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Increasing Student Motivation In English Language Arts Through Student Choice

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INCREASING STUDENT MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
THROUGH STUDENT CHOICE

by

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of Arts in Education

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I dedicate this project to fellow teachers that love to read and want to pass that passion onto their students. To my parents for surrounding me with books. To my friends and colleagues that pushed me, encouraged me, and kept me going. Thank you all for the support, I know it wasn't always easy.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Literacy is a right, not a privilege. Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. The only way to provide students the right to literacy and make sure it is not miserable is by providing them texts they want to read. The purpose of this capstone is to design a website that will encourage young adolescents to become engaged in reading and become lifelong readers through the use of student choice, independent novel projects, and literacy centers and answer the research question *Can providing student choice improve student motivation in a middle school English Language Arts class?*. To begin this chapter, I will talk about my personal history and how it led me to my research topic. Then I will discuss the significance of this research question in the world of education and how my plan should be implemented in classrooms to lead to more student engagement. Finally, I will summarize what is to come in the following chapters. This is a research question that is near and dear to me, and I hope that educators and literary enthusiasts alike will find this project interesting and illuminating.

History of a Reader and a Teacher of Reading

Books for me have always been an escape. The joys of reading is being able to leave the real world and travel into different worlds. I have walked alongside Aelin Galathynius, Queen of Terrasen as she fought to reclaim her throne, fell in love, had her heart broken, then had it repaired. I fought with her as she defeated those that stood in her way and defied those that told her she wasn't good enough. We both found the meaning of friendship, loyalty, and love together. We grew up together. Books provide us with connections and show us things about ourselves we might not have known we were

capable of. I have been blessed to have always been surrounded by books, and have always been allowed to buy or borrow any book. There were never restrictions on what was available to me. When I was a junior in high school, and trying desperately to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, my dad asked me what I loved to do and I said read. I love to read. He helped me decide that I wanted to become an English teacher. At first I thought I wanted to teach high school, but I decided real quick that if I wanted to get students to fall in love with reading like myself, then I needed to teach middle school where they were still young and could see the wonder that books can bring.

The first student I was able to get hooked on reading was a young man named J. He was in the general education class and came from a particularly devastating homelife. He, like myself, viewed books as an escape from reality. However, his family didn't have the money to provide him with books of his own, so he would frequent my classroom and public library. He would often come to me and ask for recommendations and provide recommendations of his own. I would find books that he and I could read together and then talk about after we were finished. I loved building that connection with him. Other students would hear our passionate talks and find themselves wanting to read the books as well. Through that bond I was able to get him engaged in my class, even when it didn't concern reading. He never had an A in an English class until mine, and he earned that A. He then went on to take advanced English in eight and ninth grade. He will be a sophomore this year and he still inquires about book recommendations, and I find ways to get new books for him. Our love of shared stories has continued long after he's been in my class.

Another student of mine, A, was in my advanced English class two years ago and she emailed me near the end of the year to tell me that she was going to read some stand alone novels because she became too “emotionally attached to the characters” and can’t find anything to hook her like the *Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J Maas. She, like myself, becomes invested in these characters. She engages with them to the point that they are real. Now imagine using a novel that a student picked for themselves and worked on identifying elements of plot, to write an objective summary of a chapter, to look for dynamic and static characters. The list is endless. Students would be more than willing to examine a text critically if it’s a text they picked and actually enjoy.

I have had countless students that have become engaged students in my classroom through reading a book. Through that shared experience, we bonded. I have watched students that “hate” to read fall in love with characters and beam up at me when they predict something, or share an experience with a character in a book. My favorite thing as an English teacher is hearing my students say, “Can we keep reading?”. Books are a form of entertainment, but they offer so much more than that, that we as educators should be capitalizing on. Books offer a way to connect with those around us. Reading is a human activity—the glue, the bridge, the vehicle that connects students to themselves and other worlds, whether formatted digitally or in print (Goodman, Fries, & Strauss, 2016) Connecting is something that seems to be lacking with this generation of students. After this pandemic, with all the isolation and screen time, students are going to need to remember how to connect. What better way than providing them with a choice on what they read so they can begin to connect with themselves and the world around them again. Furthermore, reading serves a couple of purposes: looking inward and outward to

establish identity and connect with self and others (Koopman, 2016). In other words, books not only provide entertainment, but they can help students that struggle with their identity finally feel like they have a place where they fit in, by allowing students to choose books that help them understand themselves more fully. Books also offer a way to engage our students in our work. If I can help students find meaning in a character's death, if I can encourage a student to find the character traits of the hero/heroine of the story, if I can have them predict who the antagonist of the story is, then I am building a relationship with them and I am engaging them in meaningful work. However, I am not going to get to that point if I don't give my students the opportunity to pick books out themselves. Through literature circles, independent reading projects, literacy centers students will be more willing to learn the skills they need to be successful and to help them become lifelong readers because they will be allowed choice.

Significance of Research Question in the World of Education

In my years as a middle school teacher I have noticed that once students hit middle school they fall out of love with reading. I have asked myself and them why that is. They will talk to me about how they loved to read in elementary school, but once they hit middle school it seems as if it becomes uncool to be an "avid reader." I believe this has a lot to do with the lack of student choice in what they're reading. As English teachers, it seems as if we can become attached to the books we fell in love with and we're hoping to pass that passion along to our students, but they aren't novels that they picked out themselves. Our students are growing up in a different world, and they are experiencing things that we as educators did not have to go through so they need to be given the chance to choose a novel that reflects those same things. In elementary school

students are surrounded by novels and they can choose anything they want to read, but once they hit middle school their teachers rarely take them to the library or design time for them to pick books they want to read. In my Gifted and Talented classes I do two series of literature circles, and I have found that the students like the books a lot more when they are allowed to select the one that they wanted to read. I provide them with choices and they are more receptive to reading and doing the work associated with the unit. Unlike when we studied *Farewell to Manzanar* and *Twelfth Night*, the former was a memoir that I selected and the latter is mandated by the district. At the end of the year they expressed adamantly how much they didn't like reading those two pieces of literature. The district and administration start dictating more often what students read once they hit middle school. We seem to still be operating off of the Western canon, which is a body of high culture literature, music, philosophy, and works of art that is highly valued in the West. These pieces of works have achieved the status of classics. While I do believe there are some classics that students should know about, there are now a lot of issues that students are facing that aren't addressed in canonized books. Our students have 21st century problems and ideas that need 21st century authors to address. Providing students with current novels and allowing them to choose what they want to read will allow for students to become more engaged in the activities that accompany that novel. I want to design a website to help provide students with complete autonomy to select what they want to read, and I teach them the skills to be able to analyze, interpret, and synthesize what they're reading. Since I am focusing on teaching skills, this website's resources will be able to be used with any novel, and this allows for students in any classroom to be able to select their own book and still become proficient in reading

and writing because they are engaged in the story they are studying. I have found that my students do inspiring work when they are doing something they are passionate about.

This would get our students reading again.

As an English teacher I hear “I hate to read” more than any other phrase, and it shatters my literary heart into pieces. I tell my students that they don’t hate to read, they just haven’t found a book that they enjoy reading. However, I turn around and assign them a text to read. As teachers, we know the importance of student choice, but how often are we truly giving them choices, especially when it comes to reading novels in class. In my classroom I have students on fifth grade reading levels and students on eleventh grade reading levels, yet I try to use the same text to teach them. Research shows that using whole class novels helps build that classroom culture and provides students with that shared experience. However, doing classroom novels always isn’t going to help differentiate for students on differing reading levels. The research will also show the importance of student choice in the classroom, by allowing students to choose for themselves we are able to engage them for a significantly longer rate than if we assign them a text. My desired outcome is to produce proficient readers, but my real goal is to produce lifelong lovers of literature.

Summary

This chapter’s focus is to provide a frame of reference for who I am as a teacher and a reader. It’s purpose is to also examine the question of how to get middle school students engaged in reading and become lifelong lovers of literature through student choice.

Chapter Two of the Capstone project will be a literature review on engagement in terms of student choice. How providing students with choices will in turn make them more engaged in the curriculum. It will provide evidence of the importance of allowing students to find novels that help shape them and that reflect who they are as young adults. I could talk endlessly about reading and the importance of it. Every educator understands how pivotal it is that students are reading. However, one of the problems with introducing more literature circles and independent novels is that there isn't easy access to resources to help implement these strategies in the classroom. Most resources are spread throughout the internet and take time to find exactly what you're looking for, which teachers don't have time in their day to accomplish. The goal is not to create more work for teachers, but to provide them with something that can be easily implemented with every novel. In Chapter Three, I will design a website that educators can use for literature circles, literacy centers, and independent reading projects that can be used with any text. I want to provide educators a way to introduce more choice into their classrooms without making more work for them, but still teaching the necessary skills students need to learn when examining a text. I will also include a reference list of middle school appropriate novels to help teachers construct their own libraries. This project should help alleviate some stress and allow teachers to spend more time teaching students skills and connecting with them in the hopes that they become engaged readers and learners. Allowing students choice gives them ownership and helps meet them where they are.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Paint The Picture

Imagine you walk into a typical American middle school English classroom, you might find that the teacher is reading a whole class novel with their students. The teacher has elected to read the novel out loud and pauses every now and then to ask comprehension questions. You see that some students are eagerly answering questions and engaging in the reading. You might see some students following along, but not quite grasping all the concepts, but they're getting enough from those eager students to understand the material. Lastly, you might see disruptive students, students sleeping, day-dreaming, or pretending to read. Even though the majority of students in this typical classroom aren't fully engaged in the novel or even understanding the novel, teachers across America hold onto the ideal of teaching to the eager students and not the disengaged ones. This leads to the question of why teachers hold onto this practice. Is it from lack of professional development, time, or resources.

In my experience, classrooms have more unmotivated students than readers, however teachers tend to gear their teaching to the eager readers and not the unmotivated ones. This becomes a problem because the unmotivated readers, known as "reluctant readers" are students who need to be reading the most. Generally, these "reluctant readers" are students that aren't reading on grade level. This is concerning to me because reading is an enormous part of everyday life and if students aren't reading on grade level it is concerning to think about how they will go to college, obtain jobs, or be able to function in the real world. Reluctant readers are students who may actively resist reading,

mask their dislike by clowning around or misbehaving when asked to read, become easily frustrated during reading, or need to be coaxed into picking up a book (Lexia Learning). This is the vast majority of our students today. In 2019, only 29% of South Carolina 8th grade students scored proficient or above in reading (National Assessment of Education Progress [NAEP], 2019). This staggeringly low percentage was even 3% lower than the national average of 8th-grade students. In fact, according to the 2019 NAEP Nation's Report Card (2019), the percentage for 8th graders scoring proficient was lower in 2019 than in 2017. This means students are becoming more unmotivated to read. The nation is gaining more reluctant readers than eager readers. This leads to the questions of why are students not performing proficiently on national reading assessments? Is this a problem of skill or motivation? Are students engaging in reading? If not, exactly what will motivate students to read? Which instructional strategies are most effective in increasing student behaviors to read and read often?

The Problem

It is understood that learning to be a successful reader is a critical skill for success in both school and life. Although it is widely accepted that motivation is key to language learning, current education frameworks do not provide teachers with measurement tools that encourage the development of skills to motivate students in the classroom. Instead, standards focus on skills rather than enjoyment and teachers are encouraged to spend more time on test-taking strategies than developing a love of reading for their students. While it is logical that skill development would create more adept readers, data from the Nation's Report Card 2019 demonstrated that 8th-grade student reading scores showed no improvement for the more struggling learners (those scoring below the 10th percentile)

since 1992 (NAEP, 2019). For over 29 years, the nation has failed to improve middle schools' adolescents reading proficiency and comprehension. This nation is becoming more and more of a nation of nonreaders.

Furthermore there are particular areas in which educators can pinpoint some sources of this pronounced lack of enthusiasm about reading. According to Nancy Allison (2009), “We now live in a society where students have few reading role models and many competing interests and types of texts beyond the printed page” (p.3). This shows that 21st century teachers are competing with video games, comic books, social media, and streaming services. They are competing for their students' interest and motivation with little to no support. This means being able to motivate students plays an essential role in making them become successful readers.

This literature review is focused on examining the problem of middle school adolescents' decline in motivation and engagement to read. Identifying why middle school adolescents are disengaging in reading. It is also essential to identify specific strategies for teachers to use during instruction to increase student reading frequency and motivation to read. This is essential to examine in middle school because Gallagher (2010) reported that students begin to lose interest in reading around the age of 13 and that disinterest typically continues. If this problem is not addressed early on it will continue to increase.

Sources of the Problem

In middle school department meetings, English Language Arts teachers have continually discussed how they can get their students to read in their classrooms. Every year it should be a goal to increase reading levels. Especially due to the declining scores

for the last 29 years (NAEP, 2019). Teachers are desperate to learn new strategies and methods to motivate students to read and read for prolonged periods of time, but they are lacking the resources, time, and support. Students tell teachers they do not read ever, because it is boring to read (K. Sutton, personal communication, June 2021).

Literacy experts say that teachers must have two goals in teaching literacy: to teach students both how to read and to love reading (Hiebert, 2009; Kasten & Wilfong, 2005; Malloy & Gambrell, 2012, as cited in Gambrell, 2015). While teachers understand and implement explicit and direct instructional strategies to teach students how to read, they struggle with strategies to motivate, increase reading time, and instill a love of reading. However, standard-driven instruction neglects to address the need for student motivation. According to the South Carolina State Reading plan, there are extensive steps in providing teachers with strategies to teach our K-12 students how to read. However, when examining the plan there is little to nothing said about strategies to motivate our students to love to read. In other words, a teacher who dutifully focuses on a standard-driven approach, may unfortunately neglect to address strategies that increase motivation in favor of covering other areas that the state has identified as important areas for development. For example, students are more motivated to read and read more frequently if they can make their own text choices. According to Gambrell (2011), students are more motivated to read when presented with text choices. When students choose their own texts, they both engage and understand more of what they are reading. However, as stated above in what a person would see in a typical American English classroom, the practice of student choice is severely lacking. Teachers are still holding on to those whole class novels and teaching only to the engaged readers instead of the

disengaged ones. Although some research focuses on understanding student motivation and reading engagement, these results are not implemented effectively and consistently in reading classrooms (Springer et al., 2017).

Since the implementation of high stakes testing and showing accountability, many teachers feel they must shift their teaching away from strategies that would help motivate students to read to more rigorous teacher-directed reading instruction. Students no longer have the time to fall into love with reading because “...independent reading time was relegated to the hallways during breaks in an ill-conceived quest for higher test scores” (Allison, 2009, p.2). Teachers in middle schools no longer feel like they have time to just teach students a love for reading. "Either we can focus on readers' motivation and interest, or we can focus on test prep and learning" (Springer et al., 2017, p.43). There seems to be no inbetween. However, successful readers need many tools to draw upon, including motivation, time to engage in reading, and ways to build their reading competency (Shaw, 2013). As motivation and engagement increase, so too does reading comprehension (Guthrie & Davis, 2003, as cited in Shaw, 2013). Moreover, "if students are not motivated to read, they will never reach their full literacy potential" (Gambrell, 2011, p. 172). Clearly, teaching students to read involves time, pleasure, motivation, and competency.

Teachers need to provide students with time to read, however with pressure from the state to increase test scores teachers find it hard to give up instructional time for reading. 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). It’s more important to cover all of the standards that are on the state tests than it is to teach our students to become lifelong readers. Gallagher (2010) also emphasized that many classrooms no longer set aside time for recreational reading. With pressure to cover so much content teachers find it hard to give students time to just read for pleasure. Students are being asked to read texts that are challenging, out of date, and inaccessible to them. It’s no wonder students don’t like to read because it is boring.

Teachers are at a pivotal point in adolescent education. Teachers must have access to and use researched best practices for motivating and engaging their students to read in their literacy classrooms. Without these resources, they will continue to fail our adolescent students for another 29 years.

Organization

This literature review will begin with a chronological examination of the body of historical research on the importance of motivation in increasing reading engagement and proficiency. Motivation is a strong personal construct and is often separated into two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic. It is also important to review the research on the various socio-cultural processes involved in motivation and engagement. Following a historical analysis of the research, current research within the last five years will be examined for new understandings of intrinsic motivation and engagement. An examination of the implications of social-cultural factors on learning is presented.

The research will also be examined on the impact of student choice in motivation, engagement, and student interest in reading. Attention will be given to the specific interrelationships of motivation, engagement, and student choice. A summary of the research's main ideas and findings and a review of the thesis and research questions will

follow. Gaps and limitations in the research will be defined, and implications for classroom practice and further research will complete the literature review.

Background on Motivation and Reading

Historically, intrinsic motivation has been a common research topic on improving students' reading skills. (Holloway, 1999). "Reading skills are essential to the academic achievement of middle and high school students" (p. 80). Especially with adolescents struggling to read, the problem has been poor motivation, a lack of experience, and egocentricity (Collins, 1996, as cited in Holloway, 1999). Motivation has been directly related to both reading competency and viewing reading as enjoyable.

Rather than a focus on struggling readers. Irwin's (2003) research focused on aliteracy, which is students capable of reading but chose not to read. She also hypothesized and found that motivation to read and viewing reading as a pleasurable experience was equal in importance to cognitive processes among these capable readers. Irwin suggested that reading engagement could be improved by providing a learning environment that promoted reading as interesting and worthwhile. All students need to create a positive self-concept as a reader to be successful.

Investigating the relationship between reading motivation and reading achievement, (Wigfield et al., 2016) found that intrinsically motivated students are more engaged in academic assignments such as reading. Teachers must focus on improving student motivation and engagement. Instructional strategies must focus on building autonomy, collaboration, and intrinsic motivation. "To enhance students' perceived autonomy in reading, students are given many choices regarding what they read"

(Wigfield, et al., 2016, p. 193). If choices have not been offered to students, intrinsic motivation and autonomy are stifled.

Examining over 20 years of intensive research on the relationship between motivation and reading behavior and competence, Schiefele et al. (2012) also confirmed the positive correlation of intrinsic motivation to reading behavior and reading competency. The types of reading materials are fundamental to intrinsic motivation. Students show less interest in traditional texts and more interest in popular cultural texts (Alvermann & Heron, 2001; Alvermann, 2011, as cited in Schiefele et al., 2012). Also, the findings showed that reading competence was positively related to intrinsic motivation and negatively related to extrinsic motivation.

Several limitations were revealed in this study analysis that made analyzing results from the studies more difficult. Researchers found discrepancies in reading motivation's operational definitions (both intrinsic and extrinsic) among the various studies. These elements need to be resolved in further research to determine if a causal relationship exists between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and reading behavior. Also, the research analysis revealed a need for a consensus on measures of reading motivation. Studies have used student self-reports to measure reading behavior. The authors suggested a broader approach with more alternative methods for measuring reading behaviors.

Accurate and applicable reading research needs to have commonly defined constructs. Conradi et al. (2014) also expressed concerns with inconsistencies in researchers' operational definitions of motivation. Their study examined scholarly reading research from 2003-2013 and found inconsistencies among researchers in

defining motivational concepts. "Our study highlights the frequent failure of researchers to specify the meanings of the constructs they investigate or to use terminology in consistent and accurate ways" (p.154). Their findings indicate a need for further research into reading motivation, specifically completing an item analysis of the following: student beliefs about reading and self-concept, reading attitudes and interests, and reading goals for mastery. These measurements have provided more detailed information about what reading motivation truly measures and have informed classroom reading instructional practices.

When adolescents enter middle school, they have entered a period of transition. Teachers have expected their students to become competent readers with the instructional practices they use. Neugebauer (2016) questioned middle school teachers' ability to judge student motivation during reading instruction accurately. He focused his research on measuring students' intrinsic motivation to read in relation to reading frequency and comprehension. He defined intrinsic motivation to read as curiosity and interest. The study measured the relationship between students' perceived motivations using outside raters and teachers' perceptions of motivational states. Results of the study showed profound differences, such as students reporting high motivation while teachers reported a lack of motivation, in the reporting of student motivation during reading instruction among teachers, students, and other raters. For teachers to change their instructional practice, they must correctly identify student motivation.

Current Research on Motivation and Engagement

Within the last five years, research has identified several principles concerning adolescent reading engagement and motivation. Alexander (2018) examined research on

the positive impact of engagement and defining the specific facets of literacy engagement. As Neugebauer (2016) found, measuring engagement involves assessing many factors, such as beliefs, behaviors, thoughts, and social interactions. He advised further research to analyze engagement factors' combined effect rather than deconstructing engagement into separate behaviors.

In researching adolescents' reading behaviors, Sullivan and Brown (2015) found a significant decline in the reading behaviors of adolescents between the ages of 10-16. A more recent study by Yassie-Mintz and McCormick (2012) focused on identifying student perceptions of reading engagement and the possible outcomes of student reading engagement on comprehension and proficiency. Based on one middle school, the study examined reading engagement among 71 8th grade students in terms of self-selected and self-paced reading of more popular adolescent literature. The students were enrolled in English classes with teachers who had agreed to change their traditional instructional focus from assigned reading tests to student choice of texts. The researchers focused their study on examining engagement through a socio-cultural lens to provide more detailed information on the engagement processes. Findings suggested engagement is not just individual, but also relational and cultural (Yassie- Mintz, 2007; Yassie- Mintz & McCormick, 2012, as cited in Ivey & Johnson, 2013). In fact, "Choice and edgy, compelling books, along with time and introductions, commonly led to engagement" (Ivey & Johnson, 2013, p. 268). The research supported the previous body of knowledge about engagement in reading and added additional knowledge concerning the specific processes that support greater engagement. Reading engagement was essentially relational, involving the students' socioemotional lives (Deakin Crick, 2012, as cited in

Ivey & Johnson, 2013). What's more, there were changes in student test scores from 7th to 8th grade in reading competency, from 78% in 7th grade to 85% in 8th grade (Ivey & Johnson, 2013). End-of-the-year state testing revealed less distinction among scores, with 89% in 7th grade and 90 % in 8th grade. This study indicates that student choice has an impact on student engagement. The data questioned traditional instructional methods for reading. Engagement, choice, and social interactions with texts are minimized and significantly share implications for further research with student choice, compelling popular texts, and the relational aspects of engagement. In summary, this body of evidence demonstrates that it has been important for educators to understand the relevance of collaboration and social interactions in promoting positive reading engagement.

Motivation and Habits

Despite the absence of standards and allotted time which would address motivation, there is a general understanding among educators that creating motivation in students to see the importance of reading for academic purposes is important. It is also crucial to find enjoyment in the act of reading which can dramatically impact whether or not students are motivated to participate in reading activities in class. When analyzing levels of motivation it is important to understand the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and their relationship on levels of engagement in learning (Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, 2009). Intrinsic motivation is the motivation to complete a task for enjoyment or satisfaction without obtaining a reward in the end. Extrinsic motivation occurs when a task is done to achieve some type of external reward (Schaffner, Schiefele, & Ulferts, 2013). Reading is characterized as a skill that increases in effectiveness the

more it is used, meaning that there is a correlation between the amount of time spent participating in reading and related activities and the level of literacy skill achieved. Young children whose parents read often to them quickly gain the ability to memorize and recite certain parts of specific books (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 58). Various research studies have been done to look at variables that impact reading comprehension and academic success. One particular study was done by McGeown, Funcan, Griffiths, and Stothard (2015), and focused on the connections and relationships between reading skills, differences in gender, motivational aspects of adolescents, and habits and the impacts on 23 learning. The study found that those who had better reading skills were more motivated to read and therefore had better scores when tested for reading comprehension. The study suggests that focusing on boosting the motivation to read among adolescents could directly impact the level of comprehension displayed and result in a deeper understanding of the text. Motivation to achieve anything in life can have a drastic impact on the ability to be successful and reading is not an exception. The development of or lack of reading skills early in life can be impactful on levels of reading comprehension as a child grows older. In order to understand that reading comprehension is crucial to academic success, it is important to explore the learning components that must come before a text can be comprehended. The development of literacy is crucial as it is connected to all forms of interaction in everyday life. Cognitive development and processing are likely to be correlated in some ways to the development of reading. Levels of motivation can impact the willingness and effort by students and can, therefore, influence the outcomes of reading comprehension. To understand whether or not reading

comprehension strategies are effective one must first analyze the framework of what comprehension entails.

The Social-Cultural Aspect of Learning and Literacy

Current researchers (Alexander, 2018; Neugebauer, 2016; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012 as cited in Ivey & Johnson, 2013; Deakin Crick, 2012 as cited in Ivey & Johnson, 2013) have stressed the critical role of the individual, relational, social, and cultural factors in promoting positive reading engagement. Their ideas are deeply rooted in social-cultural theory. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) stressed the importance of examining social-cultural theory with learning, thinking, and literacy acquisition. The theory of social-cultural influence on learning arose from Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who explained the interdependence of social and independent processes during learning. "When beginning an activity, learners depend on others with more experience" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, as cited in John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). The social-cultural theory, therefore, has significant implications for learning and instruction, especially reading and writing.

Before the birth of social-cultural theory, literacy learning was primarily a cognitive individual process (Gee, 2010). Reading and writing have involved social and cultural practices because language, both spoken and written, is used differently among specific social and cultural groups. Norms, values, beliefs, and cultural experiences have determined the meaning individuals derive from texts. "Individuals learn a given way of reading or writing by participating in (or at least, coming to understand) the distinctive social and cultural practices of different social and cultural groups" (p. 5). For example, as individuals have encountered new vocabulary and constructs, they experience two

types of knowledge, both verbal and situational. Verbal knowledge is simply understanding the meaning of the term, but situational knowledge involves applying the concept to new situations. This knowledge has not occurred in isolation but in engaging and collaborating with others. Therefore, the meaning is ultimately derived from human experiences that are social, collaborative, shared, and cultural. Neugebauer (2016) found that continued research on motivation and engagement must examine a combination of social, cultural, collaborative, and individual factors to inform classroom practice to better enhance engagement and motivation.

The Impact of Student Choice on Developing a Habit of Reading

While the research discussed above has demonstrated the importance of reading with motivation, further studies have focused on the development of reading as a habit. In 2015, Scholastic publicized the results of a national survey on adolescents' reading habits. Three critical factors were identified to develop a reading habit: reading for enjoyment, reading for pleasure, and having more time during the day to read independently (Gambrell, 2015).

Research has focused on student interest in reading and its impact on comprehension and retention (Springer et al., 2017). However, instructional strategies have not been implemented in classrooms. The researchers define reading interest as "a person's willingness to engage with specific content" (p. 44). To promote reading interest, students must be able to choose their own reading texts. Not only does student interest in reading increase, but student motivation and engagement increase when they are allowed to make choices about their own reading texts (Gambrell, 2011). Reading choice leads to enjoyment, and enjoyment leads to greater comprehension (Cullimon, 2000; Education

Standards Research Team, 2012; Meiers, 2004; Sullivan & Brown, 2015, as cited in Mackey, n.d.).

Based on the premise from existing research that students see a difference in reading they do for school and reading they do for pleasure, McKenna et al. (2012) implemented a survey to measure the reading attitudes among middle school adolescents. Surveying 4,491 students in 23 states and the District of Columbia, the researchers found that they had more favorable attitudes toward reading independently. Positive attitudes influenced student's intrinsic motivation. "This measurement of attitudes holds the potential to contribute to our understanding of reading comprehension and reading difficulties" (p.284). The findings showed that teachers need to incorporate more student choice of text in instructional practice.

In contrast to the existing body of research on student choice and its impact on reading engagement, motivation, and comprehension, Birus (2018) completed a research study on student choice effects on improving student proficiency, particularly comprehension. The study also sought to identify differences among students who chose their texts and students who were assigned texts through Fountas and Pinnell reading levels. A quasi-experimental design was used with students randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group chose their text, and the other group received a text. After four days of specified reading times, students were assessed for comprehension. No significant differences were found in comprehension scores among the two groups. It was observed that students who chose their texts read for longer periods of time, thereby increasing their reading engagement.

Teachers who have helped their students to meet essential reading goals have developed a love and habit of reading among their students (Allen-Lyall & Davis, 2020). They have used instructional strategies that build specific reading behaviors such as motivation and engagement. The researchers remind educators that motivation to read must be viewed in light of personal interests and reading competencies. The presence of intrinsic motivation to read has been essential to foster student engagement and interest in reading (Marinak & Gambrell, 2013).

Embedded in successful strategies to promote motivation are engaging with reading through social, cultural, shared, and collaborative opportunities (Neugebauer, 2016). Engagement and motivation to read are significantly impacted by student choice of texts. Case studies of adolescent students have shown that student text choices and collaboration with others have increased intrinsic motivation and proficiency (Marinak & Gambrell, 2013). Shaw (2013) affirms the strongly positive relationship among motivation, engagement, and improved comprehension. Students choosing their own reading texts has been a critical part of this relationship. Teachers who have guided their students to make authentic choices based on their personal interests and competencies empower their students with the confidence to make relevant reading choices (Allen-Lyall & Davis, 2020).

Strategies to Increase Motivation in Adolescent Students

Providing teachers with strategies to help increase motivation in adolescent students so that they will have the tools they need to produce engaged readers is a necessity that education is currently lacking. Valerie Burnow, a high school English

teacher at Millbrook High School in Millbrook, New York, had a disheartening realization when her student said: “Mrs. B, this book is old and I don’t like the way they talk.” She realized that the real issue was the personal pronoun “I.” Even though she gained significant insight from being guided through *The Outsiders* and she wanted to share that experience with her student; ““I” is not what my students needed – they needed their own experience” (Burrow p.61). It’s hard for teachers to let go of books that they hold dear. Some teachers have been teaching the same set of books for years, because they fell in love with those books and want their students to feel the same passion and enjoyment they took from the book. However, what teachers love is not what their students need; they need their own experience. 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. Allison (2009) stresses that “no harm will come to students if they do not read *The Outsiders*”. Teachers need to allow choice into their classrooms in order to increase motivation. Students shouldn’t be told what to read, because their backgrounds and experiences are completely different. Those differences should be highlighted in the novels they are reading, and that highlighting can’t be done with one novel. 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). Gallagher states “...Shouldn't schools be the place where students interact with interesting books? Shouldn't the faculty have an ongoing laser-like commitment to put good books in our students' hands? Shouldn't this be a front-burner issue at all times?” (2010, p.30).

Offering students an opportunity to choose texts and teaching how to approach texts helps to support reading investment (Brunow, 62).

The Readers Workshop model blends personal interest with approaches to reading and writing that are differentiated to meet the needs of a variety of learners (Brunow, 62). According to Literacy Today, “Reader’s workshop is a teaching model which allows students to engage in authentic reading experiences. It is an effective way to differentiate instruction. Workshops may vary in length and include time for teaching, selecting and reading books, writing about books, and sharing ideas about books with partners or in group discussions.” (2021). This type of strategy would allow teachers to work with students on their individual level and provide support for their disengaged readers. By allowing choice through the reader’s workshop it is an opportunity to motivate those reluctant readers. 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 (pp. 44-45). This indicates that teachers need to provide students time to read for a variety of reasons: recreational, informational, and academically. The reader’s workshop is an instructional strategy that promotes student autonomy and also improves engagement. Gambrell et al. (2015) promoted literacy independence by “providing time for self-selected reading and writing” (p. 23). This recommendation includes providing students with additional reading time.

The use of Literacy centers is another strategy teachers can utilize to foster autonomy in the classroom. Literacy provides teachers with a way for students to work on literacy skills either independently or collaboratively. Literacy centers are stations where students can work on building their literacy skills anyway the teacher desires.

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 allows students to work collaboratively, which is a skill that they will need as well as get the differentiated learning they desire. This allows a much more individualized plan for students. Furthermore, Fountas and Pinell (2018) promoted building classroom libraries so that teachers can take a “multitext approach” (p. 14). This is where diverting from the whole class novel becomes harder to do. Building classroom libraries takes money and resources; however, teachers can use public libraries, school libraries, and even write grants in order to obtain more novels for their students. Acquiring a robust classroom library is a big step in ensuring students can take a multitext approach to reading. It is building student choice right in there for them. 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.

It is clear that student choice is linked to motivation. The research shows the importance of allowing students to select their own reading and use the teacher as a facilitator to help make meaning. Developing lifelong readers should be every educator's goal and not just teaching to pass a state test. The focus needs to shift to these strategies to help foster readers in schools.

Summary

This literature was reviewed to answer the following research question: *Can providing student choice improve student motivation 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 student choice to motivate students. In 1970, 60 percent of high school seniors read every day; in 2016, only 16 percent read every day (Korbey, 2019). We are still in the midst of a literacy crisis. More and more middle and high school adolescents do not read and do not want to read. This is a problem that must be fixed. Researchers are clear that adolescents between the ages of 10 and 16 need additional support to encourage and motivate them to read (Sullivan & Brown, 2015).

A plethora of research, both historical and current, has pointed out the importance of engagement and motivation in encouraging students to read. Equally important is an instructional practice of allowing students to choose their own texts. As Ivey & Johnson (2013) shared from their findings, these text choices must be compelling and reflect authentic and relevant issues for today's students. A social-cultural theory has been threaded throughout the research and has indicated a critical interdependence between social, cultural, shared, and collaborative factors and positive reading habits

The research has revealed a real dilemma for teachers. Teachers have understood the urgency to develop successful critical readers. They have understood the principles of engagement and motivation in piquing students' interests and desires to read. Teachers have been torn between instilling a love of reading in their students and preparing for high-stakes testing with directed core instruction (Springer et al., 2017). Students are more motivated to read when they are presented with choices of texts. When students choose their own texts, they both engage and understand more of what they are reading (Gambrell, 2011). Choice has a powerful effect on motivation, and kids want to read what they have chosen (Roberts, 2018).

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 will go into greater detail about the website design for middle school teachers. This website will provide annotated bibliographies of novels appropriate for middle school students, as well as resources to use these novels to motivate students to read. Through choice, teachers can help motivate students to become lifelong readers.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

In larger schools where teachers are spread out across grade levels and hallways it is sometimes hard to share ideas and resources with each other. Educators all have different teaching styles and methods that are encouraging students to engage with reading, but there's not always a place to showcase those methods. I intend to create a place for educators to obtain resources and collaborate on topics concerning literacy that they are using or might use in their classrooms. Middle school is a pivotal time for our students and developing those literacy habits is a necessary skill. By increasing student engagement and autonomy we can further student's literacy skills. This happens by providing students with choice and more time to read. In Chapter Three I will create a clear framework of the project I will be creating based on the question How can adding student choice in an educator's curriculum increase student motivation and engagement?

The purpose of this project is to allow educators a chance to see other methods and practices that they could implement in their classrooms. Generally, it's easy to hear about different methods, but it's not always easy to see how to implement them in the classroom. My goal is to provide educators with ready to use resources and ways to implement them in their classroom. By providing educators with the opportunity to truly collaborate, students will grow leaps and bounds and teachers won't be so burned out. Ideally this project allows other educators to feel they have a space where they can communicate with each other and showcase their strategies as well. There isn't enough time in the day to see every spectacular lesson that is happening around the school, but

through this project hopefully educators can obtain the spectacular lessons and implement them into their classroom.

In Chapter Two I reviewed the essential research and literature that correlated with student choice and increasing motivation in middle school students. The first section of Chapter Three will provide a detailed description of the intended project. The next section will address the supporting literacy and engagement theories. The following sections will address the assessment of the intended project, the setting, intended audience, and the timeline of when the project will be created and utilized. These sections together will address how this project will align with increasing student choice and will increase student engagement. Through this project I want to keep independent reading at the center of teacher's instructional practice and articulate why it's worthwhile.

Overview of Project and Rationale

Daniels and Bizar (2005) list student choice as one of the important characteristics of "best practice" classrooms, and student choice has continually been shown to increase intrinsic motivation in learners (Guthrie and Knowles, 2001). However, teachers find it's much easier to place a book in their students' hands then try to teach them how to pick their own books. This project is meant to change that notion. The project I created includes a Google website that houses a variety of resources for the overworked teacher. I included a Google form tracker in order for teachers to keep track of strategies that work well and strategies that might need to be replaced with new ones. I have included tips for differentiating instruction because all students are not on the same reading level. However, implementing these strategies in the classroom will help meet each student at their own reading level. There are resources for even our most reluctant readers. The

website also includes an annotated bibliography of popular young adult novels for teachers to easily find books that will interest their students without having to spend hours on various websites trying to find engaging novels. These books are arranged in a variety of methods such as by genre, topic, and students' lexile levels. The website includes a connection page so that educators can continue to collaborate and inform each other of what is happening in their classrooms, their successes as well as their mishaps.

This project's goal is to share this information with other educators that might not be exposed to this type of work. English Language Arts teachers shouldn't be the only ones encouraging student choice in their classrooms, which is why developing a website that can be shared across the school and district to all content areas will be a great benefit. The Engagement Theory endorses this project because it emphasizes that students are motivated to read and are socially engaged by talking about or sharing their reading (Tracy & Morrow, 2017) and by getting more teachers resources to help encourage independent reading in the classroom this will allow students the opportunity to do both. Not only will students be engaged in what they're reading, but they will be making meaning with other students.

My thought process behind choosing the topic of independent reading is that I have witnessed my middle school students reading less and less each year. Classroom libraries are getting smaller with each passing year. Many of my co-workers have allowed literacy to take a backseat in their classrooms due to reasons such as content coverage and standardized test scores. Allington (2001) contends that "engagement in reading has been found to be the most powerful instructional activity for fostering reading growth" (p. 37). In order to foster reading growth educators must provide students with their own

choices. Bringing awareness to this dire issue and providing educators a way to rectify the problem should be the utmost concern of educators. I want to supply them with a user-friendly platform that is easy to access and implement in their classrooms.

I decided to create a website format for my project because it is the easiest way to share this information across not only my school, but other schools in my district. Especially after this past year, technology has moved to the forefront in classrooms and providing the twenty-first century teacher with an easy to use website will be of great benefit. It will save them time, which as an educator is valuable. Even if the teachers that access this website are not proficient with technology, they will still be able to use the information presented to them. This is one reason why I choose Google sites to build the website, because Google has a user-friendly platform. Another reason for choosing Google is my district operates using Google classroom, so my cohorts will be extremely familiar with the platform.

The framework of the website has a home-page that provides the reader with information that explains the importance of independent choice for middle school students. It provides links to access more information, if they so desire. There are tabs that are clearly labeled for the user to find the information they need quickly. One tab is labeled resources for implementing independent reading in the classroom. There is a tab that has worksheets to use in the classroom to help foster independent reading. Another tab has the annotated bibliography of novels that are of high interest for students. There is an assessment tab which will have trackers made that can be used for various purposes in the classroom, as well as used to indicate which resources are helpful and which need to be revised. There is a connection page that educators will use to connect with

like-minded people in order to get more resources and share their experiences so that we can all continue to grow.

Assessment

In order to assess the effectiveness of this website I will provide Google form trackers for teachers as well as students. This will allow teachers to provide feedback on the resources available to them and allow me to make adjustments if need be. The most important form of feedback will be through the students, by asking them which resources and strategies worked for them it will provide me with a clear picture on which activities were engaging and the ones that were lacking. Since this project is about student engagement and motivation through choice it only makes sense to provide the students the opportunity to share their opinions. I will use these resources and strategies in my own classroom and assess my students on their reading levels before and after the activities to better understand if their reading ability is increasing. Other educators will also have access to the trackers, so they can also gauge their students' engagement. Due to the fact that I am the owner of the website, I will be able to track which resources are being copied and the ones that aren't. This will supply me with insight into what is working and what might need to be changed.

Setting

The setting of this project will be utilized in an urban magnet middle school where I currently teach. This school houses students from sixth grade through eighth and is located in the largest district in South Carolina. This district has over 100 schools and 76,900 students across those schools. My particular school serves approximately 943 students. Many of the students have grown up together because the majority of them

attended the same elementary school. The demographics that make up the intended school are fifty percent identify as white, thirty-one percent identify as African American, seven percent identifying as Asian and seven percent identifying as Hispanic. Thirty-one percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Class sizes typically include 25-35 students. The school currently serves 141 students with special needs or 12.5% of the student population. This school ranked 44th in the state of South Carolina on the state test for reading. Only half of those 943 students are proficient in Math and English. Reading proficiency in my school and district has been declining and I plan to possibly increase reading levels through the resources and strategies I provide other educators in my district. I serve a diverse population with a significant achievement gap and I want to do my part to try and close that gap as much as possible. I will continue to grow this website in order to help educators across the state and the country.

Intended Audience

The intended audience for this project are educators that teach middle school aged students, however high school teachers could also adopt the resources and use them in their classrooms. This project is for educators that share a love of allowing students to become autonomous and make choices for themselves. The resources in this project are meant for small groups and independent learning. The use of mini-lessons and student-teacher conferencing will be used. Educators that want to put more control of student's learning into the hands of the students themselves will benefit from this website. Tips for scaffolding and differentiating will be provided on the website in order to better serve each teacher's specific students.

Timeline

The research and development of the literature review based on my research question began in the summer of 2021. The creation and completion of this capstone project took place in the Fall of 2021. The website that houses the independent reading strategies was created in a seven-week time span.

Summary

Chapter Three has provided an outline of my capstone project, the project setting, the audience in which it is intended for, and a timeline for completion. It is my goal that the website I developed will continue to bring awareness to the importance of independent reading through student choice on student achievement. This project is intended to encourage educators to incorporate more independent reading in their classroom by providing them resources that are easy to implement in a variety of settings. I hope by collecting strategies and housing them in one place, I will inspire educators to not only try many strategies and track student progress but to also collaborate with one another on different ways to combat struggles with reading levels and student engagement among students. Chapter Four, which will follow, will provide an overview and personal reflection of my capstone project. I will reflect on what I have learned during the creation of this project and ways I intend to use the website as a resource moving forward in my educational career.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

This capstone project attempted to answer the research question *Can providing student choice improve student motivation in a middle school English Language Arts class?* This project is designed to provide seventh grade English Language Arts teachers with digital resources in order to foster motivation in reading independently, and to improve their academic performance in reading.

When considering the design for this website, I sought to create resources that would help teachers encourage their middle schools to become lifelong readers by fostering a love of reading in their classrooms. Throughout my four years as a 7th grade ELA teacher, I've observed that my school's academic goals are focused on state test scores that seem to continuously drop or remain stagnant. However, there does not seem to be enough emphasis on the art of reading for reading's sake. This approach neglects the academic and social/emotional benefits of recreational, habitual, and sustained reading. While modern pedagogy touts the benefits of literature circles and independent reading, teachers lack readily available materials, so that they can implement these strategies in their classrooms. This is why I felt it was a necessity that there be an easily available website for middle school teachers to encourage literature circles and independent reading in their classrooms without taking time away from instruction. However, making such materials is time consuming, especially with the added focus on increasing state testing scores. While teachers are busy implementing new programs, workbooks, and interventions focused on raising standardized test scores, the desperate need for lessons that attend to need for students to learn the habit of reading emerges

even more strongly. This research project is part of an effort to alleviate that ache. This research project provides teachers with materials that they can implement in their classrooms with zero prep-time. The remainder of this chapter will elaborate on the knowledge I was able to acquire through this process of completing this capstone project. It will revisit and review the literature that is related to my project, and will expand on how the research was relevant to my project. This chapter will also present the possible implications for the future of education, as well as its limitations in the field of education. I will provide recommendations for future research, the methods in which to share this project, and the advantages this project offers the profession. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with a summary of the capstone project and a reflection.

Wisdom Earned Through This Project

As I begin to reflect on where I started when I began this project to where it is now, it is hard to believe. This capstone project started out as a professional development, changed into a curriculum design, and finally landed on becoming a collaborative website that gives voice to an often neglected concept within the American educational community. I truly have grown as an educator, and, at times, I've been surprised by the strong pedagogical perspectives that I've gleaned from wrestling with the concepts and challenges that I've encountered. This process has helped shape two years of my teaching career, and hopefully will continue to shape me. Throughout this literature review alone, I have felt justified in taking on this project and feeling as if it has meaning for teachers and students. My understanding of how and why we need to foster student engagement in reading has been fortified through synthesizing theories and strategies that are supported in my research.

When I began the journey of answering the question *Can providing student choice improve student motivation in a middle school English Language Arts class?*, I didn't think I would build a website with resources, suggestions, and materials for teachers and students to use and benefit from. Through my own teaching I have witnessed increased engagement in my classroom and my students pick up more novels each year. However, through the process of making this website, a lot of things began to shift in terms of books in classrooms. This year specifically there has been a lot of discussion of banning books and censoring what students are allowed to read. My personal experience with this issue came this fall when I had provided a novel about gender identity for students to read and a member of the community not associated with my classroom, felt it was his job to censor the rest of the students. Efforts such as asking parents to sign opt-out permission forms were futile in protecting my students' abilities to access these texts as our approval process was not honored and, instead, our school allowed the book to be challenged and removed, despite the protections that our staff had put in place. However, the book was still challenged and taken to the board for review. This has been happening all over the state of South Carolina and even the nation.

This experience, while I was trying to create a website where I was suggesting books for other teachers, was extremely disheartening. I want to provide my students with books that reflect the problems, experiences, and situations that are authentic and it made me question the website altogether. I questioned myself, "Was I truly an authority on giving book suggestions?" My students, however, validated my intuitions and thanked me for providing them with literature about a topic that they are currently dealing with.

That student went on to write one of the best literary analysis papers I have read in a long time, because they connected with what they were writing about.

Now remind myself that research shows that students need to feel a connection to a text in order to engage with it and I provided that connection. Sometimes, as teachers, it can feel as if the whole world can do our job better than we can, but through this website and this experience I have come to truly appreciate the fact that I know my students and I am the one in the classroom with them everyday, and their best interest is all we want for them as educators. I am hoping this website helps another struggling teacher and student feel a connection with a book and allows them to engage in that text, even in these dark times of book censorship.

Overall, this journey has been an amazing experience. Embarking upon my capstone project, I thought reading was important and that students needed choice, but to have the research confirm that, and to then go and design a website where my resources will be showcased, is unbelievable.

I learned how to truly engage with my students and I have watched them build relationships with texts. It was also a learning experience trying to find time in the day to allow for reading and book discussions. Making reading a priority in the classroom is hard and my students sometimes thought I was tricking them by just giving them time to read. They've started asking if today is a reading day, or can we use the last five minutes of class to talk to someone about our books. It's truly a sight to see and it is my hope that other teachers in my school and in the profession will benefit from this capstone project.

Reviewing The Literature

I was inspired to investigate the true impacts of choice and interest on student engagement because those are buzzwords in our education community. In studying the research, I found much to support this claim and the theory behind it. One piece of data that drove my inquiry was the 2019 National Assessment of Education Progress [NAEP] report that said 29% of 8th graders in South Carolina scored proficient or above in reading. In fact, this was 3% lower than the national average. This signals that students are becoming less motivated to read which puts our nation at risk of gaining a generation of nonreaders. This statistic was shocking, but it supported my assessment that decreased motivation causes our students to lose interest in reading. In fact, the majority of students in South Carolina and the nation aren't proficient in reading.

There was also a statement that helped drive my capstone project materials that I found while doing research. According to Nancy Allison (2009), "We now live in a society where students have few reading role models and many competing interests and types of texts beyond the printed page" (p.3). A student's motivation to read something is going to be driven by their interest. As of right now, technology that provides "instant" gratification captivates our nation's youth. Video games, TikTok, Instagram, etc. are all more frequently accessed by American teens than books. Nancy's statement kept me asking myself how I can get students interested in a book that will take longer to focus on than a short video. This is what prompted me to outfit my website with a wide range of engagement resources. Teachers need catchy ways to engage and motivate students to develop the habits of strong readers. Nancy's statement helped drive the resources I was developing for my students such as literature circles which allow for camaraderie with

their fellow classmates and helps motivate them to finish the novel. The statement reminded me that our current generation of students represent a different generation than the teachers who are educating and trying to motivate them to read. Consequently, the same methods that have been used in the past won't necessarily work for these types of students.

One of the most striking reports that contributed to my research was Gallagher's 2010 report that revealed the age at which students appear to lose interest in reading. The study detailed results that suggest students begin to lose interest in reading around the age of 13 and that disinterest typically continues. Truly, my capstone project is essential: if we don't help middle schoolers find a love of reading then they are far less likely to ever find it. This helped solidify that I needed to share these resources with my colleagues and the profession in order to keep students motivated to read.

I also found support in an article written by Allington and Gabriel, titled "Every Child, Every Day," and the article explicitly states that "the two most powerful instructional design factors for improving reading motivation and comprehension were (1) student access to many books and (2) personal choice of what to read" (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 10). This indicates that literature circles and independent reading will be powerful tools in helping improve motivation to read. By providing those resources to teachers it will help them develop motivation in their own students. The article supports what I have created by providing students with many book choices and helping them select books that are going to be right for them and their interest.

In 2015, Scholastic publicized the results of a national survey on adolescents' reading habits. Three critical factors were identified to develop a reading habit: reading

for enjoyment, reading for pleasure, and having more time during the day to read independently (Gambrell, 2015). By encouraging students to find out what they like to read through independent reading they can find reading for enjoyment. Also, by incorporating independent reading into classrooms teachers can help develop a reading habit for students that they will then carry with them for the rest of their lives. Not only does student interest in reading increase, but student motivation and engagement increase when they are allowed to make choices about their own reading texts (Gambrell, 2011). Again, students need time to read and they need to have interest and choice in what they read which is what the research keeps saying.

Implications

The key implication of this capstone is that a student's reading motivation is improved through increasing student choice and engagement. If the district wants to increase reading scores, and even writing scores then use the elements of the website - literature circles; student choice; and engagement. The research beyond my capstone project reinforces the idea that student motivation will increase if students have choice in what they are reading. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that districts start providing students with choice and allowing them time to read independently if they truly want to see an increase in those state test scores. The way educators increase student motivation is through increasing student engagement in reading by promoting texts that are both of interest to and relevant to them. This project seeks to accomplish that goal.

Limitations

The main limitation of this project is something that has been common for years and that is censorship. Educators run the problem of letting a student read a book that

others deemed unworthy. As always, parent permission should be required for any book that a teacher thinks might be questionable. It's hard to know which of these book titles are acceptable and which could potentially be challenged, and a lot of that has to do with the student population and the culture of the school. Different school environments will allow and suggest different titles, so it's hard to provide a website with books for all school environments. However, the resources are meant to be edited, so that any teacher can change book titles and find authors that their students will resonate with and find that connection.

Another limitation is that this project does not allow for a whole class novel. Students do lose that common text. The literature circles allow for a little bit of that shared reading, but it's not quite the same as the class culture that is built when reading a whole class novel. However, the benefits of allowing students to read something they want versus reading something they might not be interested in may outweigh this limit. An educator could still provide short whole class readings in order to develop that shared reading experience if they so desired.

Future Research

Based on what I have already researched and learned through the capstone process, I have several future research recommendations and ideas. In regards to recommendations, I would start planning early how to incorporate the literature circles and independent reading into the school's curriculum. Literature circles take planning to do, because books must be ordered, either through the school or through the students. For the gifted and talented students, most of them were able to obtain their own book. However, the general education students tend to need the books supplied to them due to

lack of resources. So, it's imperative to know your student culture. In terms of independent reading, having a robust classroom library will be extremely beneficial. If that is not doable then having a familiarity with the school's library, so that when recommending books you know what is available to the students.

In terms of future research that would benefit the field of English Language Arts instruction are to further study the impact student motivation has on increased test scores. It would be fascinating to introduce student choice into a group of sixth graders and continue encouraging reading until they reach eight grade and see if their state test scores increase more than a group of students that continued to follow the basic curriculum where student choice wasn't as prevalent. Taking it a step further it would be interesting to see if those same students that had choice made reading a habit as adults. Another area for future study is looking at the impact of peers on student motivation. As a middle school teacher, I see peer pressure affecting students everyday, and it would be interesting to study if students could motivate other students into reading and therefore help them develop a love of reading. This could be done through independent reading and allow students time to talk with each other during the unit. Or even, allow student led book talks where a student recommends a book, and see how student motivation and engagement is affected. Ultimately the question comes down to: What role does peer-pressure play in student motivation in increasing reading habits?

Sharing with Other Professionals

This capstone project has been made using Google sites as an easy accessible website. All the resources on the website are viewable and the user just needs to make a copy and it will automatically be stored in their Google Drive. This means the resources

can be used as they are or the user can edit them to fit their student's needs. This website has been shared with my district's ELA teachers to use how they need to. My sixth, seventh, and eighth grade ELA teachers already have access to the website and have already started using the independent novel sheet and the literature circle slides. My seventh grade ELA team is currently using the literature circle jobs resource for their literature circle unit.

This project will also be stored in Hamline University's Digital Commons, where many future educators will have access to the website. Since this project was designed using Google, a fairly universal format, users will be able to use the resources as they were originally designed or adapted them for use in their specific classrooms. In fact, several graduate school colleagues have already asked to use and adapt the resources on the website for their classrooms. My school participates in Schools to Watch and we present at their conference every year and I have been asked to present this website at the conference this coming summer. The hope is to get this website to as many people as I can.

Benefits to the Discipline of English Language Arts

The essential benefit of this capstone project is to provide already made resources for educators that helps encourage reading in the classroom. By providing teachers with recommendations, slides, and sheets they can spend more time allowing students to choose their reading material and therefore increase student engagement in the classroom. This project should help teachers give students more time to read in class and stress the importance of reading for pleasure. Ideally, this motivates teachers to carve out time for

students to read in literature circles and independently in order to increase motivation and develop lifelong readers.

This project also saves teachers time, so they don't have to create these resources themselves. They can spend time recommending books, learning their student's interest, and helping them learn how to pick books that are right for them. This capstone project will bring more reading back into the classroom without sacrificing instructional time.

Summary

This chapter embodies all of the new learnings and connections of my capstone journey, from the initial research, to the development, to the implementation of the project. Throughout the capstone project, I have endeavored to answer the question *Can providing student choice improve student motivation in a middle school English Language Arts class?* My understanding of research-based materials for incorporating student choice in the classroom has allowed me to create my capstone project: a website with student choice resources that aims to improve student motivation through student choice. The research was explicit that increasing student achievement in reading was dependent on improving student motivation, which can be done through student choice. This chapter also described some limitations this project faced in the heightened political atmosphere of banning books. Finally, this chapter has discussed the future implementations of this project and the benefits it has in the field of education.

Conclusion

My whole journey to completing this capstone project and earning my master's degree has encouraged me to consider all of my teaching strategies, and what outcome they are yielding for my students. As I think back on my early years as a newly-licensed

teacher, I understand that what I learned from those experiences are what encouraged me to pursue this non-traditional way of looking at reading engagement. When I went to school, there were no literature circles or independent reading time. I became a reader because I had books surrounding me at all times. However, as I look at the population of students I teach, they don't have books surrounding them at all times. Reading one book a quarter, as a whole class, wasn't going to encourage them to become readers for life. Something had to shift, and that was how I thought of reading. Literature circles and independent reading is frightening for many veteran teachers because it means letting go of some of that control. However, it also means students finally reading books they enjoy and connect with, versus books teachers enjoy and connect with. Reminding myself that it's about the students and their experiences, not necessarily my experiences, that's important. This led to my excitement to design a website in which other teachers could use and allow their students to connect with characters that understood what they are experiencing, and not continuing to read books because someone said they are "classics". Students need relevant literature in order to increase their motivation to read, so there needs to be a website that is constantly changing to reflect what students are experiencing now in the 21st century. I believe I have made a website that will do just that. This website will continue to grow and reflect the experiences students face in today's climate, and there will be topics that are of interest to them, therefore increasing their desire to read a book. I am hopeful that this project will inspire others to question how they teach reading in the classroom, and hopefully inspire the next generation of readers.

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