to texts of high interest to themselves (Calkins & Ehrenworth,

2017, p. 7). It accomplishes this through guiding students in choosing books that both

interest them and reflect their current reading level. Most important is the idea that this model of reading instruction allows students to choose texts that are both reading-level appropriate and of high interest. Choosing a text that is neither significantly above nor below their ability allows students to pursue reading at their current zone of proximal development and push themselves as quickly or slowly as needed with teacher and peer support (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, each student is able to choose an independent reading book that can be the basis for his/her reading work throughout the unit. This matters because it allows student choice and is highly motivating, but also because it affords differentiation options for each unique student. As Calkins explains, "When you are choosing three to five books [in a whole-class novel approach] for a hundred kids, it would be impossible to choose novels that were fascinating and relevant to each and every reader" (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2017, p. 3). If teachers use only those three to five novels a year, the ability to reach students where they are and build their intrinsic motivation to read may become lost. Allowing for student choice, however, even among a few prescribed books rather than a specific assigned reading, creates strengthened student ownership of the literature (Reynolds & Symons, 2001). The more control students feel they have over text selection, the more likely they are to actively engage in the texts they choose. Guthrie observed that with high-interest choices regarding texts, "students subsequently experience an increase in reading comprehension and increased self regulation" (McRae & Guthrie, 2009, para. 37). Employing the workshop model allows teachers to support and include student choice in text selection, the benefits of which will be expanded upon later in this chapter.

Furthermore, the reading workshop model uses a unique instructional approach to daily lessons. Instead of the teacher being the giver of all information and informing students of the themes, meanings, and problems within the text, students learn a particular strategy or reading skill from the teacher in brief, daily mini-lessons instead and are then given time to discuss and apply the strategy or skill to their chosen texts. The frequent read-aloud sessions of the mentor text allow students to experience a shared text and guided reading without requiring the sustained and exhausting effort it might take struggling readers to complete a whole-class novel. Research on reading and comprehension has shown that "listening to an adult model fluent reading increases students' own fluency and comprehension skills" (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 14). Additionally, research has shown that "rather than conducting whole-class reading of a single text that fits few readers, teachers should choose to spend a few minutes a day reading to their students" aloud in order to build a sense of community with a shared text, offer a guided reading of a high-level text, and provide an opportunity to listen to, enjoy, and consider the text within a group (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 14).

Finally, the latter part of the reading workshop lesson provides time for students to engage in thought, discussion, exploration, and further reading. This essential part of the reading workshop model holds benefits for both the students and the teacher. The time that students use to discuss and digest the day's mini-lesson and their texts is the time that the teacher is able to confer with individual students in order to gauge their understanding, instructional needs, and reading growth. In forming student groups, teachers afford students opportunities to deepen their understanding of their own chosen

texts through discussions they have with peers. Even though students may be reading different texts, they will be able to discuss similarities and differences in themes, characters, writing styles, etc. Overall, the methods used in a reading workshop model are widely heralded as more student-centered, differentiated, and effective than the traditional anthology or whole-class, novel-based approaches.

**Opposition to Reading Workshop**

What is most interesting within the body of research surrounding the reading workshop model is how vehemently some denounce its merit. Some research seeks to show how the workshop model emphasizes too much of a "whole language" approach rather than a necessary study of phonics and more direct instruction of decoding skills, especially for those who are struggling readers. However, this argument does not apply in middle school and higher classrooms where students have mastered the fundamentals of reading and are working to develop skills in comprehension and analysis.

If our goal as teachers of ELA is to build skilled readers in the middle grades and beyond, we need to move beyond phonics and word decoding, focusing rather on honing comprehension skills and exploring critical analysis. Growth in reading comprehension and analytical skills must begin with full reader engagement and include high-volume reading. Using the reading workshop model rather than a whole-class novel or textbook approach will guide students to grow as readers on their individual paths while still being guided by the comprehension and analysis skills learned during mini-lessons and 1:1 or small-group conferencing sessions. The reading workshop method allows "an understanding of independent reading as an opportunity to meet the needs of student

participants rather than as a static literacy practice" (Sanden, 2012, p. 229). Students who are more invested in the choices and activities surrounding what they read will be more engaged in learning through their reading and ultimately will be more motivated to push themselves as readers.

**Elements of the Reading Workshop Model**

*Student-Selected Texts*

It is well documented in research that students become more engaged in reading when they are given more opportunity for choice in what they read. However, "typical reading demands in middle schools rarely take into consideration the developmental and personal differences between students" when they assign whole-class readings (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Even students who excel in school as readers often will claim they are not motivated by or excited about the assigned readings at school since, too often, those readings do not match personal interests (Ivey, 1999). In order for students to deeply engage in reading activities and learning, there must be at least some element of interest or personal connection to the student and his/her experience. Texts placed in front of students must be those that are more culturally relevant to those students.

In the whole-class novel approach, students are handed a text and told of its significance or literary value rather than being allowed to make that determination for themselves. This immediately creates resistance to or resentment toward the assigned text, its author, and its premise. Therefore, even before the student has been exposed to the text, he or she feels disconnected from its content and the purpose behind reading it. Immediately the text feels less intriguing and less compelling to the student and is viewed

as dated, dull, difficult, or a combination of these. As noted in her reading unit implementation study where she included current popular culture texts to assist in examining canonical texts, Del Nero found "that participants' lack of connectivity [to the canonical text] influenced their typical academic text engagement" and kept them from being able to comprehend the purpose and value in reading the text (Del Nero, 2019, p. 17). However, using current, popular culture "texts from their world made the unit feel immediately relevant" and the students' connection with and both types of texts increased (Del Nero, 2019, p. 16).

According to Sanden (2012), reading choice is proven by researchers as a way to foster motivation, increase engagement with texts, build support for struggling readers, and improve overall performance on assessments. Without choice and opportunity to connect background knowledge to their text, "the lack of creativity and ability to choose material to read impacts students' growth as independent readers and limits connections they make" to other knowledge as learners (Streefland & Eischens, 2014, p. 1).

**Increasing Student Reading Engagement**

*Motivation*

When seeking to increase student engagement in reading and reading work, research suggests that intrinsic motivation is a key element. Teachers must seek to foster intrinsic motivation in order to increase student engagement in reading, discussion, and writing about reading. Situational interest, such as interest in a specific topic or esoteric detail, in the moment, will not push the student to further develop his or her internal desire to read for the enjoyment of reading (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). For the student,

the type of motivation to read, or not to read, matters. It cannot be external in the form of a reward or an academic grade; it must come from within and be built on a desire to succeed, to enjoy, and to appreciate reading for reading's sake (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). Rather, student motivation to read must be intrinsic in order to improve not just reading engagement, but reading success.

*Interest*

Of enormous importance in building intrinsic motivation in students is the idea of interest: that which a student finds interesting and relatable incites intrinsic motivation. This is clear in the literature. Researchers "refer to interest as intrinsic motivation, meaning something we do for its own sake" (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010, pp. 16-17). As students find their reading interests, they are able to choose genres, authors, and texts that feed into those interests. Eventually, with consistent support from teachers, this reading interest can build into an "enduring motivation" for that student (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010, p. 17) and lead to an intrinsic motivation. Teachers of reading must pursue the goal of continually fostering the growth and development of the intrinsic value in the enjoyment of reading for reading's sake (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). For this reason, teachers must pay attention to—and include—students' interests when planning curriculum. Successful African American author Jason Reynolds, questioned on the topic of student interest in classroom texts, "remembered saying to his teacher, 'None of the books you ask me to read have anything to do with me'" and felt shut out—as though his identity and interests were invisible in the reading classroom (Cherry-Paul, Cruz, & Ehrenworth, 2020, p. 40). Above all, when students can see themselves and their interests

reflected in the texts they are provided, they are more likely to find the intrinsic

motivation to read for reading's sake.

### *Choice*

The importance of considering and synthesizing student interests, then, into a

reading curriculum, leads researchers to the idea of choice: student self-selected texts.

Considering student interests in classroom texts does not necessarily indicate a need for

student choice in text selection, but a strong argument can be made in favor of it.

According to Allington and Gabriel, "Students read more, understand more, and are more

likely to continue reading when they have the opportunity to choose what they read"

(2012, p. 10). Research on student choice of reading materials in correlation with

increasing motivation and improving comprehension decidedly says that students'

personal choice of text is a predominant factor (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). It is even

proven that "the experience of choosing in itself boosts motivation" for some students to

read (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 11). Therefore, if increasing student motivation to

read is the goal, student choice must be a primary objective in curriculum planning.

### *Relevance*

Relevance of a text to a student, both cultural and otherwise, matters. For

example, Cambria and Guthrie state the following:

> Having African American students read biographies of Booker T. Washington
>
> and Harriet Tubman does not automatically generate relevance simply because the
>
> texts are about African Americans. If the students do not feel connected to those

African Americans in the biographies, relevance will not be generated. (2010, p.

23)

If teachers do not make reading culturally and experientially relevant to the student and

"limit the types of books we offer children, the curriculum can be identity-silencing"

(Cherry-Paul, Cruz, & Ehrenworth, 2020, p. 40). Increasing the relevance of course texts

to the real-life experiences of the students by offering choice to students will serve not

only to increase student interest and motivation in reading but has also been shown to

increase student reading success in both comprehension and assessment.

**Increasing Student Reading Success**

Research around increasing student reading success is abundant. Increasing

student motivation and reading engagement through student interests, student choice, and

relevance of the text to the student are directly related to success in reading

comprehension and assessment of reading skills. According to Krashen, research

demonstrates that student choice in self-selecting texts for independent reading seems to

be the most influential factor in improving student reading performance (Krashen, 2011).

Allowing students options in selecting texts will more likely ensure that they will choose

texts written at ideal levels for them (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). Reading self-selected

texts at the right level of difficulty is proven through research to improve student reading

performance (Allington & Gabriel, 2012).

According to Allington & Gabriel, "the last 60 years of research on optimal text

difficulty...consistently demonstrates the importance of having students read texts they

can read accurately and understand" (2012, p. 12). Asking students to struggle with a

whole-class text that is even slightly too far above their optimal level of difficulty will not improve reading ability (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). This is extremely challenging for struggling readers: "Struggling readers typically encounter a steady diet of too-challenging texts throughout the school day as they make their way through classes that present grade-level material hour after hour. In essence, traditional instructional practices widen the gap between readers" (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 12). An overly difficult or overly simple whole-class novel cannot and will not meet the needs of either the advanced or the struggling middle school reader. This research supports bringing the concept of student-selected texts to the front and center of curriculum and lesson planning for ELA teachers, in particular.

Research also indicates that increasing reading success for students results from access to texts that students find both "engaging and comprehensible" (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 13). When students read more authentically, that is, reading what is more genuinely relevant and interesting to them, they develop into better readers (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). More authentic, genuine reading also will increase student success in engagement with class and peer discussions about reading. ELA teachers often must use discourse analysis as a means to interpret and gauge student comprehension and analysis of literature. A conversation with peers improves student comprehension of—and engagement with—a text, which in turn improves the student's success with that text as it builds understanding (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). Even among struggling readers, participation in literary conversations with peers about engaging, self-selected texts is shown to improve standardized test scores (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). Students

participate more actively in conversations when the texts they are discussing are of interest to them, thereby increasing their understanding and appreciation of the text; ultimately, this increase in understanding improves student success in assessment.

The act of conversing over a text is not only a method of building comprehension and engagement, it also is a way of boosting student confidence and motivation. As the research clearly shows, this boost of motivation leads to further success in reading, which in turn leads to higher confidence within the readers themselves. Cambria and Guthrie's research shows that "belief in yourself is more closely linked to achievement than any other motivation throughout school" (2010, p. 17). As the research discussed in the previous section proves, building motivation through increasing student reading confidence is a requirement in improving reading engagement.

Therefore, the impact of motivation, interest, choice, and relevance of texts is clear: "Research undergirds the impact of these practices on students becoming avid readers and on students becoming achieving readers" (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010, p. 16). Furthermore, research fully supports the concept that student motivation to read, student interest in the reading material, student choice of self-selected text, and their perceived relevance of that text to themselves, will allow students to become "achieving readers" (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). Increasing student success in reading, discussion about reading, and reading assessment, ultimately relies on increasing student reading engagement through motivation, interest, choice, and relevance of reading material in the classroom.

**Summary**

This chapter has examined what the literature purports on topics surrounding the reading workshop methodology, seeking research around the question: *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* In exploring the research on the best methods for teaching reading, it is clear that the research shows many benefits of using the reading workshop model. However, there also is evidence that a shared common text has its place in the classroom community in collectively helping students to understand and practice the featured reading strategies. The NEA Task Force on reading highly recommends balance over extremism in any method of teaching reading. While research firmly supports many of the elements of the reading workshop, there is still much to be said for a relevant, student-interest-driven shared text in the classroom even if the traditional whole-novel model is not used. This makes it clear that in designing and implementing a reading workshop model, teachers must take into account student interest and experience when selecting mentor texts.

This chapter also has reviewed the literature surrounding the need for student-selected texts for independent reading in the classroom. Students feel engaged and valued when the texts they read are of their choice and reflect their experience and are relevant to them. The literature shows that increasing student engagement in reading is highly reliant upon building student motivation, including student interest, allowing for student choice, and presenting literature of relevance to students. This increase in student engagement can then incite an increase in student reading success. Motivation increases

with the element of choice through consideration of student interests and relevant experiences. Additionally, motivation and interest are built through shared common-text experiences and discussions of the read-aloud mentor texts. Student discussion improves with engagement, and this, in turn, increases comprehension. All of this is shown to lead to increased student success in comprehension and assessment in reading.

In the following chapter, the review of this literature will be used to support the design and implementation of a reading workshop unit based on the Units of Study: Investigating Characterization. Research-based methods of implementing a reading workshop unit of mini lessons, mentor text read alouds, teacher modeling and student practice, followed by work time and conferring, will be used to design this capstone project. An overview of the design and framework of the project will be presented, followed by the project description and details. The setting and audience of the project in question will be explained, and the timeline of the project's design and implementation will be reviewed.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Project Description**

**Introduction**

This project seeks to answer the question *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* It is designed to provide seventh grade ELA teachers with a digital reading workshop unit that will allow students to grow as independent readers and improve their academic engagement in reading, even through distance learning.

This chapter will begin with an outline of how the unit has been developed using the reading workshop method, based on the Investigating Characterization: Author-Study Book Clubs unit, as well as the McTighe & Wiggins' Understanding by Design (UBD) framework for assessment planning and overall unit design. The project overview will describe the goals and learning targets of the unit, which are based in Minnesota state standards. The detailed project description will describe the unit's lessons and daily structure, guiding teachers in how to implement this unit. This chapter then will provide the details of the setting and intended audience for this unit plan. Finally, this chapter will include a timeline that lays out the plan for this unit's implementation in my current ELA classroom as well as in other district grade seven ELA courses.

**Project Framework**

In designing this unit of study, I sought to provide a clear and supportive method of conducting a reading unit that would encourage and build both engagement in, and

appreciation for, independent success in reading in my seventh grade students. While working on this project, the school district where I am employed chose to pilot the *Units of Study for Reading and Writing*, which fit well with my understanding of and desire for student-centered learning in my classroom. After spending considerable time with the unit's guided lessons and curriculum, I sought to design a unit with greater accessibility for my students as newer middle schoolers as well as for myself, as a beginning teacher. Additionally, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a growing demand for high-quality, online curriculum materials. Almost immediately there was a desperate need for a curriculum that could be used in a digital (or mostly digital) format as schools everywhere rushed to transition to hybrid or online teaching. As school districts nationwide have been forced to offer online learning, it is a certainty that the demand for easily adaptable online curriculum options will continue. This unit project will address that need as it relates to the team of teachers with whom I work in my current position.

I chose to design this unit plan with the UBD framework suggested by Wiggins & McTighe (2011). This framework suggests, simply, that teachers work from the larger picture to the smaller details. Identifying the overall unit goal and final assessment, as well as having a clear idea of what students should know and be able to do by the end of the unit, allows teachers to design and plan a unit from that idea and identify the essential concepts and learning targets for daily lessons. Once the learning targets are clear, one can more effectively plan the related activities and essential elements of those daily lesson plans. For this unit, the final summative assessment and overall unit goal will be to have student book clubs create videos, known as "Author Talks" that demonstrate what

students, collectively, have learned about particular authors, their techniques for character development, and how those authors employ those techniques in order to create themes. These video Author Talks will provide evidence of student learning. With this final summative assessment in mind, I created my unit plan, where each section will feature a different element of author technique in characterization. Finally, I am able to use these sections to subdivide the larger goal into daily lesson plans designed to demonstrate for readers how authors create characters and also convey the major themes of their work.

**Project Overview**

The goal of this project is to design and implement a digital reading workshop unit that is based on the *Investigating Characterization - Author-Study Book Clubs* (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Wischow, 2018), which is a new curriculum recently adopted by my current district. The seventh grade ELA team, representing two district middle schools, will need to implement this unit plan while teaching students in an online format as students learn from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, and perhaps beyond, as schools are likely to offer online learning as an option for the foreseeable future.

The overall teaching goal for this project is to show students how authors use varied writing techniques to create their characters, make them lifelike, characterize them—and to use those characters in developing themes within their written works. Students will learn about perspective as well as how and why readers sympathize with characters. Additionally, students will learn how authors employ a variety of literary strategies as they develop characters and themes; among these are symbolism, imagery,

and multiple perspectives. Finally, students will learn the structure of a story's plot and strategies authors often use as they construct connections between the reader and the text.

**Detailed Project Description**

This capstone project consists of building and implementing a digital reading workshop unit that is based on the *Investigating Characterization: Author-Study Book Clubs* unit (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Wischow, 2018) and uses the UBD framework to build the unit outline and assessments (Wiggins & McTighe, 2012). Designed and implemented in a digital format using Google Slides, this project uses the Schoology course platform and a number of other digital tools to meet the needs of a middle school ELA course operating in a hybrid or online only/distance learning environment. Furthermore, the unit will focus on student-selected texts within author-study book clubs, teaching comprehension and analytical skills through short mini-lessons on characterization and author technique, and checking for understanding while guiding learning through student-teacher conferring. Included in the unit are formative assessment checks, a final summative assessment, and suggestions for a number of texts teachers might offer to students for their book-club reading as they study characterization and author techniques throughout the unit.

In this unit, students will study character perspectives, "particularly how readers sympathize with certain characters, what shapes characters' and readers' perspectives, and distinguishing between characters with differing perspectives" (Teachers College Reading and Writing Project Reading Curricular Calendar, 2020). This section of the unit will include five lessons about character perspectives and development and how authors

create these. Next, students will closely study authors' techniques in creating moments of insight into a particular character and how he/she views his/her world. This section of the unit will include another five lessons about author techniques and goals in the development of their characters. Finally, students will build on what they know about author techniques to develop an understanding of how authors craft a character-reader relationship and use this relationship to reflect a theme. This section of the unit will include five lessons that focus on identifying authors' methods for building a relationship between the reader and the characters to show how their experiences and perspectives signal a theme or lesson to the reader. As a final summative assessment of student learning, student author-study book clubs will create final video projects that demonstrate students' knowledge and understanding of authors' techniques for developing characterization.

**Setting**

The unit provided in this project was written for use in a seventh grade English/Language Arts course. Designed at a suburban middle school just outside the Twin Cities, Minnesota, this unit also could be used in an urban or rural school. The school has three grades: sixth, seventh, and eighth. Each grade has two ELA teachers, each on one of two "teams" where students are grouped with the same ELA, social studies, math, and science teachers, respectively. This structure allows all teachers on the team to build and share community with the same 150-160 students. The two grade-level ELA teachers, though on different teams, are curriculum planning and development

partners who design and implement units, lessons, and assessments in their alike courses for their respective team's students.

The middle school itself enrolls approximately 900 students in total. The average class size of an ELA course ranges from 30 to 35 students during a normal school year. This year, however, the average class size is around 20 students due to fluctuations between a hybrid model and a distance learning model. At the time of this project's implementation, this school will be in a distance learning model, and ELA teachers will be using this unit plan in an online teaching format through the use of Zoom meetings, Schoology courses, and various Google applications. Each student is guaranteed access to a school-provided Chromebook, wifi or a hotspot, and is enrolled in school courses through the Schoology and Google Gmail and Drive platforms. The goal is for this reading unit to be of benefit to every student at every reading level and area of interest, truly differentiating to every ability, in a time of structured but highly independent learning online.

**Participants**

This unit has been designed for seventh-grade middle school ELA teachers wishing to alternate or swap the whole-class novel approach for a more student-centered and differentiated model of reading instruction, and particularly those who must teach in an online model. The guiding principle of this unit is that in order for students to improve in reading engagement and successful independent reading, they must be offered the following: choice in high-interest texts; time in which to read, reflect, and discuss; and

practice in applying the comprehension and analysis skills learned in class to their own texts.

My ELA 7 teaching team, consisting of my PLC partner, two ELA 7 colleagues from the other district middle school, and me, will be implementing this unit within the current 2020-2021 school year. For this reason, this unit will be designed in an online format to meet the needs of our seventh grade ELA students as they learn online from home. The students participating in this unit's implementation are seventh graders; 12-13 years old; and the overall school population is 89% White, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 2% Black (Public School Review, 2020). It is noteworthy that "the percentage of students achieving proficiency in reading/language arts is 67% (which is higher than the Minnesota state average of 60%) for the 2017-18 school year" (Public School Review, 2020). These students, in general, tend to have high expectations for themselves, have supportive families, and perform at or near proficient in grade-level reading.

**Timeline**

The planning, design, and implementation of this project have been determined. The planning of this unit developed slowly over the course of the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years during my time at this particular middle school as the district piloted and adopted the Units of Study curriculum for ELA courses. Its design was completed during the fall semester of the 2020-2021 school year as I worked with my ELA 7 colleagues in planning the year's curriculum outline. This unit will be implemented at the end of the first semester and will culminate with a final summative assessment.

**Summary**

This chapter has provided the basic outline for the unit project I have designed for the requirements of this capstone. It presents the framework and justification for such a project by providing the relevant information in its design and implementation process. In providing an overview of the project, I have described the goals and learning objectives of this unit: to teach students to identify character perspectives and author techniques for developing characterization; to analyze why and how authors use these techniques; and to explore how authors use characterization to develop themes and a reader-character relationship that matters. The detailed project description has explored how these goals and objectives will be achieved through the lessons and assessments in the unit. The setting and participants are described to allow the reader an understanding of the method of implementation for this unit. Finally, the timeline shows the development of the unit as it was planned and designed, and how it will be implemented. Chapter four, which follows, will provide a reflection on the project's implementation outcome.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Reflection**

**Introduction**

This capstone project sought to answer the question *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* It is designed to provide seventh grade ELA teachers with a digital reading workshop unit that will allow students to grow as independent readers and improve their academic engagement in reading, even through distance learning.

In designing this unit of study, I sought to provide a clear and supportive method of conducting a reading unit that would encourage and build both engagement in, and appreciation for, independent success in reading in my seventh-grade students. While working on this project, the school district where I am employed chose to pilot the *Units of Study for Reading and Writing*, which fit well with my understanding of and desire for student-centered learning in my classroom. After spending considerable time with the unit's guided lessons and curriculum, I sought to design a unit with greater accessibility for my students as newer middle schoolers as well as for myself, as a beginning teacher. Additionally, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a growing demand for  high-quality, online curriculum materials. Almost immediately there was a desperate need for a curriculum that could be used in a digital (or mostly digital) format as schools everywhere rushed to transition to hybrid or online teaching. As school districts nationwide have been forced to offer online learning, it is a certainty that the demand for

easily adaptable online curriculum options will continue. This unit project will address

that need as it relates to the team of teachers with whom I work in my current position.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the major learnings I discovered

throughout the process of completing this capstone project and revisit my review of

related research literature, making clear its influence on my project, as well as defining

my new understanding of it in relation to my project. This chapter also will present

possible implications of my project as well as its limitations, my recommendations for

future research, methods for sharing this project; and some of the benefits this project

offers the profession. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary and a final

reflection on my capstone project.

**Major Learnings**

When I consider how much I have learned throughout the process of completing

not just this capstone project but also my graduate school journey, I am surprised to learn

how much my pedagogical perspectives have changed. My past convictions regarding

how to increase student engagement, how to help students achieve reading success, and

even how to teach reading have all been upended over several years of both teaching and

researching. I have new perspectives on each of these topics now that I have completed a

research review, gained experience in teaching, and built a project that explores these

concepts. My understanding of how to build student engagement in reading has been

enhanced through synthesizing theories and strategies supported by research. My

knowledge of how to help students find success in reading achievement has been

expanded through combining research-supported strategies with practical implementation in the classroom—both online and in-person.

When I sought research to answer the question *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?*, I hoped to find a method for teaching reading in a way that would make reading not only more engaging, but more rewarding, more beneficial, and more relevant to students. My purpose was to build a curriculum unit that could be used to achieve these goals. Creating and implementing my project allowed me to combine knowledge gained through my teaching experiences with my current research findings, as well as developing an understanding of my district's English/Language Arts (ELA) curriculum—both its benefits and its limitations. I even discovered some unexpected learnings, especially regarding how to structure a reading workshop, as I worked to complete this project in the demanding new landscape of education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding increasing student engagement in reading, I have learned that—as I suspected even from my first student teaching experience, where students seemed so disconnected from the assigned canonical texts—research shows that students need to feel a connection to a text in order to better engage with it. Motivation to read is built through interest and relevance, and these can be achieved by allowing student choice of text. All of this compelled me to rethink my accepted use of the traditional method of teaching reading through a whole-class novel approach. Additionally, I began to explore not only what new research offered on this topic but also which teaching model, such as

the reading workshop, might best align with the goal of increasing reading engagement while supporting the needs of diverse learners.

Furthermore, I learned much about the connection between reading engagement and achievement, or success, in reading. Through my capstone project research and design work, I was able to see potential connections between reading engagement and reading success: The more connected and engaged students are with a text, the more likely they are to feel successful, confident, and motivated to achieve. Building a unit around this idea of student choice and engagement-based teaching strategies allowed me to implement a reading workshop method for teaching reading that was designed to increase student reading achievement.

Overall, unexpected discoveries and learnings were rampant. I discovered that it is no easy task to plan and design a reading unit for delivery in an online format. I learned that it is much easier to plan a unit based around a single novel or text for the class as a whole rather than plan a unit that teaches reading strategies students can independently apply to a text of their choice. I learned, too, that perhaps there is something to be said for the traditional whole-class text method—it certainly would have been conducive in fostering a community experience and connection that seemed to be missing in some of the lessons I found myself writing. Additionally, it certainly would have been easier to implement in an online format. It may even have been useful to experiment with teaching a whole-class text that was relevant and more accessible to students than a canonical text. The most influential and unexpected learning that occurred as I created this project involved teaching in a variety of educational formats, including in-person, hybrid, and

distance-learning models. Each required unique and often unprecedented approaches to teaching and learning.

**Revisiting My Review of the Literature**

*Most Influential/Helpful Literature*

In revisiting what research literature was most helpful and most influential in guiding my capstone project development, I reviewed the stacks of printed and highlighted articles I had collected. I reflected on the impact that my access to printed materials had on my effort and ability to complete the research needed for my work on the project. I concluded that some things simply cannot be experienced in the same way in a digital platform. Indeed, a major component of the Calkins Units of Study model, on which my project is based, involves getting a variety of physical books into students' hands: "students need access to lots of books that they can read with high levels of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension" (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2017, p. 21). This would be an impossibility, most likely, for my digital project. However, it would potentially be possible to offer students a variety of digital texts and that would have to do, for now.

Discovering this component of the reading workshop model as I first read through Calkins' books immediately led me to question the validity of the claim that students need a diverse, relevant, and choice-driven curriculum for reading. I wondered if choice and interest were in fact so crucial to student engagement as it was suggested. In studying the research, I found much to support this claim and the theory behind it. Most notably, an article written by Allington and Gabriel, titled "Every Child, Every Day," discussed the elements of effective reading instruction that supported the basis of the reading

workshop model of teaching. This article clearly states that "the two most powerful instructional design factors for improving reading motivation and comprehension were (1) student access to many books and (2) personal choice of what to read" (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 10). This article in particular was most helpful in supporting the methodology I used in creating and implementing my unit for this project. Its data and results proved that it was necessary—indeed, critical—for students to have access to a wide variety of high-interest, relevant texts from which to choose if I wanted to increase their level of reading engagement.

However, the most influential research literature in directing my goals for this online-teaching unit, were both the guiding overview of the original unit in the Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Wischow book *Investigating Characterization: Author-Study Book Clubs (2018)* and the research article "Motivating and Engaging Students in Reading" by Cambria and Guthrie (2010). The principles embedded within Calkins' reading workshop model are soundly and thoroughly supported in the Cambria and Guthrie research. For example, as I sought potential ways to increase student engagement in reading, I found myself discovering relevant information in nearly every paragraph of this article. After thorough highlighting, my review of the research presented in the article made clear that there are significant connections between student engagement in reading and student interest, motivation, relevance, and choice of text. These four pillars of engagement are foundational in Calkins' model and methods: "This curriculum invites students to choose books and other texts with guidance" and to "choose books that matter to [them]" in a way that creates relevance to the texts for the students and motivates them to engage in it

deeply (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2017, pp. 1-3). Together, these two resources became critically influential in the design of my project.

### *New Connections to and Understandings of the Literature*

When I pause to consider the influence of the research literature on my project, I have to reflect on the implications of the conditions under which this project was both created and implemented. While the research and curriculum on which I based my project were completed and designed under normal circumstances, the completion and delivery of my project was done under entirely unprecedented circumstances. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for my district and many others, all teaching and learning moved back and forth among an in-person model, two different hybrid models, and a fully-online, distance-learning model throughout the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. This led to a need for not only flexibility in teaching strategies, but for an entirely new curriculum plan for the ELA teaching team. I quickly realized that it was not feasible to teach reading in the way that our newly-adopted Units of Study curriculum had been designed. This situation called for a complete adaptation of the curriculum into a flexible, online method of delivery and instruction. However, all the research that fed into the planning of my project was based on in-person and live delivery of instruction. I felt that even though the method of delivery and learning would have to change, the theory and strategies supported by the original research would likely hold true in offering a way to build student engagement and success in reading.

Additionally, a new understanding I developed through the research literature was that of having a better appreciation for the benefits of the shared common text in the

reading classroom. While I found a lot of research showing the benefits of the reading workshop model, I cannot deny that in the actual implementation of my project, I rediscovered the not-so-insignificant value of the experience students may have in sharing a common text. Though I did not delve into research supporting this idea of community and a shared text with which to model to students how to apply new reading strategies, it is evident that some value is also placed on this idea even within the reading workshop model, where Calkins features mentor texts throughout her curriculum to achieve the same result. This new understanding of the research literature and a sort of missing element led me to desire to research this more in the future in hopes of bridging the gap between the traditional whole-class approach and the reading workshop approach to teaching reading.

**Implications of this Project**

The main implication of this project is that student reading achievement is improved through increasing student reading engagement. If districts seek to increase students' reading achievement scores, use of a reading workshop-type curriculum is essential. The research behind my project supports the idea that reading achievement is improved, mainly, through increased student engagement in reading. Therefore, it is imperative to focus first on building a curriculum that is driven by student reading engagement. Increasing reading engagement is accomplished through increasing student motivation to read; this, in turn, is accomplished by offering students a choice of texts that are both of interest and relevant to them. If districts endeavor to increase reading achievement scores, the best way to do this is to provide students with a reasonable

amount of choice over highly engaging and relevant texts. This project seeks to provide exactly that.

**Limitations of this Project**

The major limitations of this project are due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects. For example, moving our teaching and learning completely online vastly impacts the ability of teachers to provide students access to materials, including books and short stories used in this unit. All of these materials would need to be acquired or purchased online as digital materials and then provided to students online through the virtual classroom. This also raises a significant question: What amount of screen time can we reasonably ask our students to endure? If all daily learning for each course for middle school students is online, how can we ask them to commit to spending additional time in front of a screen in order to complete required reading assignments?

The COVID-19 pandemic forcing education into an online model resulted in educators becoming limited in their ability to offer ways for students to communicate with one another, whether in partnerships, small groups, or large groups. Anyone who has hosted an online session understands that only one person among those present can be heard at any given time. This is an enormous limitation for a curriculum such as the reading workshop, which depends heavily—indeed, almost entirely—on students working with a chat partner, participating in a small reading and discussion group, and contributing to whole-class discussions around the texts. When teachers and students are not in physical proximity, these tasks become nearly impossible.

The main result of these limitations, in particular the latter, is that students and teachers are less likely to develop positive, open relationships and experience the sense of community that defines the traditional classroom. It is unlikely that students will become well acquainted with one another or their teacher in an online learning format, where Zoom meetings are the main venue of instruction and communication among classroom members is limited. Educators know that building a trusting, supportive, and communicative classroom is essential to student success. Without this, learning and success may be severely impacted. Perhaps we eventually will overcome these obstacles as we endure the current challenges of the pandemic while providing online education.

**Future Research Recommendations**

Based on what I have learned throughout the capstone process, both through studying the literature and by creating and implementing my project, I have several recommendations and ideas for future research. Regarding recommendations, I would suggest early planning and organization of the materials needed for teaching this unit in an online format. Providing students with the necessary reading materials will require pre-ordering of texts and implementing a plan for students' families to obtain these materials from the school before the unit begins. It is possible, as I have done during the first implementation of my unit when the recommended texts were unavailable, to locate and make use of digital resources in order to provide students access to texts while in an online model. However, this again forces students to spend even more time before their screens in order to accomplish their reading goals.

Two areas of future research that would be beneficial to the field of ELA instruction are further study into the quality of student reading engagement as well as the impact of decreased socialization students experience while in the online learning format. Perhaps educators and researchers might measure and study how levels of student reading engagement differ while learning in person versus learning online. When the curriculum relies as heavily on peer-to-peer interaction and discussion as the reading workshop model does, how can it be effectively translated to online learning, and will the results be comparable? My colleagues and I have found, through our experience over months of online teaching, that students are given little time to practice academic socialization and communication skills with their peers when learning online. This simply is a result of the instructional delivery format that must be used in online education. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to have the same kinds of peer interactions in the daily lessons in an online Zoom session that students normally would have in an in-person classroom.

Unfortunately, there are far too many restrictions and limitations within this format. Without academic socialization, I wonder to what extent student engagement is limited. Also, when students have had few opportunities to learn and practice interpersonal skills within an academic setting, it seems probable that those students will be less engaged, less confident in speaking with one another about lesson content, and less equipped to communicate effectively with their peers in general. Therefore, I believe future research into this area would be highly beneficial to the field of ELA instruction, especially as we foresee online learning continuing well into the future. Ultimately,

educators and researchers must ask themselves this essential question: What role does socialization play in student engagement in the online classroom?

**Sharing This Project with Others**

This capstone project has been created in Google Slides as a three-week reading workshop unit meant to be used in a digital classroom. Easily accessible through a shared Google Drive, this unit plan has been added to my district's shared ELA Middle School Curriculum folder. This provides access to this unit to any of the middle school ELA teachers in my district. My seventh grade ELA team plans to use this project for our next online reading unit during the current school year. Seeing this project implemented by my colleagues fills me with pride as we strive to improve our students' online ELA learning experiences.

This project also will be stored in Hamline University's Digital Commons, where many educators will have access to download it. To the extent that it was created in a fairly universal format, this unit could be used as originally designed or adapted for use in hybrid or even in-person learning models. It has, in fact, already piqued the interest of several graduate school colleagues hoping to use this unit plan in their own schools, where many educators are finding it difficult to adapt a similar curriculum in an online environment.

**Benefits to the Field of ELA Education**

The essential benefit of this project to the field of ELA education is one that assists teachers in creating a bridge through the adaptation of an in-person curriculum for use in an online format. When teachers adapt a reading curriculum in order to implement

it in a new way, it forces them to examine how they are teaching reading instruction.

Innovation is the result of such endeavors. If a school district has a goal to increase

student reading achievement, improving reading proficiency and engagement must be

paramount. I have found the methods used in creating this unit result in engaged readers,

and engaged readers become more proficient readers. In pursuing reading advocacy and

efficacy, this project encourages teachers to diversify their texts and offer choices that

will result in increased engagement and success for individual students. Therefore, it is

my conviction that this approach is likely to lead to lifelong reading and learning in our

students, whether through in-person or online instruction.

**Summary**

This chapter has encompassed all the major learnings and results of my capstone

project journey, from research, to development, to implementation. Throughout the

capstone process, I have sought to answer the question *Can student-selected texts and the*

*use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* My

new understanding of research-based strategies for teaching reading has allowed me to

create my capstone project: a reading-engagement focused unit that aims to improve

student success in reading, even during a time of online learning. Research was clear that

increasing student success and achievement in reading is dependent upon first improving

student reading engagement. This chapter also has described the difficulties presented to

this project due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on public education, as well as

the major implications and limitations of this project. Finally, this final chapter has

discussed how this project has been created, shared, and can be implemented in the field of education.

**Conclusion**

My journey to complete this capstone project and earn my master's degree has compelled me to question any and all teaching strategies and methods, and always to pursue those most likely to yield optimal outcomes for students. When I think back to my early teaching experiences as a student teacher and a newly licensed teacher, I recognize that those experiences are what inspired me to consider whether or not traditional reading instruction methods were resulting in student reading engagement and success. I felt that student engagement in reading had to be improved before I could expect an increase in student success in reading. I did not see the results I expected when using a traditional whole-class text teaching model. Therefore, my research and eventual creation of this capstone project focused on how ELA teachers can improve student engagement and reading achievement in using a reading workshop model. I was excited to design and implement a reading workshop unit for use in my seventh grade ELA classroom and to observe any improvement I could mark in my students' growth. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the design, implementation, and limitations of this project, I believe that my goal of developing a reading workshop unit that would increase student reading engagement in a way that would help improve student reading achievement, even in an online classroom, has been accomplished. I could not be more proud of my perseverance throughout this difficult journey. I am hopeful that this project will inspire others to continue to question the status quo of all

that is traditional and to pursue their goals, no matter what difficulties they face in doing

so.

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