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Improving Engagement and Literacy Skills with Choice Literacy Centers

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Improving Engagement and Literacy Skills with Choice Literacy Centers

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Literacy Education.

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“Our job, sometimes, is simply to be the spark, help build confidence, and then get out of the way.”

– *The Innovator’s Mindset* by George Couros

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview of Research Inquiry

My older brother of three years started school, and I was infatuated with the idea. I begged him to tell me what he did all day just so I could create my own pretend school with Kelly dolls, Barbie's youngest sister. We would have spelling tests and read from books, just as my brother told me, and my dolls and I were happy. My brother did not feel this way, but he indulged me with the secret on-goings of school anyway. I was curious, I wanted to learn, and I was engaged.

This is how I want my students to feel: curious and engaged. I want them to question the world around them, to be critical thinkers, and to solve problems. For students to have a spark of curiosity, they need opportunities for choice and time to experiment with their thoughts and ideas with guidance, and without fear of failure. This time must be made a priority within our classrooms, because if we do not give them time to be curious and to explore those curiosities, then we are telling them that it is unimportant to fuel those interests. By utilizing these interests, students are inherently engaged.

Providing these opportunities for students leads to my research question: *How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills in a middle school English Language Arts class?* The purpose of this project is to develop a series of choice literacy centers for students to use weekly to increase their academic engagement and to improve literacy skills in a differentiated manner. Literacy centers are activities that

students are able to complete independently, that reinforce previously taught literacy skills, and to support on-going learning (Swartz et al. 2003). This project is based on Minnesota's English Language Arts standards for seventh-grade students.

This chapter describes my journey to choosing this question as a research project. It explains the professional context of the project and identifies stakeholders. The relevancy of choice literacy centers along with learning objectives for students will support the importance of completing this capstone project that emphasizes and celebrates student autonomy and decision-making for improved engagement and literacy development.

Journey to My Capstone Inquiry

I must recognize the experiences throughout my literacy journey that developed me as a reader, writer, and teacher since they provide the foundation of the educational experiences that I hope to develop and guide my students along their literacy journeys. These personal experiences have led me to my research inquiry.

As a young reader, I developed a sense of wonder and awe of literacy. Some of my earliest memories are of my parents reading bedtime stories to me. Typically I asked my mom to read in her soprano voice, but on the nights she worked, my dad's gravelly voice read a now unknown Winnie the Pooh picture book and sang the Tigger song. Both of my parents modeled literacy throughout my childhood. My dad was an informative reader; he read equipment manuals, new farming research, and followed politics. In my youngest years, he relied on newspapers and magazines, and now he has added online resources to his reading material. On the other hand, my mom modeled recreational

reading; she would relax after her nursing shifts by curling up on the couch with a Christian romance novel, and more than once she hid from us by reading on top of the chest freezer in the basement! Beyond modeling, our summers included weekly trips to the library and Mom teaching us how to request books online. We always chose our own. These early positive memories show the variety of literacy skills and also how my parents modeled their choices along with guiding us to make our own decisions. Students need opportunities to choose their own reading materials for a variety of reasons, and literacy centers create these opportunities.

Literacy also encompasses an expanse of skills beyond reading. Through my middle school years, I fell in love with writing. Mrs. Kent, essentially my junior high teacher, was considered eccentric. She was a nurse turned educator who taught most of our middle school classes, from health to English, since we were a small rural school. Many considered her disorganized because her desk was constantly covered in papers, but now I know that she had a focus on projects and writing with all those classes, and those were our papers. She assigned work that allowed for choice and required creativity. I remember being given lists of vocabulary words and told to write a story or poem. During story units, we would rewrite or add to the endings, and we interviewed fictional characters. A great moment of pride for me was after reading Anne McCaffrey's short story "The Smallest Dragonboy" (1973) and writing an interview of the characters Keevan, now known as K'van, and his dragon. I spent my home computer time creating a newspaper format and filling columns with questions and character responses. The pride came when my teacher, who must not have been as disorganized as we thought since it

was not lost, returned my paper with a note that encouraged me to share my writing with Anne McCaffrey herself. I flourished with the freedom granted by Mrs. Kent. Literacy centers can incorporate writing that allows students the freedom to make decisions and to be creative.

During my college years, I experienced even greater variety. My core English classes required reading British, American, and world classics while my pedagogy classes centered around young adult literature. Academic papers were the focus and I missed the creative writing of my teenage years, so I enrolled in creative writing workshop courses and studied for a publishing certificate. Here my memories are murky as to the most influential of texts and professors because, quite honestly, looking back it feels like a constant onslaught of literature, writing, and presentations, but my worldview grew in a variety of ways, including a visit to a mosque during World Literature and a two-week exploration of Ireland. Literacy opens up and reveals how expansive the world is, through “mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors” (Bishop, 1990, ix-xi). A standard curriculum can limit the amount of literature that students experience, so literacy centers can offer diverse literature that connects to core content.

My favorite memories from the early days of my teaching career were conversations with students about books, not the assigned novels we would read in class, but their books. They would tell me about their favorites. They would tell me what characters made them angry. When I announced that I would be moving to a new part of the state, a student gifted me her favorite series of books. These conversations came about because they were reading their choice books in class every day for a minimum of

10 minutes. When they had the opportunity to choose their own books and I let them know that I wanted to hear about them, they wanted to talk and share their reading experiences. This reminds me of the power of student choice.

My parents modeled a variety of reading purposes and making choices; Mrs. Kent presented an expanse of writing opportunities along with freedom to be creative. My college professors showed me how vast the world of literature truly is, and students discussed with me what they learned through their own reading adventures. These are the opportunities that I want to create for my students through literacy centers: choice of activities and topics, freedom to take chances in their writing

Professional Context

I am in my seventh year of teaching English Language Arts. I have four years of experience with seventh and eighth grade students along with a year with sixth, 11th, and 12th grade. Currently, my position is teaching English with seventh and 11th grade students in a rural school district. These years and the grade-level variety of my students have allowed me opportunities to observe the effects of junior high students' interest, or disinterest, in literacy activities on their attitudes towards language and communication skills at higher levels.

My literacy instruction philosophy revolves around providing students opportunities to be passionate and curious about reading and writing, listening and speaking, and viewing and creating visual representations. My students come to my classroom with a variety of literacy backgrounds; I have students who love to read and have to be asked to put their book away during instructional time, and I have students

who avoid reading and hope that watching the movie is all they need. No matter my students' preconceived notion of literacy, my goal is to provide a positive, respectful, and literacy-rich environment for them to take educational risks that create a “spark” that burns outside of our classroom.

These observations and aspirations have shown me that students require opportunities to be actively engaged in these various and reciprocal literacy skills that maintain their interests and curiosities even as they grow. Many students have increased disengagement with during their junior high years (Gallagher, 2010; Renaissance Learning, 2019), so my focus is on creating opportunities for my seventh grader readers to continue practicing literacy skills from their elementary years in a manner that allows them to be confident and engaged so that they have a more positive perception of literacy and themselves as learners.

Direct stakeholders in this project include teachers like myself who would implement literacy centers into their curriculum. I designed for the centers to be implemented in an English classroom, but they could be appropriately adapted to other content areas. Another group of direct stakeholders is the students themselves. This project has been designed for their engagement and improvement, relying on their interests and literacy needs. Improving student literacy skills also influences indirect stakeholders: members of our society. Our society heavily relies on individuals being able to “read” the world around them, to be decision makers, critical thinkers, and problem solvers to be responsible citizens within our communities. Relevant and intentional

literacy centers will help our students develop these social skills along with their academic literacy.

Relevance of Capstone Project

Providing students with opportunities through literacy centers would expose them to a richer variety of activities. In best practice, communication and literacy skills must be taught utilizing reciprocal relationships between reading and writing, listening and speaking, and viewing and visually representing as recognized in the Emergent Literacy Theory (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). When planning literacy instruction, it is imperative educators do not isolate literacy skills (Tracey & Morrow). Traditionally, literacy education focused on reading and writing; however, Gambrell et al. (2015) reported, “Comprehensive literacy instruction addresses these three reciprocal modes of communication, building both receptive skills (listening, reading, viewing) and expressive skills (speaking, writing, visually representing)” (p. 7). As with oral language development, practicing one of these skills, such as listening, will influence the other literacy skills. These also present multiple opportunities to develop vocabulary and analyze or evaluate communication modes of presentation. By providing literacy activities through centers, students will have increased opportunities to practice multiple modes of communication and prepare to be members of a literate community.

Centers in a literacy-rich environment can be designed to be student-led and determined by their choices, and students should be given choices to become intrinsically engaged, to practice autonomy and decision making. Teachers can develop intrinsic motivation for their students by providing opportunities for choice, such as in centers.

Often traditional classrooms do not provide choice: “In many classrooms that teach ‘strategies,’ however, it is often the teacher who takes on a great deal of authority in terms of making decisions about what strategies will be taught, to whom, with what texts, and when” (Almasi & Hart, 2015, p. 238). This can lead to disengagement for many students and defeats my goal to provide students with a “spark” of curiosity. By providing choice, teachers allow students to practice agency, and Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2015) reported, “When students’ interests direct their goals for learning and problem solving, there is a likelihood of increased motivation, finding relevance and connections to content goals, choosing to read more widely, higher confidence in their abilities” (p.110). The Unfoldment Theory (Tracey & Morrow, 2017), which argues that students will naturally educate themselves as their curiosity evolves, supports this use of student interest.

Using literacy centers as an opportunity for student choice and decision making also allows students to practice self-regulation and autonomy. Choosing their own texts or literacy activities allows students to practice decision making in a safe environment. Guthrie (2015) explained, “A theoretical framework for choice in the classroom is self-determination theory, which argues that students’ development of autonomy, or being in charge of their lives, is central to their academic achievement and emotional adjustment” (p. 71). Opportunities to choose literacy texts and strategies will enhance student motivation and engagement while allowing them to practice informed decision-making. The life skills of self-regulation, autonomy, and decision-making

supported through literacy centers will help prepare students to be active and responsible citizens.

Summary and Overview

This first chapter has presented my research inquiry: *How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills?* The inspiration behind this question is the modeling of literacy that I experienced throughout my life and the opportunities of choice that were granted to me as a reader and writer. I have observed the need for students to have choice in educational settings for them to be engaged; engagement leads to improved literacy skills. Our students will benefit from this inquiry along with the communities that they belong to. General literacy research indicates the benefits of providing students with a variety of literacy activities, opportunities to practice decision-making, student autonomy leads to engagement, and that these social skills will prepare them to be critical thinkers in society.

Chapter Two will review literature that bridges gaps between two areas of study: the traditional use of literacy centers and academic engagement for junior high students. The combined research will further demonstrate the relevancy of creating literacy centers to be implemented in junior high classes. Chapter Three will provide a detailed description of the designed literacy centers and how to implement them into a general education classroom. Chapter Four will present a conclusion of the project encompassing my reflections on the process of preparing choice literacy centers.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Traditional instruction in middle school English Language Arts classrooms is often perceived as a whole-class reading of a novel with comprehension questions, the teacher lecturing on literary elements, and then assigning an essay or project at the end of the novel. Beyond the elementary level, the direct instruction of specific reading skills and strategies may not be evident in this traditional format, even for struggling readers. Gallagher (2010) argued that due to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), “These students have already spent years in schools where teachers and administrators have confused covering massive amounts of material with teaching students how to think and read critically” (p. 36). An instructional emphasis on comprehension rather than critical literacy (questioning, analyzing, and application of the content) also limits students’ opportunities to practice critical thinking and problem solving within a safe academic environment. Common instructional approaches have led students to disconnect from reading, both in and out of the classroom. There is a need to reevaluate literacy instructional practices to address this pervading disinterest in critical literacy and to provide students opportunities to practice a variety of literacy skills.

This chapter begins by examining the need for authentic literacy for students. It then examines traditional literacy centers that are typically utilized for primary reading instruction. The following section identifies and discusses benefits of literacy centers. The final section explores the use of small-group discussion and instruction as well as

literacy centers in middle school language arts classes. The review of this literature provides the framework for the following research question: *How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills in a middle school English Language Arts class?*

Need for Authentic Literacy for Students

Students exhibit a need for authentic literacy opportunities in English Language Arts classrooms to promote engagement and provide relevant dialogue beyond comprehension. Gallagher (2010) reported that students begin to lose interest in reading around the age of 13 and that disinterest typically continues. Implementation of literacy centers provides an opportunity for teachers to incorporate student reading focused on their interests and choices. The first section reviews the need for a variety of literacy activities and sufficient opportunities to practice literacy skills. The following section discusses practices that increase student engagement. The final section examines how literacy centers make it possible to provide for these needs through direct instruction on literacy skills and additional practice with a variety of literature.

Students' Literacy Needs

With students losing interest in reading in junior high, students exhibit a need for authentic literacy opportunities in English Language Arts classrooms to promote engagement and provide relevant dialogue beyond comprehension. Gallagher (2010) also emphasized that many classrooms no longer set aside time for recreational reading. Renaissance Learning (2019) reported a similar claim that even though elementary and middle school students “generally spend 15 to 20 minutes reading each day” (p. 14),

reading in the upper grades sharply declines to 8 minutes per day. Recreational reading has been linked to student success on standardized tests while also promoting lifelong reading habits. Gallagher and Kittle (2018) wrote that to “reconnect kids to reading” requires offering a variety of reading opportunities, including core texts, book clubs, and independent reading (p. 44-45). This indicates that teachers need to provide students time to read for a variety of reasons: recreational, informational, and academically.

Linked to reading disengagement is a need for students to read at or above grade level. According to Renaissance Learning (2019), “Students are reading at levels at the very bottom of the recommended reading ranges for their grades, and at levels that are far below real-world materials such as college texts, workforce documents, and popular books and media” (p.15). When students struggle with reading, they need opportunities to develop their independent reading skills but may require teacher prompts to identify and advance those skills. Guided reading is an authentic literacy instructional strategy that students struggling with reading skills will benefit from (Swartz et al., 2003). These students require authentic reading opportunities with texts that are above their independent reading level to develop their literacy skills.

Students also need opportunities to practice autonomy, develop decision-making skills, and learn to work collaboratively. Wolk (2008) noted that throughout the school day, students hardly get opportunities to take ownership of their own learning. This lack of ownership has a negative impact on engagement and limits critical thinking, and literacy centers may be structured to encourage student choice. Hodges and McTigue (2014) argued that to prepare students for future careers, they must be focused on

collaboration rather than traditional whole-group instruction with independent work and that literacy centers provide collaborative opportunities for student readers. To be successful beyond their academic years, students need to develop their critical thinking and collaborative skills.

Best Practices that Increase Student Engagement

Meeting the needs of students requires the utilization of best practices; these best practices also positively influence student engagement. Gambrell et al. (2015) explained that best practice is a class culture “that nurtures literacy motivation by integrating choice, collaboration, and relevance into literacy tasks” (p. 15). This recommendation includes providing students with additional reading time. Renaissance Learning (2019) explained that reading volume is a necessity alongside high-quality instruction and differentiation. Reading volume is correlated with both vocabulary growth and higher scores in reading (Renaissance Learning). Best practice indicates the importance of providing students with time to read.

Students who are struggling readers need additional support. Goeke and Ritchey (2014) argued that any students at risk of not achieving reading standards, whether they have a learning disability, are English language learners, or are low-achieving, benefit from literacy instruction. In their promotion of literacy instruction through Response to Intervention (RTI), Goeke and Ritchey emphasized that the general classroom curriculum should be research-based with a variety of instructional groups and that students should have other professionals provide supplemental instruction along with other characteristics of RTI. The use of literacy centers may identify students who struggle with reading,

writing, and other literacy skills while also providing additional literacy skill practice.

Swartz et al. (2003) promoted the instructional practice of guided reading. Guided reading is traditionally a small group or individual instructional practice that focuses on developing students' word knowledge, fluency, and comprehension through teacher support (Swartz et al.). This instructional strategy allows teachers to observe student literacy skills and to provide differentiated prompts to encourage student literacy independence.

Instructional strategies that promote student autonomy also improve engagement. As part of their program, Renaissance Learning (2019) emphasized that goal setting is correlated with increased reading time and higher comprehension scores through their reading program (p. 35). Wolk (2008) advocated that teachers should promote ideas initiated by students and collaborate alongside them. This encourages student engagement by providing a purpose for their interests and ideas. Casas (2017) emphasized consistently implementing “genius hour, 20% time, gamification activities, project-based learning, student presentations, personalized learning models, and other student led learning options that require students to demonstrate their learning through presentation, modeling and performance” (p. 116). Utilizing instructional and assessment strategies that promote student interest and decision making also increases engagement.

Another instructional strategy to engage students is collaboration. Frey and Fisher (2010) discussed the unique challenge of engaging adolescents since they increasingly rely on their peers for validation and this can be utilized through group collaboration of meaningful tasks. Meaningful tasks require that students are challenged and have

opportunities to practice autonomy (Frey & Fisher). Collaborative tasks allow students to utilize literacy skills of speaking and listening while preparing them for future academics and careers.

Literacy Centers Provide Best Practices to Meet Individual Needs

Literacy centers provide opportunities to meet individual needs of students. Goeke and Ritchey (2014) argued that utilizing “a variety of instructional grouping options (e.g., whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, and independent centers) are included to provide differentiated opportunities to learn” (p. 192). This is part of research-based and best practices for general education instruction. Implementing literacy centers creates opportunities for students to increase their reading volume and independence. Gambrell et al. (2015) promoted literacy independence by “providing time for self-selected reading and writing” (p. 23). Literacy centers can incorporate independent reading activities while also providing opportunities for teachers to incorporate reading focused on student interests and choices.

Literacy centers can also be designed to promote and provide students with a variety of text structures. Fountas and Pinell (2018) promoted building classroom libraries so that teachers can take a “multitext approach” (p. 14) as this provides student readers with exposure to multiple perspectives and ideas through both fiction and nonfiction texts. There are a variety of strategies for implementing these texts within the classroom: interactive read-aloud, shared reading, guided reading, book clubs, and independent reading (Fountas & Pinell). These are instructional strategies that can be used through literacy centers. Gallagher (2010) also argued that students do not receive

sufficient opportunities for authentic reading opportunities in schools, such as “magazines, newspapers, Web sites, and blogs that provide background knowledge about U.S. society, key political players and issues, and students’ own role as informed participants” (p. 38). Direct instruction on how to access and read and/or view these materials through small groups and making them available to students is possible through literacy centers.

No matter the grade level teachers will have students with diverse literary backgrounds, and Owaki (2005) argued that literacy centers are a way to effectively differentiate instruction for a wide array of students. Burke and Baillie (2011) explained that literacy centers are a model that allows for a variety of reading levels, student interests, and learning preferences while teachers can provide instruction to small groups. The structure of literacy centers requires that students work independently (Swartz et al., 2003), which allows the teacher to provide guided reading instruction to a small group of students.

By utilizing student interests and decision-making and collaboration, teachers can also use alternative forms of assessment. Wolk (2008) recommended limiting quantitative assessments and instead to utilize qualitative assessments, such as portfolios, student presentations, narratives, and self-reflections. These types of assessments require students to demonstrate their learning (Casas, 2017). These projects can also require students to showcase their critical thinking by explaining their decisions. Through independent and collaborative work, literacy centers can be designed as project-based and to utilize qualitative learning assessments.

When designing literacy centers for middle school students, it is imperative that the learning objectives focus on student reading volume, reading and literacy skills, and building student autonomy. This should be accomplished by providing a variety of texts and text structures, allowing student choice, providing differentiated instruction, and alternative assessments that require student interests, decisions, and reflections.

Traditional Literacy Centers

Literacy centers are traditionally considered best practice and commonly used in the primary grades. The first section defines literacy centers and the different models that can be used; Tracey and Morrow (2015) argued that best practices for early literacy students include intentional planning of the physical environment, classroom management, and curriculum integration. The second section discusses strategies for successfully implementing literacy centers at the primary grade levels. Tracey and Morrow explained that emergent literacy is based on the related skills of listening and speaking, reading and writing. This is important to recognize when examining the value of literacy centers. The third section examines which literacy skills are practiced and support independent work for students. The final section presents assessments of literacy centers appropriate for the primary grades.

Defining Literacy Centers and Models

Literacy centers are part of a well-rounded literacy program. Swartz et al. (2003) emphasized that literacy centers provide additional practice of previous learning, as a powerful support tool, that students can complete independently. Repetition of skill practice allows students to internalize those skills and to gain confidence. Owocki (2005)

defined literacy centers as “an area of the classroom in which a set of literacy-related materials is arranged for collaborative exploration” (p. x). This emphasizes the need for an intentional environment that promotes literacy skills and materials and also that most centers organize students into groups. However, not all center models are fixed in location; students may have independent activities at their desks or they may be working in a small collaborative group (Swartz et al.).

In most literacy center models, students are in groups that may or may not rotate together, depending on which model of centers is utilized. There are two ways to group students: mixed ability and leveled ability (Fletcher, 2019). Owocki (2005) emphasized that groups of heterogeneous (mixed ability) will create a learning environment that leads to developing thinking and conflict strategies as students work through a variety of topics and strategies to demonstrate their knowledge. However, leveled ability groups make it easier for the teacher to provide differentiated activities and small group lessons and many of the different stations (Fletcher). Teachers must determine which type of groups will best meet the needs of their students and use that to help determine which model of literacy centers to use.

Centers can be designed in one of three common rotation models: individual pace, group-in-one-center, or group with choice (Owocki, 2005). The individual paced center model allows for students to self-select their activity and to rotate when they choose to complete another activity; in this model, the center choices are typically displayed in the classroom or on a handout (Owocki). This can be adapted to include mandatory centers (Owocki). A more recent model that utilizes individual choice of centers is the Daily 5

and CAFE. In this daily model, teachers teach whole-group lessons, provide instruction to small groups, and confer with individual students when they choose their activity (Boushey & Moser, 2012). This allows for students to have extended reading and writing time, receive focused and differentiated instruction (Boushey & Moser).

The group-in-one-center model requires a heterogeneous group of students at one center; within that center the group may have choices for their activity or they may have one required activity (Owocki, 2005). A similar model of literacy centers promoted by Guastello and Lenz (2005) used the term “kidstations” where the same group of students work in one center but do not rotate until the next day (p. 146).

The group with choice center model has students assigned to a group, but individuals can choose activities from multiple centers, so that the group may split up (Owocki, 2005). Starting in a group provides additional structure for struggling students while also providing additional freedom to those who are more independent.

Teachers must determine which type of grouping is most appropriate, mixed-ability for increased student collaboration and problem solving or level-ability for the ease of differentiation, then a rotation model that is appropriate for the literacy block, and how much choice students can manage. No matter which model is chosen for a classroom, literacy centers should be focused on the activities it provides rather than a space in the classroom (Swartz et al., 2003). It is imperative that teachers implement a model that promotes student independence and providing activities that are skill practice rather than new skills.

Implementing Literacy Centers in Primary Grades

It is imperative, no matter which model of literacy centers are used, that students understand the relevance and importance of the center activities; this will contribute to their accountability and engagement (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). To successfully implement literacy centers in the primary grades, Garcia (2019) argued that a weekly written plan is essential so that the teacher knows what centers are being used while at the small group table and to be more efficient. Successful implementation allows for students to work independently so that the teacher does not have to guide students; these routines must be established before the teacher is available to provide guided reading instruction (Swartz et al., 2003). All of these elements will allow for literacy centers that promote student engagement, independence, and literacy skill improvement.

Tracey and Morrow (2015) reported that the physical environment plays a significant role in best literacy practices in the primary grades: a literacy center should have spaces for both independent and shared reading; there should be books that students can help shelve; there should be a listening station, and there should be “magnetic letters, puzzles, rhyme cards, and letter chunks on small tiles for making words” to help develop print concepts (pp. 95-96). At literacy centers, students must have a routine to get supplies, what their tasks are, when they will switch, and how to clean up; these must be practiced for a few days with teacher observation prior to implementing guided reading (Swartz et al. 2003). Literacy centers should extend to incorporate writing with a space for teacher and writer conferences, writing materials such as paper, writing utensils, and creative supplies (Tracey and Morrow).

Owocki (2005) emphasized that expectations of center routines must be clearly established in the early days before the teacher can be available to work with small groups. One of these routines is how students can prepare their individual schedules (Owocki). In the Daily 5 model, Boushey and Moser (2012) identified these as “must have” behaviors and have displays reminding students of the expectations (p. 174). In those early days, it is important that the teacher rotate and clarify to students the quality of work expected during centers; this should not wait for the end of the period (Owocki). If utilizing a guided center rotation model, using a transition bell and timer can help students rotate through more efficiently (Garcia, 2019).

Students also need to be taught how and when to interrupt the small group instruction, such as low-key signal that allows the teacher to address the students when the small group concludes (Owocki, 2005). Teachers should also model and teach expectations for noise levels; this can also include silent cues for when students need reminders of this expectation (Garcia, 2019). These routines will allow all students to successfully complete their independent activities and allow the teacher to provide differentiated instruction.

Independent Literacy Skills for Primary Literacy Centers

All models of literacy centers require students to practice skills at an independent level. Activities should be “process orientated” rather than product orientated (Swartz et al., 2003, p. 57). This focuses students on building their literacy skills. Owocki (2005) explained that spending the first few weeks of center implementation observing and taking notes about the stations provides valuable feedback to determine which activities

are appropriate for independent work. It also can be appropriate to role-play what students can do when difficulties arise during stations as well as receive feedback from students (Owocki). These observations early on will allow the teacher to appropriately level the centers, solidify expectations, and ensure student success.

Literacy centers focus on a variety of literacy skills: alphabetic principles, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, print concepts, writing, and research (Fletcher, 2019; Swartz et al., 2003). The grade level will determine which activities are best suited for students. Phonemic awareness activities can include sorting picture cards with beginning/middle/ending sounds whereas phonics will incorporate the visual of the letters (Fletcher). Vocabulary activities may be related to identifying sight words or specific skills such as using a dictionary. A fluency activity can be allowing students to reread texts while comprehension has students answer text-based questions (Fletcher). The grammar/writing skills vary from specific grammar skills (parts of speech, sentence structure) or providing writing prompts (Fletcher).

Literacy centers can be used to encourage reading and writing stamina as a skill for students. Boushey and Moser (2012) also provided suggestions on interventions for students who need support with stamina, such as providing additional work time or visual reminders to stay on task. In the Daily 5 model, there are five independent tasks for students: read to self, work on writing, partner reading, word work, and listen to reading (Boushey & Moser). When literacy centers incorporate choice reading, students are able to develop literacy skills to determine when a text is appropriate for them. For example, Boushey and Moser (2014) promoted an acronym I PICK (I choose, purpose, interest,

comprehension, know) to teach students to identify a “good-fit book” (p. 74). In this acronym, students learn that “I” choose a book to preview, then question their purpose: “Why might I want to read it?” (p.74), determine if they are interested, begin reading a section to determine if they comprehend the text, and finally do they recognize most of the words. This can be displayed to help build student literacy independence. By using the another acronym CAFE (comprehension, accuracy, fluency, and expanding vocabulary), Boushey and Moser (2012) promoted that teachers intentionally provide instruction on independent reading practices.

The kidstation model by Guastello and Lenz (2005) recommended four different types of activities with one being completed each day: work recognition and vocabulary with activities related to affixes, compound words, syllabication, synonyms, or analogies; reading for meaning that requires students to draw conclusions and inferences; analyze and evaluate literature with activities that ask students to respond in writing or drawings to explain, persuade, or think creatively about the literature; presentation of what the students have learned to their peers by sharing what they have created at their stations. As students complete work in these centers, teachers should be monitoring for assessment.

Assessing Literacy Centers in Primary Grades

In all literacy center models, teachers should provide frequent assessment and use those assessments to regroup and plan instruction for students based on their greatest literacy needs. Reading assessments should be comprehensive, including teacher observations and formal systematic records, and then used to appropriately group readers throughout the year (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). By having folders for student work,

teachers can easily check student completion and progress (Garcia, 2019). Swartz et al. (2003) recommended formative assessments to guide instruction based on literacy center observations: literacy skills checklists, record of oral reading, observation guides, and guided reading procedures and self-assessment.

Effective assessments use data to determine students' strengths and areas of need. Boushey and Moser (2012) emphasized including students in these observations to celebrate their strengths and to also identify areas of need so that students can participate in the goal-making process. These goals then determine small groups for instruction (Boushey & Moser). Students should be held accountable for their work done during stations; this can be through accountability sheets and also teacher observations that address when work does not meet expectations (Garcia, 2019). This will emphasize the relevance to students and help them focus on their literacy tasks.

In this project, it is necessary to determine how to structure the groups, based on student choice, in mixed-level, or ability level groups along with a routine for when students should rotate. The classroom's physical environment should also contribute to this rotation model. There should also be a plan for implementation to help the teacher with organization and also demonstrate relevance to students; this should lead to established routines. The centers should also focus on a variety of skills that students can practice independently; by offering a variety, students can have differentiated practice and improve their reciprocal literacy skills. Students need to be regularly assessed for their learning needs, especially if related to grouping, and also be held accountable and assessed for their work within their centers. When designing and implementing literacy

centers for middle school students, it is imperative that a similar structure is provided that allows for it to be adapted for student ages and abilities so that students experience the benefits associated with traditional literacy centers.

Benefits of Literacy Centers

Considered a best practice for literacy instruction, literacy centers provide benefits for students beyond providing additional practice to improve literacy skills. It is important to identify these benefits so that the literacy centers are used intentionally and objectives are communicated to stakeholders. The first section examines how literacy centers foster student engagement. The second section reviews the literacy skill benefits. The following section discusses the benefits of literacy centers being used to provide opportunities to use small group instruction to teach or provide interventions of specific reading skills. Frankel (1975) illustrated that “learning centers provide a solution” (p. 243) for teachers to provide guided instruction while other students have reinforcement activities. The final section reviews the benefits of developing independence and student autonomy.

Literacy Centers Fostering Engagement

Student engagement improves student literacy skills. For engaging students, Couros (2015) looked for eight aspects in a classroom: voice, choice, time for reflection, opportunities for innovation, critical thinkers, problem solvers/finders, self-assessment, and connected learning. Teachers can intentionally design literacy centers to provide these opportunities for students. Worth and McCool (1996, as cited in Daniels & Zemelman, 2004) emphasized that classroom strategies that incorporate choice are

motivating for student reading and that they rarely have those opportunities in school. Students can be provided with this time through literacy centers.

Best practices also make connections to learning theories. According to Tracey and Morrow (2017):

The use of literacy centers in the classroom is consistent with Unfoldment Theory because literacy centers are designed to capture and build on children's natural curiosity about their surroundings. The use of literacy centers in the classroom is also consistent with Social Learning Theories, Emergent Literacy Theory, and Motivation Theory. (p. 31)

As noted earlier in this chapter, these theories emphasize building on student knowledge, encouraging student choices, and intentionally designing and implementing literacy centers for student choice.

Guthrie (2015) argued that providing choices is the most recommended strategy to motivate students, and this aligns with self-determination theory (as cited in Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Providing students time with self-selected books allows students to enjoy and be successful with their reading (Boushey & Moser, 2012). A format that could be similar to literacy centers are reading workshops. Daniels and Zemelman (2004) reported that “Workshop signals that reading and studying a subject is important enough to give students class time for it” (p. 226). Providing students with the time to explore their reading and writing interests will increase their engagement which in turn will improve those skills.

Another benefit of literacy centers is that they provide students a variety of instruction. According to Vacca and Vacca (1974), the use of stations at the middle school level allowed students to practice two pedagogical methods of reading instruction: “the Self-Interest, Self-Selection, Self-Pacing approach and the Individually Prescribed Instruction approach” (pp. 18-19). The first method intrinsically motivated students to practice reading skills based on individual experience, interest, and skill level while the second method provides opportunities for students to practice reading skills in a sequential order. To achieve this benefit, each student’s station schedule must be intentionally developed by the instructor (Vacca & Vacca). In their kidstation model, Guastello and Lenz (2005) reported, “Low-achieving students took more pride in the work they produced than previously, while average and high-achieving students were challenged by the kidstation activities” (p. 153). This is supported when the teachers reported “the students’ successful completion rate of kidstation activities at 98%” (Guastello & Lenz, p. 154). By modeling the relevancy and encouraging choice, student engagement will improve student literacy skills.

Literacy Skill Growth

When English Language Arts teachers design literacy centers with a variety of activities, students have opportunities to practice diverse literacy skills. Falk-Ross (2008) emphasized that literacy centers/stations “are used for practicing with reading elements, experimenting with reading strategies, activating independent monitoring and problem solving, providing extended time for reading, initiating reader response through writing, and allowing time for peer conferencing” (p. 237). It is necessary for a comprehensive

literacy program to emphasize a variety of literacy skills so that teachers intentionally develop student schedules to complete stations that fit their academic and literacy needs based on observations and assessments.

By offering a variety of activities, students can focus on their individual learning needs. Daniels and Zemelman (2004) argued that the similar format of reading workshop “is one of the most effective tools for addressing students’ greatly varying needs” (p. 226). This can be accomplished by providing students with a specific schedule to practice their weak skills or teacher guidance while observing students. These activities can provide the differentiation that students need to meet their literacy goals along with opportunities for students to reinforce learning from teacher modeling and whole-group (Hodges & McTigue, 2014).

The additional engaging practice of literacy skills improves student progress. In the kidstation model, assessments such as running records indicated that students increased their reading skills, such as fluency, and comprehension improved according to teacher observation forms (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). Hodges and McTigue (2014) explained that literacy centers at the middle school level could “review a week’s essential instruction” by utilizing ten minute centers (p. 156). While students complete these individual activities, student literacy growth is also supported with small group instruction.

Fountas and Pinnell (2012) emphasized that the goal of small group instruction is to help readers develop reading strategies to strengthen a variety of reading skills, including those that require monitoring their own reading for errors and comprehension

strategies such as summarizing or “adjusting reading for different purposes and genres” (p. 272). These strategies taught in small group settings lead students to further their literacy skills as independent readers.

Opportunities for Small-Group Instruction

Another benefit of literacy centers are the opportunities to use small group instruction to teach or provide interventions of specific reading skills. Frankel (1975) illustrated:

In order for the teacher to change from classroom supervisor to reading instructor, it is necessary to create reinforcement activities to occupy the majority of the class while the teacher devotes her attention to individuals or small groups.

Learning centers provide a solution. (p. 243)

Designing literacy centers with authentic and meaningful activities will allow for students to work independently and utilize their literacy skills.

With students engaged in independent tasks, the teacher is available to provide guided reading instruction to a small group of students (Swartz et al., 2003). Guided reading is a common differentiated instructional practice for struggling students; this practice allows teachers to choose instructional level texts for students that they can proficiently read with guidance (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This allows students to read increasingly difficult texts to improve their reading comprehension, vocabulary, and other literacy skills.

Small group reading instruction allows for teachers to make observations about students' reading habits and skills; reading involves a variety of cognitive activities that

happen very quickly, and teachers need to be able to observe how and when students are struggling to provide meaningful support (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). These observations are difficult to make during whole group instruction, especially when individual students are not reading for the teacher to observe and provide immediate feedback.

Guided reading provides scaffolding to independent reading by showing students how to read and offering guidance and support (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). This can include self-monitoring strategies, decoding strategies, and other intentional literacy skills. Students also need to be paired with texts that are appropriate for their instructional level, and small groups allow for this to occur whereas large group instruction of a single text does not allow for the differentiation of reading levels and content (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Reutzel et al. (2015) described this as a tier two intervention as part of the Response to Intervention model. This provides opportunities to intentionally support the students who struggle the most.

Developing Student Autonomy through Literacy Centers

Students also benefit from literacy centers by developing independent learning and problem solving. In traditional literacy centers in the primary grades, “Positive experiences encourage [students] to become more independent learners” (Swartz et al., 2003, p. 57). Literacy centers provide a classroom structure that allows students to practice self-directing and self-control of their academic skills and work with a teacher available to provide autonomy support (Guthrie, 2015). This is a format that meets the needs of a variety of readers.

Literacy centers are intentionally designed to promote autonomy. Boushey and Moser (2012) emphasized that the model of Daily 5 and CAFE is to “teach students how to be independent” (p. 173). These literacy centers foster independence by teaching, modeling, and practicing to choose tasks and maintain attention (Boushey & Moser). Teachers report that students learned to work independently through the modeling of activities at the beginning of the year (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). Guthrie (2015) emphasized that developing autonomy is imperative to not only academic success but also emotional health. Hodges and McTigue (2014) emphasized, “Self-regulated learning skills are becoming increasingly essential because new literacies demand greater facility with such skills than traditional literacies” (p. 156). These are skills that will benefit students beyond their academic years.

With intentional design and implementation, literacy centers will provide many benefits for middle school students. They will foster student engagement through choice, problem solving, and self-assessment. Their engagement will increase their success with literacy skills by providing them opportunities to practice a variety of reading strategies, opportunities to read traditional and nontraditional texts, and to provide leveled and/or differentiated activities. Successful implementation of literacy centers will also promote small-group instruction for teachers to provide interventions and intentional guided practice meant to help readers develop their skills and reading independence. As literacy centers provide engaging activities and promote student success with literacy skills, this will lead to increased student confidence and autonomy. These skills are still necessary beyond elementary classrooms and can be appropriately adapted for older students.

Literacy Centers in Middle School

The use of literacy centers in middle school classrooms is not a predominant practice. This first section examines peer-reviewed articles focused on the need and use of small-group discussion, small-group instruction, and literacy centers (also referred to as stations) within middle school (sixth through eighth grades) English Language Arts curriculum. A significant objective to these practices was to provide authentic and engaging literacy opportunities in which students move beyond comprehension to execute critical literacy. The second section reviews strategies to implement literacy centers at the middle school level. The third section explores age-appropriate literacy activities for students in grades six through eight. The final section reviews how to assess literacy centers.

Need for Small Group Strategies in Middle School

A common small group strategy in English Language Arts classrooms are literature circles. Daniels (2006) explained that literature circles work because of “engagement, choice, responsibility, and research” (p. 11). Students have a chance to choose a book that meets their interests and/or reading levels, work in a small group that is less intimidating than the whole group, and take responsibility and practice autonomy. Research has shown that this engagement has improved student success (Daniels, pp. 11-12). This empirical evidence suggests that utilizing literacy centers would increase student engagement and reading skills.

An aspect that can help encourage the success of literacy instruction is to incorporate modeling of explicit reading strategies, such as questioning, visualization,

and connections (Daniels, 2006). These strategies can be modeled in a large group setting, then practiced in small groups during literacy centers. Identified student needs can also be retaught during centers to provide tier two of Response to Intervention. Kate Roberts (2018) recommended the use of demonstration and think alouds, guided practice and coaching, and inquiry. These strategies give students opportunities to see reading strategies modelled and practiced.

Hodges and McTigue (2014) argued that implementing literacy centers in the middle grades “can produce such a dynamic classroom. This classroom resonates with the clamor of peers negotiating, seeking knowledge, exploring new technologies, and grappling with critical questions” (p. 155). It is more imperative that students learn to work collaboratively as our industries require teamwork between individuals.

Implementing Literacy Centers in Middle School

To successfully implement literacy stations, Vacca and Vacca (1974) determined four objectives: students independently use a specific schedule to locate their activities, students can explain each activity and work independently, students can act in a manner respectful to each person’s learning opportunities, and students can privately communicate with the teacher informally or through conferences (p. 19). Tucker (2015) explained four different station models: small group instruction, small group work, collaborative project, and online learning. In any of these models, the expectations must be presented, modeled, and reinforced for students.

When implementing literacy centers, routines need to be established. It is necessary to model and teach how to transition between stations (Tucker, 2018). In

time-based centers, displaying a timer can serve as a visual and auditory cue to transition (Tucker). If students are completing choice stations, students can have handouts that utilize stickers or stamps for each center they work in to demonstrate their progress (Potash, 2019). These routines must be established before teachers can implement small group instruction.

When implementing small-group instruction, teachers can incorporate guided reading strategies at appropriately leveled texts and also guided writing to provide specific and efficient writing strategies for students (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018). These focused and short lessons will benefit students of all levels. While the teacher provides this instruction, other students will utilize independent or collaborative literacy centers.

To prepare a classroom for literacy centers, there were varying methods. Potash (2019) explained that centers, also known as stations, should be easily identifiable for students, with posters or other displays and to have materials prepared for each student so they are not waiting on their peers. Tucker (2015) presented that center directions can be frontloaded, provided at each station in written form or as a video tutorial. Frankel (1975) suggested materials are organized on the outside of the room where students can grab materials and directions then return to their desks to work rather than rotating from center to center. A weekly checklist was displayed for students to follow along with maintaining a daily log of activities attempted and completed (Frankel). Falk-Ross (2008) recommended that materials for stations be clearly labeled with directions and be easy to access for both the teacher and students within designated areas. Each center may have a labeled focus, such as “vocabulary, word identification, comprehension, fluency, and

listening activities” while others may be focused on independent work or interactive discussion (Falk-Ross). Instructors should determine which system is most engaging and least disruptive for their students.

Independent Literacy Activities for Middle School

Many sources concur with a need for diverse skill practice. Vacca and Vacca (1976) provided a “Stations Implementation Chart” (p. 565) to help teachers organize stations, as many as eleven, that can be used daily and to organize materials. The teacher then creates individual schedules for students based on their reading skills and levels, social skills, and occasionally random options (Vacca & Vacca).

On the contrary, Frankel (1975) encouraged three centers for junior high students: creative writing, the catalog corner, and “Get the Message” in which students write letters, prepare advertisements, or create signs (pp. 244-246). Falk-Ross (2008) presented different types of literacy stations, including quiet reading, paper-based activities (“worksheets, journal activities, or extended reading assignments”), manipulatives (building words, using tape recorders, “language and reading games”), and discussion (“literature or inquiry circles”) to practice literacy skills (p. 239). Other suggestions could be a tape recorder or typing station, comic and word mix station, main idea station (using photos and print), tutoring station, or game station (Vacca & Vacca, 1974, p. 20). Centers in middle and high school classrooms can also incorporate a variety of discussion strategies; post-its can go on a variety of posters, there can be online discussions, or students can use index cards to create a collage of important quotes (Potash, 2019). Centers should be designed to meet the students’ needed skill practice.

Other literacy center ideas can be related to class content. Potash (2019) recommended stations for high school students such as growth mindset stations with activities such as reading picture books, stations for listening to podcasts, reading news magazines, and an art station. These could also be adapted to address other curriculum topics. For example, when students are learning to prepare college admission essays, centers could be used to help students learn the expectations and also brainstorm ideas (Potash). Hodges and McTigue (2014) recommended activities that are easily updated to match class content without planning new centers, such as reading and responding to a class blog. Other recommendations included: gallery walks, interactive white board activities such as the vocabulary activity “shades of meaning” (p. 157), writing and research center with computers, apps like PoppletLite to create graphic organizers, and other individual activities such as independent reading or webquests (Hodges & McTigue). Another source for would be to incorporate activities and projects that promote reading and creating texts considered nontraditional in an English Language Arts class, such as infographics, or elements of printed texts such as window quotes or writing headlines (Gallagher, 2015). This model would provide students with consistency of skills to support routines and limit teacher preparation.

Assessing Literacy Centers in Middle School

To hold students accountable, Hodges and McTigue (2014) created “Center Completion Cards, which resemble Bingo! Cards, as a management tool to teach students to take responsibility for and self-monitor their learning” (p.159). However, Tucker (2018) emphasized that teachers should only grade assessments completed in centers; if

teachers provide feedback in small groups, it is not necessary to provide written feedback, and literacy practice should not be graded. Teachers must identify which assessments will best guide their instruction.

In middle school, literacy centers can be assessed in a variety of manners. Vacca and Vacca (1976) provided a “Self Evaluation Form” (p. 567) at the conclusion of a unit, semester, or year. Another form of assessment could be a collection of portfolios, and Falk-Ross (2008) recommended the use of an essential elements checklist and self-reflections by students (pp. 241-242). These demonstrate that student reflection is necessary as part of the assessment and to provide feedback to teachers.

Locating and reviewing sources specific to middle school literacy centers is difficult in comparison to traditional, elementary literacy centers, since they are less common. However, small group strategies are promoted in all classrooms for student engagement, problem solving, and collaboration. There are some literacy advocates who have been promoting the use of either centers or stations in middle school since the 1970s, but their use still has not become mainstream. When designing these literacy stations for middle school language arts students, it is important to iterate the need for small-group collaboration and small-group instruction with explanations of how these lead to benefits identified in traditional literacy centers. The implementation of these is similar to that of younger students: have an intentional and clear plan, establish routines, provide guided support until students develop independence, then implement either guided reading groups or tier two interventions. The activities provided should be age and ability appropriate based on skill and content for middle school students. Assessment of

literacy skills should incorporate both self-assessment to help develop autonomy and portfolio to demonstrate literacy skill improvement. Encompassing these elements of literacy centers will provide positive academic, social, and emotional benefits for students.

Summary

This literature was reviewed to answer the following research question: *How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills in a middle school English Language Arts class?* This literature has revealed that there is a need for authentic and a variety of literacy opportunities that are engaging for students and that best practices support the implementation of literacy centers. Reviewing literature on traditional literacy centers in the primary grades provides strategies and benefits of implementing literacy centers in other grades with appropriate literacy practices and independent learning activities. Additional literature emphasized that the benefits of literacy centers include student engagement, improvement of students' literacy skills due to increased practice and guided instruction, providing opportunities for guided reading and writing instruction, and increasing student autonomy and decision making. The final review of literature presented models and content for implementing literacy centers or stations in middle school classrooms. Hodges and McTigue (2014) argued that "literacy centers in the middle grades allow teachers to differentiate instruction, reteach critical concepts, and simultaneously promote students' lifelong learning skills of self-regulation and motivation" (p. 159).

In Chapter Three, the capstone project will be described in detail. This will include an overview of the project, guiding learning theories, the setting and audience of the project, timeline of the project and future implementation.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Chapter Three explains how this project answers the research question: *How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills in a middle school English Language Arts class?* The purpose of this project was to design weekly literacy centers to implement in a seventh grade English Language Arts classroom in order to increase student engagement and autonomy; these improvements then further develop student literacy skills. As students transition to middle and high school, opportunities for student choice within curriculum become limited, and there is a need for students to have authentic literacy and decision-making opportunities. These literacy centers are meant to encourage students to be curious and engaged learners.

The first section provides an overview of the project. The following section addresses supporting research literacy theories. The next section identifies the setting and audience of the project. The following section provides a timeline for creation of the project and the future implementation. The chapter will end with a summary of details and transition to a reflection of the project. These sections together will address how this project will be designed to align with researched evidence promoting literacy centers.

Overview of the Project

This project provides weekly literacy center activities to be used for a semester in a seventh grade English Language Arts classroom in Minnesota to increase student engagement and literacy skills. These centers include at least one activity from each of

the following categories: vocabulary, fluency/listening, digital literacy and print concepts, choice reading, choice writing, research, and missing work. The number of centers made available to students each week is determined by the classroom environment, the number of students, and current curriculum study. Alongside these are small-group instruction for completing needs assessments and to provide supplemental instruction for students identified with reading struggles. These learning activities are aligned with the Minnesota seventh-grade English Language Arts standards along with lower-level standards appropriate for readers who struggle with literacy skills.

The project includes a schedule for year-long implementation that can be adapted as necessary for specific classrooms or districts. This implementation schedule has recommended timelines for establishing routines, completing needs assessments, incorporating small groups, and completing student portfolios.

For this weekly activity, students complete the Renaissance Place STAR Reading test as their needs assessment for vocabulary and comprehension; it includes information on both literature and informational texts. The teacher also references student MCA results from the previous year, if available. Student read-alouds completed in small groups are used to assess fluency and comprehension. Teacher observation during whole group instruction also provides formative assessment for other literacy skills, such as digital print concepts, research, and writing.

Using feedback from these need assessments, the teacher determines which small group instruction is most appropriate for individual students. These mini-lessons are designed to provide supplemental instruction to students who are struggling with literacy

skills and are designed to be adapted to fit the current curriculum of the course. For example, a mini-lesson on reading nonfiction allows the teacher to choose a leveled article related to the class content from the NewsELA website.

This project has students complete a portfolio assessment at the end of term, including tracking cards that indicate their practice at all of the centers throughout the term. This portfolio includes pieces that the student identifies as showcasing their abilities in a variety of literacy skills. For example, a student may provide a QR code poster to a speech recorded on Flipgrid to indicate their fluency skill, and there may be a Google Doc embedded with a creative writing piece that showcases the student's improved inference and writing. This particular project is designed for students to create a digital portfolio on Google Sites, but could be adapted for students to create a physical, printed portfolio.

The purpose of this project is to increase student engagement and autonomy, to provide tier two interventions to students who struggle with literacy skills, and to improve all students' literacy skills so that they are successful in academics. Benefits of literacy centers include fostering engagement, literacy skill growth, opportunities for small-group instruction, and developing student autonomy as discussed in Chapter Two of this paper. The design of this project is supported by a variety of learning theories.

Supportive Learning Theories

Several learning theories support the use of literacy centers in all grade levels. In the Unfoldment Theory, students naturally educate themselves when they are genuinely curious and engaged in the learning process (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Tracey and

Morrow argued that “literacy centers are designed to capture and build on children’s natural curiosity” (p. 31). In alignment with these concepts, this project is designed for students to complete the centers in an order and by activity of their choosing.

Other supporting theories include the Social Learning Theories. Literacy centers require students to practice social collaboration skills. Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism theory states that students learn through social interactions (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). In literacy centers, students have social interactions both directly and indirectly related to the content as they must rely on each other to ask and answer questions when the teacher is unavailable. Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory also emphasized that students can learn from observing others (Tracey & Morrow). Literacy centers provide students opportunities to see how their peers of all abilities problem-solve when facing tasks that may be challenging or time-consuming.

The variety of literacy activities within this project is supported by the Emergent Literacy Theory. This theory recognized the reciprocal relationships between listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). This suggests that as students improve their abilities in one of these skills, improvements are seen in the others. This supports the need for literacy centers to incorporate literacy skills such as those practicing fluency and listening to fluent readers or strong orators along with traditional literacy practice of reading and writing.

The Engagement Theory also supports the design of this project. This theory emphasized that students are motivated to read and are socially engaged by talking about or sharing their reading (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). The literacy centers designed in this

project are focused on student motivation by allowing their choice of activities and time of completion. Not only do these learning theories support the design of the project, but are appropriate for the setting and audience of the students the project will be designed and implemented for.

Assessment

The effectiveness of this project is measured through both formative and summative assessments along with Minnesota state testing. The formative assessments act as needs assessments and include: the Renaissance Place STAR Reading test for vocabulary and comprehension, MCA results from the previous year for literature and informational texts, student read-alouds for fluency and comprehension, and teacher observation for other literacy skills, such as digital and print concepts, research, and writing. These formative, needs assessments are repeated throughout the year to track student growth along with changes in students strengths and weaknesses.

The summative assessment at the end of each term is a portfolio assessment. This indicates the students' engagement through their tracking cards, improvement of literacy skills by organizing their most successful projects, and measures their engagement and autonomy through a self-assessment checklist. The Minnesota state testing (MCA) will also be used to compare student achievement as both individuals and as a group by providing a direct comparison to performance in past years. This can also be viewed on the Minnesota Report Card as a district or school-wide trend in the past couple years. These assessments measure the effectiveness of literacy centers in a middle school

classroom as individuals and as groups and are utilized to improve instruction throughout the year and upcoming years.

Setting and Audience

The setting for this project is in a rural, northern Minnesota public school district. According to the United States Census Bureau, the community is predominantly middle class with a median household income of \$59,644 (in 2018 dollars) with 8.5% in poverty. According to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE, 2018), the number of students receiving free/reduced-price meals is 22.4% district-wide. The community is predominantly white. According to the MDE, the district-wide enrollment for the 2019-2020 school year indicated that 92.2% of the student population was white, 1.5% was Hispanic, 1.3% was American Indian, and 1.3% was black or African-American.

The district is a single building with kindergarten through 12th grade but is separated in the building by elementary (K-6) and high school (7-12). This project is part of the high school curriculum for seventh grade. The high school has approximately 600 students enrolled and has approximately 35 secondary teachers. According to the MDE Minnesota Report Card (MDE, 2018), this school district consistently had 87% of students with consistent attendance, which is slightly higher than the state average, and the high school with 82.4% which falls below the state average of 85.3%. At the time of the development of this project, the elementary school received Title I funding, but the high school did not.

This seventh grade literacy center model takes place in the English Language Arts core class. Current enrollment has a total of five sections of approximately 20 students

each and taught by two teachers who are both licensed in Communication Arts and Literature (5-12). All seventh grade students take part in these literacy centers on a weekly basis because of the indicated need of additional literacy practice. The school's MCA results of all grade levels within the district indicate that the students are testing near the state average for reading. The state's average over the last three years was nearly 60%. The district wide results of reading have remained consistent at 63.9% (2017), 65.1% (2018), and 64.6% (2019). However, in the high school the reading scores drop below the state average: 56.0% (2017), 53.5% (2018), and 56.3% (2019). This decline demonstrates a need for reading support in the high school.

Literacy centers provide all seventh grade students with additional literacy practice based on student choice to increase engagement, while also providing small group instruction for seventh-grade students who indicate literacy need from the needs assessments. This need was indicated by the high school's MCA results. This project is designed for face-to-face instruction with one regular classroom teacher, but it could be adapted to include a paraprofessional or a special education co-teacher.

Timeline

This project began in September 2020 with the brainstorming of project ideas that aligned with the school's needs and my own teaching beliefs. The needs and my beliefs aligned in that students need more opportunities to practice authentic literacy to both increase their engagement and their literacy skills. This developed the research question:

How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills in a middle school English Language Arts class?

Following the development of the research question was a complete literature review of literacy centers. This was completed during October 2020 and included the need for authentic literacy in all aspects of education, traditional literacy centers, the benefits of literacy centers, and the research of current literacy centers in middle schools.

After reviewing the literature, preparation for project design began in November 2020. This included an overview of the project, identifying the supporting learning theories, the indicated needs in the setting and audience of the project, and the timeline completed.

Following this overview, the literacy center model and activities were designed during the months of February, March, and early April 2021. The model and activities were determined by the literature review sources and also aligned with the Minnesota State Standards for English Language Arts seventh grade and lower for students who needed supplemental support in literacy activities. Each activity was designed to provide additional practice of skills and lessons covered in the regular English Language Arts class. The format of the activities were designed for students to follow directions and complete the practice independently. This led to the format of presenting a literacy objective, a summary of the skill either in writing or through the use of videos, numbered directions, and any necessary handouts that the student would require.

In April 2021, several of the activities were presented to the content reviewer, peer reviewers, and the capstone project facilitator. Additional feedback provided insight on the format, clarity, and additional project recommendations. These suggestions were then used to revise and adapt the center activities. The project was presented to a small

group of peers and the capstone project facilitator through the use of a Google Presentation and online Google Meet. The reflection and conclusion of this capstone project was also completed in April. This is reflected in Chapter Four.

The future implementation schedule of this project is the following school year, 2021-22 (see Appendix A). This provided schedule is based on academic quarters for other educators to appropriately adapt for their 7th grade English Language Arts classrooms that may have different start and end dates to their academic calendars.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the research question: *How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills in a middle school English Language Arts class?* It presented the project overview and the end result. The following section reviewed the learning theories, such as the Unfoldment Theory, Social Learning Theories, and the Emergent Literacy Theory, that support the design of literacy centers in a middle school classroom. The next section reviewed the setting and audience of the project and the indicated need for literacy growth within the high school. Based on the school's lower MCA reading results in the high school, additional reading support is necessary for students who are identified with struggling literacy skills. The last section presented the timeline of completing the project and the future implementation timeline in a realistic manner.

Chapter Four will reflect on the most influential sources of the literature review, provide a project description, describe the process of creating literacy center activities

and major learning, the limitations and an implication to the project, benefits to the profession, and related and future projects.

CHAPTER FOUR

Capstone Reflection

Overview of Reflection

The final chapter of this Capstone Project is a reflection of my process, learning, and conclusions of my research and project focused on seventh grade choice literacy centers. My own personal experiences that encouraged me to be an engaged reader and writer along with my observations and work as a middle school English teacher led me to ask my guiding research question: *How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills in a middle school English Language Arts class?* The purpose of this project was to develop a series of choice literacy centers for students to use weekly to increase their academic engagement and to improve literacy skills in a differentiated manner based on Minnesota's English Language Arts standards for seventh-grade students.

This chapter will discuss my personal reflection of the process and major learnings based on the process and my research, and a brief review of my literature review that guided the creation of my project. A project description will be followed with the benefits to the profession along with implications and limitations, related and future projects, and communicating results with stakeholders.

Literature Review Summary

My literature review has four major sections that promoted my development of weekly literacy centers for a seventh grade English Language Arts classroom. The first is the need for students to experience authentic literacy opportunities, the implementation of

traditional literacy centers, the benefits of literacy centers, and the use of literacy centers in middle school.

It has been indicated that as students grow older, they spend less time reading (Gallagher, 2010; Renaissance Learning, 2019). There are several reasons why this occurs, including less class time dedicated to reading, especially recreationally, and also increased student responsibilities in and out of the classroom. By providing students with a class culture that incorporates student choice, collaboration, and literacy tasks that are relevant, teachers are implementing best practices (Gambrell et al., 2015). Intentional development of literacy centers can help achieve these goals in classrooms of all ages.

Traditionally literacy centers have been used as additional skill practice in elementary grades, especially in the primary classes, and considered to be part of a well-rounded literacy curriculum. There are a variety of strategies of how to organize literacy centers, and educators must choose a model that best meets the needs of their students while maintaining researched, best practices to support core curriculum. These models may include fixed locations or independent activities at desks (Swartz et al., 2003), students may rotate in groups or independently (Owocki, 2005), and models using groups may use mixed ability or leveled ability (Fletcher, 2019). A more well-known model is the Daily 5 and CAFE in which teachers provide whole-group lessons, small group instruction, and conferences with individual students (Boushey & Moser, 2012). When choosing a model to implement, teachers will need to determine which style will promote student autonomy, appropriate literacy skill practice, and opportunities for meeting student learning needs.

Literacy centers provide benefits to students beyond additional skill practice. The use of literacy centers fosters student engagement by incorporating student voice, choice, reflection, and opportunities to problem solves both critically and creatively. The additional practice of literacy skills presented in a whole-group format also improves student independence of skills and increased confidence in their literacy abilities (Falk-Ross, 2008). These centers can also be implemented with the intention to incorporate small group instruction; this could be focused on students' skill needs and also provide interventions for students who struggle with particular literacy skills (Frankel, 1975). Students also benefit from opportunities to make decisions and practice problem solving to develop their independence and autonomy (Guthrie, 2015). These benefits indicate that the effort to develop literacy centers and the classroom time are benefiting students academically and collaboratively.

Though literacy centers in middle school classrooms is not a predominant practice, research has indicated that there is a need for small group instruction and practice of authentic and engaging literacy skills (Daniels, 2006). In a similar manner to traditional elementary literacy centers, these literacy centers need to intentionally focus on literacy skills that students can practice and master independently, students can respect the time, space, and learning opportunities of others, and allow for individual or small-group conferences with the teacher (Vacca & Vacca, 1974). Intentional implementation of these centers promotes students lifelong learning and literacy skills. The following section summarizes my capstone project.

Project Description

This project provides weekly literacy center activities to be used for a semester in a seventh grade English Language Arts classroom in Minnesota to increase student engagement and literacy skills. These centers include an activity from each of the following categories: vocabulary, fluency/listening, digital literacy and print concepts, choice reading, choice writing, research, and missing work. Provided are also overall materials: Student Goal Sheets, Tracking Cards, Portfolio Checklist & Rubric, and an Implementation Schedule and Mini Lesson Template for instructors. The purpose of this project is to improve all students' literacy skills, provide tier two interventions, and to increase student engagement and autonomy both in the English Language Arts classroom and beyond.

Author's Reflection and Major Learning

As an educator, my main mantra is to help my students to be curious and engaged lifelong learners. This should help them to develop into critical thinkers, creative problem solvers, and to ask and answer questions about the world around them so that they become involved and responsible citizens. My own experiences and my research have shown that promoting intrinsic motivation and student interests are required to encourage this type of engagement. As a core-content teacher, there are challenges with incorporating student choice, time to develop ideas and experiment with required curriculum maps, but the importance of modeling and promoting students choices is emphasized by sending the message that their curiosities and interests are worth pursuing.

Since I have experience teaching both middle and high school students, I have had opportunities to observe the detrimental effects of students who have become disengaged with literacy instruction and skills at a young age and how that affects their attitudes towards not only reading and writing, but their education experiences as a whole. Other content areas also require students to utilize literacy skills in their acquisition of knowledge, to demonstrate their understanding and applications, and their communication skills with peers, teachers, and community members. By promoting student choice and interests with middle school students, this project intends to provide students opportunities to develop confidence in academic and communication skills, improve decision-making skills, and being a reflective learner.

In my teaching experiences, I have come to appreciate the need to implement Response to Intervention tiers in content-area classrooms and through my research, I learned that literacy centers provide opportunities for students to reflect and practice on their weaknesses and also to incorporate small group instruction specifically focused on student needs. Depending on the resources of the school district, literacy centers could also incorporate a reading specialist or instructional coach to provide tier two interventions while keeping students engaged in the content-area classrooms.

In the early stages of research, I realized that literacy centers are primarily used in elementary grades, especially in grades one through three. However, the use of centers or stations in middle school classrooms has been promoted and encouraged despite the reality that they are not often implemented. Based on conversations with teachers both in and out of my district, this is due to the perceived time to develop center activities and the

more significant obstacle is giving up instructional time when content-area teachers are limited with bell-to-bell of 50 minutes or less. This demonstrates how imperative it will be to share not only my research on the benefits of “losing” instructional time to student choice and skill practice, but also the results of implementing this project into my classroom where I must “give up” one class period each week to encourage student choice and interest while investing my time in providing small group assessment or instruction.

Before developing independent center activities, I needed to focus on how students would be assessed on these weekly centers. This forced me to develop overall materials to focus the goals and types of activities that students would need. To help students make a choice based on their reflections and to encourage their autonomy of lifelong learning, I developed a student goal sheet that incorporates a checklist of reciprocal literacy skills of both their strengths and weaknesses along with developing two specific goals to work towards in the following semester, which is approximately 18 weeks.

After developing a lesson to help students set their own literacy goals, my focus became how to assess individual student goals. Rather than assessing all student work created in the weekly literacy centers, students will keep records and evidence of their skills practiced. At the end of the semester, students will then reflect on their skills, practice, and accomplishments to create a digital portfolio demonstrating their efforts and personal reflections towards their self-determined literacy goals. When implementing these literacy centers with students, it will be imperative to show students the

expectations of tracking their progress and that they will be creating a portfolio so that they are motivated to maintain their records and focused on their goals. This will also require reminders of deadlines and completion of a variety of activities.

In the development of literacy center activities, it became imperative to provide directions that students can access on their own, so I relied on skills that are taught in my English Seven class that students would be introduced to and have done group practice prior to being included in literacy centers. Initially I had hoped my activities would be versatile enough for other English-Language Arts teachers to incorporate into their classrooms and to also provide a model for other content-area teachers. Based on my completed project, other educators would have to choose activities that align with their content-area skills and curriculum while adapting others.

The research and development of this project has led me to believe in continuing to advocate for student choice and interest in content-area classes. In the following section, I will review the key concepts and researchers that guided the creation of my weekly literacy center capstone project.

Limitations and Implication

As I worked to complete my project a few difficulties limited my project. The first was the scope I intended to create. Initially, I wanted to create enough literacy center activities to rotate monthly and to have a year's worth of activities prepared. I know, as all good teachers do, that I will continuously adapt, improve, remove, and add centers based on the objectives, my observations, and my students' successes, but I thought having more options to begin implementation would be beneficial. Due to time

constraints, I had to limit my project to the necessary overall materials and four activities in each of the focused literacy skills. However, I have maintained a working list with additional activities and sources that can be added to my centers.

Another limitation I encountered was the specific activities that I adapted and created for my centers. Initially, I had hoped to have activities that would be easy to adapt to other curriculum areas. However, without working closely with content-area teachers I was unable to determine which skills they have observed their students needing to improve on to be more successful in those particular courses. Instead, I returned to my own curriculum map and identified specific skills that are taught with whole-group instruction and created materials and activities that provide additional practice. Though I provide specific photo prompts, articles, and/or stories for students in various stations, I could update some of these with other sources related to our class content to emphasize relevancy or to reuse the station for continued skill practice.

The creation of this project has occurred during the 2020-21 school year, where schools are continuously adjusting to Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions and protocols to keep both students and staff safe. Because of hybrid learning, contact tracing, and limits on small group work, I was not able to introduce the center rotation format to my students to get feedback on the model chosen specifically for their benefit. However, many of the activities are related to a whole-group lesson and skill practice so that students would have been exposed to them prior to independent practice through literacy centers.

An implication of my project is the expectation that all students have a one-to-one technology device. My particular district is one-to-one, so students have access to a device throughout the day. This has allowed me to incorporate technology into most stations, whether it is watching a YouTube video, typing a poem, or creating a reading recording. Other teachers looking to implement my materials may struggle with my activities if they do not have student access to technology. Despite these difficulties, there are significant benefits to teaching and learning by sharing and implementing this project.

Benefits to Profession

This project is a benefit to others in the profession of teaching because it provides a model of literacy centers that could be adapted to other English Language Arts classrooms. It also models how incorporating choice activities related to the content-area can increase student engagement and academic skills is beneficial to students and their lifelong learning habits. This may encourage content-area teachers to make time for these types of activities within their classrooms. If students have opportunities to choose activities and strategies in multiple content areas, they are practicing informed decision making and developing the life skills of self-regulation and autonomy to become active and responsible citizens.

Related and Future Projects

My capstone project has been the beginning of my development of literacy centers for my own classroom. Through the next academic year, I plan to implement them in my seventh grade English classroom and continue to adapt and add literacy centers that I observe students needing additional support and practice from all areas of

literacy, such as fluency, digital literacy, and research skills. Additional literature will continue to support the creation of these additional centers, such as the work of Kylene Beers (2003) and Roberts and Roberts (2016). These responsive changes will help students achieve the most benefit from the literacy activities.

The next step would be to encourage others in my department to adopt literacy centers in their classes, especially those who are teaching middle school. This requires me to communicate the results of implementing the centers with the stakeholders of my project. This will include having students share their portfolios with their peers and their parents or guardians. I will also share their portfolios with my colleagues, both English and other content-area teachers, and my administrators to communicate the results and encourage implementation into other courses and classrooms.

In the future, I would be interested in working with grade-level professional learning communities and aiding others in developing independent and small group learning centers for other content areas. I believe this would encourage increased engagement and lifelong learning for all topics. This will require further research of literacy and content-area skills along with learning cooperatively with my professional learning community. The intention of continuing the development of these activities and encouraging other educators is to provide additional opportunities for our students to be curious and engaged.

Summary

This capstone paper and capstone project worked to answer my guiding question:
How do choice literacy centers improve student engagement and literacy skills in a

middle school English Language Arts class? Chapter One presented my personal experiences with curiosity and engagement with literacy activities along with my observations through teaching to show the development of my research question. Chapter Two provided a review of literature on the need for authentic literacy opportunities, traditional literacy centers, benefits of literacy centers, and middle school literacy centers. Chapter Three described an overview of the project along with supportive learning theories, planned assessments, the intended audience, and the timeline of creating the project. Chapter Four examined my personal reflection and major learning through the creation of the project, a summary of the literature review, a project description along with limitations, benefits to the profession, and my future related projects.

The completion of this project has aided in my development as an educator in preparing materials to provide students with additional literacy opportunities to increase student engagement and foster their curiosity. It helped me develop as a researcher, project planner, and advocate for student voice and choice within the classroom. Looking to the future, I hope to share my project and future projects with English and other content-area teachers to inspire them to utilize learning centers in all disciplines as we work together to foster lifelong learning among our students.

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Appendix A

2021-22 Implementation Schedule of 7th Grade Weekly Literacy Centers

Date	Activity	Notes
September 2021	Implement Literacy Centers	Establish weekly along with specific and intentional routines
October 2021	Needs Assessments	Complete for all students during small groups
November 2021	Implement Tier Two Interventions	Utilize small groups based on needs assessments
December 2021	Prepare Student Portfolios	Students utilize the checklist and rubric to prepare portfolios to determine their progress
January 2022	Complete and Assess Student Portfolios	Educators determine student growth and provide feedback through student portfolios for second semester literacy goals
February 2022	Needs Assessments	Complete for all students along with portfolio observations to change small group instruction
March 2022	Adjust Tier Two Interventions	Adjustments to groups and lesson content based on portfolio observations and needs assessments
April 2022	Prepare Student Portfolios	Students utilize the checklist and rubric to prepare portfolios to determine their progress
May 2022	Complete and Assess Student Portfolios; Needs Assessments	Educators determine student growth through student portfolios and final needs assessments for the following year