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## Joy In Choice: Cultivating A Choice-Centric Literacy Classroom In Upper Elementary

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JOY IN CHOICE: CULTIVATING A CHOICE-CENTRIC LITERACY CLASSROOM  
IN UPPER ELEMENTARY

by Alexandra Thomas Pickell

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Schools have changed in many ways in the past twenty years. Classroom design, curriculum, social-emotional learning, and best practices have all evolved to better meet the needs of today’s students. Reading instruction has been through many changes and iterations, as well. Phonics, whole language, reading for context clues, and

comprehension strategies all ebb and flow as best practices are studied and refined. Meanwhile, there is one thing that has remained a staple of classrooms for as long as the American education system has existed: books. Though literacy instruction has changed over time, the prominence of “real books”—not textbooks or readers—is visible in almost every classroom in the nation. However, many classrooms leave books on the shelf as though their secrets may be revealed to students through osmosis. Is having books around enough? Is making time for reading the key? Is it a particular genre or author which will speak to students so loudly, they become readers? How does real, joyful reading happen in a classroom? That fundamental question still baffles many educators. This capstone project aims to explore the question: *How do teachers initiate and nurture joyful, personally meaningful opportunities for reading in the classroom?* In addition, it aims to give teachers resources and insights to adjust their classrooms to help cultivate more joyful, authentic reading in the classroom.

### **Personal Background**

I have always been an avid reader. I was lucky enough as a child to find books that hooked me early, and my life-long reading habits were established young. I read constantly and had parents who indulged my passion with trips to the library, money for book fairs, and relentless enthusiasm for my book passions. Aside from reading

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veraciously from my public library, I was also involved in a mother-daughter book club that met monthly. In short, it is no miracle that I am a lifelong reader. My experiences with reading have been overwhelmingly positive, supportive, and magical. What is more, reading has transcended school or assignments, and become a part of who I am. Yes, I read for class, or to pursue topics in which I am interested, or to learn more about

something I hear on the news. But more than that, I read because it is a part of who I am—I am a reader, as a part of my core personhood. My childhood experiences and memories are often intertwined with books: my cousin and I read all of the *American Girl* books and then acted out plays and cooked recipes from cookbooks affiliated with the books. We made crafts that were mentioned in the stories and researched about the time periods in the books at our local library. After school, I was part of a mother-daughter book club that met monthly to read and discuss books. We read a number of titles across many genres, and the adults in my life modeled what it meant to be a reader and a lover of literature. My experiences as a child solidified that reading was so much more than a subject in school, it was a source of joy, identity, friendship, and belonging in life.

### **Missing Pieces**

During my years of teaching, I have noticed an upsetting reality: many students are not finding joy in reading. They do not have the passion, the insatiable desire to read, that I was lucky enough to find early on. Reading is a task, and like any task, the goal is to come to an endpoint. While this mindset is enough to get many students to read what is assigned to them, it does students a great disservice by overlooking the many joys of reading that cannot be measured by a classroom task (Miller & Kelley, 2014). This mindset is a shortcoming of the adults in their lives, specifically teachers. When we focus

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on the technicalities of reading we forget its core importance—the magic of reading something you really want to read. As teachers, it is crucial that we find ways to promote literacy in our classrooms that meet standards, are rigorous, and can be measured; however, it is far more critical that we cultivate the kinds of libraries and facilitate the kinds of communities that bring students into the next level of reading—reading for joy

and self-expression. In her phenomenal book *Reading in the Wild: The Book Whisperer's Keys to Cultivating Lifelong Reading Habits*, author Donalyn Miller writes, “Exposing students to lots of books and positive reading experiences while building a network of other readers who support each other provides students with tools that last beyond the classroom setting (2014, p. 71). A classroom which is centered around connecting students with books that bring them joy is, by extension, some of the most important work that we can do as educators. Encouraging lifelong readers rather than classroom readers may seem antithetical to a lot of the extremely fast-paced, standards-driven directives we seem to be given as educators. However, cultivating a love of reading is important both long and short term. “We have two equally important reading goals: to teach our students to read and to teach our students to want to read... Teaching students specific reading skills is important, but it is equally important to give them the time and opportunity to read so that they develop a love of reading.” (Gambrell, 2015). The research is clear: when students feel joy in reading, the traditional “results”, will follow.

### **My Learning Community**

The community where I teach is small—there are just over 27,000 people living in the city, and just under 3,000 students enrolled in the city’s two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The school where I teach serves students in grades

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K-4. There are approximately 550 students. The school is approximately 35% African American, and 18% Hispanic or Latino, that number is growing each year. 17% of the students at the school are English language learners and 73% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. There is quite a bit of diversity in terms of home language, family structure, and housing. While the community itself is fairly segregated by neighborhood,

the school is a place where many communities interact and overlap. There is a distinct pride that you can feel walking through the school, or around the city during a community parade or event—it's not a glamorous city, but people take pride in living here. Though such a close-knit community certainly has many benefits, the need to look beyond the walls of our district is of special importance to these students. These students need to connect with communities that can not only mirror their own understandings of the world, but also broaden their horizons to possibilities outside of our small school and city community (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

Three years ago, our school adopted the literacy curriculum from Collaborative Classroom. This curriculum includes multiple parts, including shared reading, common vocabulary, and importantly, “IDR”, or Individualized Daily Reading. In regards to IDR, the curriculum website states: “To motivate children to read, write, and expand their vocabulary, they must have books that capture their imagination. Students need daily practice reading high-interest fiction and nonfiction books that are carefully matched to their independent reading levels and that appeal to their curiosity and interests.” (Collaborative Classroom, 2019). This part of the reading block is a genre-specific time for students to read any book of their choosing and practice the reading skills associated with the day's lesson using their own book. For instance, after teaching a mini-lesson

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about making inferences, students would read their own fiction book and look for an example of an inference they made. Student share these insights either through writing prompts in the curriculum, or conversations built into the wrap up of the lesson (Collaborative Classroom, 2019). Unlike other reading curriculums I have used before, a good amount of time in each reading block is allocated to independent reading, which I



found very exciting and important. However, there were still issues of helping students choose books, having meaningful discussions, and broadening reading conferences that I still wanted to expand upon. While I hope that my research and project will be helpful to all teachers, I am also writing with the point of view of a teacher using the Collaborative Classroom curriculum and wanting to improve upon the classroom experience with this curriculum.

At the end of my research, my aim is to help the teachers in this community better serve this specific population of students. This project is for all upper elementary teachers who want to re-center authentic learning experiences in their classrooms. However, there will be sections related to the Collaborative Classroom curriculum and integrating this model using that specific curriculum and terminology.

### **Student Interest Driven Reading Classrooms**

There is a great need for further investigation into student interest driven reading classrooms. Most of the online platforms and packaged curriculums available for younger students are entirely teacher-driven, with teachers posting questions for each chapter and students responding in kind. Truthfully, this model has been how I have structured my book clubs for the past few years. However, I know that there has to be a better way to engage students in more meaningful and authentic discussions. Multi-modal learning, or

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learning that happens through a variety of approaches, rather than just one, is good for all learners, but especially those who are struggling (Bromley, 2014). Are there ways to utilize elements of writing, speaking, acting, and drawing to engage learners in multiple ways over the course of a single assignment. In addition, can we appeal to both introverts and extroverts in the classroom, using methods of sharing which are varied and include

choices, and do not require speaking in front of a group in the way that traditional class participation requires? For most of my life, I regarded reading as a solitary pursuit. However, upon further reflection, this is certainly not the case. Again, Donalyn Miller puts it best: “Every book begins and ends with other people- the readers who suggest the book to us and encourage us to read it, the talented author who crafted each word, the fascinating individuals we meet inside the pages- and the readers we discuss and share the book with when we finish.” (2014, p. 92) The goal of bringing a community of readers together is to open the doors to the other people who are a part of our book journeys.

In chapter two, I will explore the literature about current reading practices and trends in the classroom. In addition, I will look at the vast research around student motivation and engagement, and use these understandings to inform classroom instruction.

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## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

This chapter will review the literature about learning communities, literature circles, student engagement, and multicultural literacy pedagogy in order to contextualize the project which follows. This chapter also will offer definitions of various components of reading instruction, in an effort to understand the ways in which these practices inform student learning and engagement. Connections between learning communities and student engagement will also be presented through research around student engagement and identity-building. I am investigating student attitudes in fourth grade classrooms about reading and how those attitudes are impacted by classroom literacy instruction in

order to give teachers customized information about their students to inform their future practice.

### **Authentic Student Engagement**

Authentic student engagement is a critical term to define for the success of this project. Both “authentic” and “student engagement” are educational buzzwords that are thrown around casually, but each has an important and specific meaning in my work. This section will provide a framework of how student engagement is measured and what successful engagement looks like for students and teachers. In this section, I will also explore the importance of student authenticity, and the ways in which teachers can promote positive self-identity through structures in the classroom literature circle.

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**Defining student engagement** “Student engagement” is a major educational buzzword with broad and far reaching implications. It can be broadly defined as meaningful student involvement in the classroom and school community. Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement are all dimensions which contribute to overall engagement at a given time and in a given context (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). A student who is engaged in a community has their needs met, and is having an active role in their own learning. They are consistently on-task and doing what is expected of them not to please a teacher or avoid trouble, but because they are interested in what is going on in the classroom (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Engagement is not obedience: it comes from a place of personal conviction for the child in which they want to participate in ways that are in line with classroom expectations. Furthermore, students tend to be more engaged when content is presented in such a way that it is right

in their proximal zone of development—not too easy, but not frustratingly difficult (Lutz, Guthrie & Davis, 2006). One way to achieve this perfect zone is through scaffolding: the practice of supporting learners needs through instructional, behavioral, or social supports that are just right for the learner (Lutz, Guthrie & Davis, 2006).

**Measuring student engagement** Once student engagement is defined, the question remains: how can it be measured? Engagement is instantaneous—a student might be engaged during one time or context, but become disengaged once the circumstances change. Engagement is inherently multidimensional and dependent upon the context and relationships present at a given time. (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).

Teacher ratings and student self-report studies are generally used to measure engagement, but they are limited by incomplete understandings by the teacher and

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metacognitive challenges in examining one's own engagement on the part of the student (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). One way in which researchers can gather more accurate data is through isolating behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement indicators and measuring them separately. In addition, teaching students early and often how to think about their own thinking (metacognition) aids in students coming up with more meaningful self-reporting (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

**Positive self-identity through engagement** With the rise of high stakes testing and standards-based classrooms, students are increasingly finding that their reading selves and their school selves are two different personas, and often they have wildly different goals and ideals (Miller, 2009). The teacher's job, above all, must be to strengthen students sense of self, both as a reader and as a person. Canned curriculum and reading

the same book at the same time cannot accomplish this goal (Fisher & Ivey 2007). Examining meaningful, student-led discussions, Lloyd writes: “Through the process of asking genuine questions, literature discussions become more than an activity in which the reader is responsible for finding a specific predetermined meaning of the text; the questions invite students to interpret the text by illustrating the meaning and acknowledging the valuable insights each reader brings to the text.” (Lloyd, 2004, p. 121). The role of the teacher is to draw out and honor these insights in the classroom, if learning promoting self-improvement and growth is to occur. In order for reading to be engaging in the classroom, students must see it as personally valuable, a task they are capable of handling, an exercise which is not anxiety producing, and is an activity which is modeled by someone they respect and trust (Cambourne, 1995). Engagement, then,

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must come not from flashy fads or activities, but first from relationships and community building.

**Mindsets** A huge component to student engagement is contingent upon students believing that they are capable learners. When a student tells themselves they are capable of learning and that their struggles are temporary, they are able to achieve at higher levels than when they believe their intelligence to be fixed and unchangeable. Carol Dweck’s research into mindset has provided the educational world with a wealth of information surrounding student mindsets, and how we can use this knowledge of our flexible brains to aid our students’ learning. She explains that intelligence and determination are not static or inborn traits, but skills developed over time. Moreover, she advocates that simply by knowing this fact, we are more likely to open ourselves up to learning (Dweck,

2016). Therefore, with every lesson we teach, we must ask ourselves: does this lesson give students an opportunity to grow? Does it equip them with opportunities to struggle with content, and overcome that struggle? If not, then we are robbing our students of the opportunity to shift their mindset, which in turn, robs them of the authentic engagement that we as educators so desire to see in our classrooms.

### **Literacy Practices: An Overview**

Teachers want what is best for our students. Therefore, we generally try to base our instructional approach around research based pedagogy in order to best support learners.

Though many schools provide a reading curriculum for teachers, many teachers “finesse” or “hybridize” their reading instruction to better suit their students (Kersten, & Pardo, 2007). Teachers might finesse their curriculum by supplementing the existing

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resources with other practices by using stations or once-per-week foundational lessons, while they may hybridize by creating thematic units around the key concepts found in the curriculum, while using the actual curricular resources as supports, rather than the base of their instruction. The components of instruction that are most essential for students, therefore, are not locked in curriculum, but in the methods by which reading is taught. There are likely many different ways that the fourth graders in this study will be engaged in literacy this semester. However, there are a few key components that I expect to see across all of the classrooms: independent reading, shared reading or read aloud, multicultural reading opportunities, and literature circles. These key components to balanced literacy support readers in the areas of vocabulary development, text structures, and comprehension skills.

**Independent reading** What is the purpose of teaching? To me, and I suspect to many other educators, it is to increase student independence so that they can be successful in life even when I am not there. Therefore, it only makes sense that students should spend time each day practicing independent reading. The importance of time in the classroom for students to read independently cannot be overstated. To experience reading as joyful, one must pick up a book of their own selection and allow themselves to get lost within it. Anyone who has fallen in love with a book inherently knows the value of reading purely for joy. But it turns out that regular independent reading has far reaching implications, even beyond joy. In a 2007 report from the National Endowment for the Arts, the benefits of reading were stated thusly: “Regular reading not only boosts the likelihood of an individual’s academic and economic success—facts that are not especially surprising—but it also seems to awaken a person’s social and civic sense”

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(Iyengar & Ball, 2007, p. 6). Reading contributes, therefore, not only to students’ well being in the short term (in school) but to society’s well-being in the long term.

Not all independent reading structures are created equal, however. My own experience as a student in the 1990s was focused entirely on SSR, or Sustained Silent Reading. SSR was focused entirely on giving students time to read in the classroom, following research that showed student growth in all areas of comprehension when they were given time to read at school (Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990). The transition to IR (Independent Reading), according to Fountas and Pinnell, is different in five key ways. These five major differences are: 1-teacher acts as a guide for book selection, 2- students record what they read, 3- students reflect upon their reading, 4- mini-lessons and

discussions are part of the IR time, and 5- the teacher models reading, but also conferences and has discussions during IR. These five differences address some of the problems with accountability and stamina that were present in many SSR model classrooms (Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S., 2001). Implementing these changes allows for more accountability and less wasted time during the reading block. In a study of her third grade students, Trudel found that students spent more time reading and were more eager to share connections to whole group lessons after moving from an SSR to an IR model (Trudel, 2007). Finding a balance between complete freedom and guidance and accountability is key to a successful program.

Gallagher suggests that schools are diminishing a genuine love of reading in four major ways: focusing on developing test taking skills over reading skills, limiting authentic reading experiences, overteaching books, and underteaching books. He also offers solutions to each of these four issues. First, our focus on test taking has created a

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curriculum with more standards than can be taught deeply, and so schools have adopted a “coverage” approach—giving students just enough to get by on a test, but not enough to pique any genuine inquiry. His solution is to teach more depth, even if it covers fewer concepts, in order for students to dig deep into the material. Second, schools are not giving students reading experiences that are in keeping with the type of literate adults they will need to be. “Schools are not doing the job they once did of engaging students in the kinds of reading that enable them to become literate, well-informed adults. Instead, as students progress through our schools, they are forced to read more and more worksheets focused on isolated facts.” (Gallagher, 2010). His solution: allow for more reading



experiences that mirror the outside world, including websites, blogs, newspapers, and other sources that students are likely to have contact with outside of school. Third, in order to address all the standards, teachers overteach books, picking away at every detail in order to meet all standards and, in so doing, diminishing actual joyful reading experiences. The solution he offers for this problem is finding the right balance of giving students just enough support for complex texts. And fourth, the other side of this balance, is underteaching books: giving students a complex book to read independently without scaffolding and framing the book in any way. The solution here is to continue to provide students with background knowledge and supports as they read increasingly complex or intricate texts. In summary, Gallagher explains, our reading classrooms are lacking depth, and in so doing, depriving students of the joy of discovering insights that literature can hold. Other research has sought to find the ways in which student reading joy flourishes in the classroom. Interest and joy can come from knowing one's students and their interest, and from fostering "situational interest" in the classroom (Springer, Harris, &

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Dole, 2017). So often we think about engaging the former and not the latter: by setting up situations that spark inquiry, we can help students find areas of study that are intriguing to them that they may not have considered before (Springer, Harris, & Dole, 2017).

**Choice in books** People (adults and children, both) who feel that they have power and agency in making choices are more intrinsically motivated to take part in those choices. Simply put: when humans are allowed to make choices for themselves, those choices are more meaningful. When students are allowed, or better yet encouraged, to make their own reading choices, they take ownership over the reading process, and are

more motivated to continue reading. (Cambourne, 1995). "Research offers excellent advice on getting students to read: choose texts that matter to students, create contexts in which students find intrinsic reasons to read... and provide time to read in school. . . . When students read widely from books they have selected, they are more prepared to discuss books with their peers and write complex analyses of the themes and ideas. What's more, they are motivated to read more." (Fisher, D., & Ivey, G., 2007). Reducing the whole-class novel approach and increasing autonomy in reading choice increases reading outcomes: most notably: students read more.

**Reading Notebooks** Written response to reading is a mainstay of most literacy classrooms. Being able to express a response to reading through writing is an important skill for secondary skill and beyond, and upper elementary students are just beginning to cultivate that skill. "Written response to literature is a powerful means of preserving those special transactions with books that make reading a rewarding, personal journey." (Hancock, 1993). Asking students to respond to reading in different and diverse ways is also important for recognizing student strengths and unique talents. In addition, we need

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to keep prompts and opportunities relevant and current. "We need to consider ways that students can respond to texts that are in keeping with what they experience in the real world." (Gambrell, 2015). Students may respond by writing in the form of a comic strip or writing song lyrics. The umbrella of written response is broad, and when we find ways to tap into culturally and personally relevant writing for students, we encourage and inspire them. "The classroom teacher plays a vital role in the expansion and enrichment of student response to literature . . . Striving to awaken new modes of response within the

reader is the responsibility of the teacher in the role of facilitator and response guide.” (Hancock, 1993). In short, when we act as guides, allow for change and improvement, and value creativity over the status quo, both students and teachers benefit.

Lastly, it is not just the “what” of reading response notebooks that matters, it is also the “how”. The ways in which teachers introduce and explain written response to reading has a great impact on student outcomes. “Children need to see the purpose in what they're doing. If the reading response notebooks are introduced as busywork then students will see them as busywork, and they won't have fun during silent reading. When I demonstrated and explained why readers keep track of and respond to what they read, the children understood the purpose and they were eager to continue. Our silent reading period became not just a time to practice reading (in that case, struggling readers continued to struggle) but an opportunity for students to recognize and celebrate their skills as readers and improve upon them with teacher support.” (Trudel, 2007). Reading notebooks are a tool for reflection, yes, but they are also a tool to cultivate skills not just in writing, but in the whole process of reading and comprehension.

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**Reading Conferencing** Conferencing with readers one-on-one is a common part of many reading programs in upper elementary settings. These conferences take many shapes, from listening to students read aloud to asking comprehension questions, to having dialogue that sparks student inquiry. In a choice-driven classroom, reading conferences are an important way for teachers and students to understand one another and make connections across literature. “Conferring with readers is a small part of a teacher’s overall instruction in the reader’s workshop, but it can be indicative of other classroom

interactions. In the reading workshop, a major goal is to create lifelong interest in reading...and an educational model of a community of learners supports student independence and development of positive dispositions toward reading.” (Porath, 2014). When discussing books with readers in this context, passion and inquiry are the subject of the reading conference, rather than rote comprehension questions. So how to teachers do this? There are two main rules for student inquiry led reading conferences: talk less and listen more, and embrace uncertainty (Porath, 2014, and Lillege & Crane, 2019). Though generally teachers have many more hours of reading practice than students do, it is key that we do not use conference time to “impart knowledge” but rather to listen to students and draw out their insights. “Listening to students sounds like a simple directive, but active listening requires that teachers are aware of how their own experiences intrude on their ability to focus on the words and experiences of the child. At the same time, the teacher should work toward achieving a shared understanding through authentic questioning of the student that will guide instruction to what the child actually needs rather than what the teacher imagines the child needs.” (Porath, 2014). When teachers come to the reading conference with a vision of what “should” be discussed, we have

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decided what is important to the reader for them, rather than co-creating that knowledge with the reader during the conference. Our presence as teachers must, then, be less about assessing or asking specific questions, and more about co-learning, acting as a guide who is also along for the journey. “[Teachers] need to be aware of how their own interactions may enhance or inhibit the creation of a community of learning- even when working one on-one with students. Recognizing the importance of full student engagement in the reading conference, teachers may wish to adopt [the] mantra of ‘talk less, listen more.’”

(Porath, 2014). This practice will inevitably lead to conferences that are less scripted, and therefore less predictable. We therefore must be willing to come to conferences with a degree of uncertainty in regards to where the conversations will lead. “Our willingness to assume a place of discomfort is closely linked to students’ ability to view uncertainty as a resource rather than a hinderance to learning and enjoying what we read.” (Lillege & Crane, 2019). In our willingness to discuss what is most important to students, we model the joy and the art of reading, not just the science and mechanics that are often the focus of school reading time. “We hope that students see in us readers and learners who, like them, are not always sure of our practice but who embrace the promise in uncertainty. When students see how their ability to articulate generative wondering can connect them to ideas and perspectives that affirm their identities, they find space to grow their understanding and contribute to conversations with others.” (Lillege & Crane, 2019). In releasing control of the reading conference, we affirm students ability to create meaningful dialogue around reading and about themselves.

**Reading aloud** By the time students reach upper elementary, most are capable of reading a variety of texts independently. However, research suggests that reading aloud to

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older students still has many benefits. Reading aloud builds community through shared experiences with common books. They introduce students to books they may not have previously been exposed to, especially books outside of their preferred genres. They support readers who are reading below grade level, and, most importantly, they model reading as a joyous activity in which to partake. (Miller & Kelley 2014, p. 49-50). A book read aloud can also serve as a bridge to social-emotional learning, or integrate into

other subjects. For instance, a biography of a well-known scientist might increase background knowledge before a new science unit, or a historical fiction novel might pique student interest in a social studies event of which they may not have been aware before. Reading aloud offers teachers and students a shared experience with which they can have common language or background knowledge around a subject.

**Shared reading** Similar to reading aloud, shared reading is a strategy wherein the teacher and students engage in reading together in order to comprehend a difficult text. Unlike a read aloud, where the focus is on plot and ideas, shared reading is an opportunity for teachers to model more complex reading skills. A study by Stahl found that “comprehension, vocabulary, text structures, and text features were commonly addressed by expert teachers during shared reading lessons in the intermediate grades” in order to meet the needs of all learners (Stahl 2012, p. 50). A text that might feel frustrating to students independently can be pulled apart and analyzed with a teacher there to guide the intricacies of the text with the students. Many curriculums utilize “big books” where the whole class can see the text together—working through these books is one example of shared reading.

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**Multicultural reading opportunities** What is the purpose of reading? For many young readers, there are two main reasons: to see “mirrors” which affirm their identity and “windows” which open doors to new experiences (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor 2014). For many students, affirming mirrors can be difficult to find in the typical curriculum. The Eurocentric curriculum and texts often used by schools do not do much to affirm the identity of students who see themselves as other, by nature of their race, ethnicity, home

language, religion, sexual orientation, or other identity group. Bishop writes: “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (Bishop, 1990, p. 557). Classroom teachers, especially those who serve many children who are not affirmed in the traditional curricular cannon, must be constantly aware of who is missing from their bookshelves, and who is missing from conversations around literacy in the classroom.

**Literature circles** Literature circles are widely used in many upper-elementary classrooms in order to promote more independent thinking about reading. As students turn the corner from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”, it is important for them to have opportunities to discuss not only comprehension, but word choice and artistry, as well as personal connections, with their peers. Most likely, all fourth grade students will participate in some sort of “literature circle” in their classroom, though the structures and guiding principles will vary widely from classroom to classroom. This section will focus on the differences between literature circles and book clubs, and the benefits of literature circles in the classroom for learning outcomes.

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**Defining literature circles** Literature circles are, broadly defined, a group of students who read the same book and meet to discuss the book together. However, within the academic community, there are many terms and definitions which overlap, support one another, and in some cases, contradict each other. In some research, book clubs and literature circles are used synonymously, while in other research, they are distinctly different communities (Daniels, 2002). In much

of the research available, one of the defining differences between a book club and literature circle is that literature circles have defined roles (Daniels, 2002; Mills & Jennings, 2011). In other research, the defining difference is that a book club discusses only the book at hand, including elements of plot and personal connection, while a literature circle also incorporates literacy discussions around word choice and theme (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

Currently, one of the most oft-cited and comprehensive definitions comes from Daniels (2001) in the form of eleven key components. The essential components of a literature circle as defined by Daniels include student choice, student-generated discussion topics, open and natural conversations, and teachers as facilitators, p. 18). In almost all of the research, these components are the basis of student-led models of literature circles. Student-led and student-driven models have become the preferred method of literacy instruction because of the successful learning outcomes with which they are associated.

**Learning outcomes of literature circles** Collaborative models of learning, such as literature circles, are widely accepted as best practice in many American schools. The quality of relationships between students in a classroom

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directly impacts student learning outcomes. Some of the research surrounding the success and learning outcomes of collaborative and cooperative learning comes out of Johnson and Johnson's research in Minnesota. One of the main aspects of their research is in social interdependence. When goals are structured in such a way that group members have positive social interdependence (collaboration), the



result is that students put in greater effort, have more positive relationships, and benefit from greater psychological health (Johnson, D. W, & Johnson, R., 1999).

Furthermore, the fundamental elements which contribute to successful learning are often embedded in the very fabric of literature circle learning: immersion in books and conversations about books, expectations that students read, responsibility for their own reading choices, and time to engage in reading in the classroom (Cambourne, 1995). Shockingly, these needs are often overlooked, especially for struggling readers. Students in remedial reading settings end up reading 75% less than their on-grade-level peers (Allington, 2012). While the interventions they receive are certainly meaningful and important, they are not immersed in the elements of successful learning which they so need.

**Social elements of literature circles** People are inherently social beings.

Literature circles are one example of a way to integrate social interacting into the school day in a way which fuels our need to express ourselves to others. Furthermore, children learn and grow from their interactions with peers (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). According to social constructivists, all learning takes place in a

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social and cultural context, one which is created and maintained in large part by the words students speak to one another (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

## **The Gap**

Clearly there is no shortage of research when it comes to student engagement or

literacy instruction. The aim of my project will be to create a website that empowers teachers who want to make a change in their methods to encourage their students as independent readers. My aim is to inform real classroom instruction for the particular group of students who will populate our classrooms this year. So much of what happens inside the classroom cannot be captured in the broad strokes of a book or article. It can only come from learners reflecting deeply about what happens in their classroom, and how they have grown from it. Which students in the classroom are feeling affirmed by the literacy instruction? Which students are finding joy in reading? Which students are we putting on a lifelong path of reading, and future success? Using research and scientific data about student motivation, retention, and critical thinking, I want to empower other educators to try a new way of going about reading instruction.

### **Research Questions**

While each of the topics in the sections above has been heavily researched, there is still exploration to be done. While there is some research on the components of classroom reading that make it more joyful and authentic, there are still relatively few resources available for educators to help them implement those practices. I seek to find practices which support all learners, and inspire and cultivate student autonomy, and to share those insights with other classroom teachers. Which aspects of literacy instruction

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do students see as the most engaging? Which aspects do they think help them become better readers? Do these align with what we know about best practices, and what teachers are doing in the classroom? Will differences in instructional techniques between teachers lead to different attitudes towards reading in the students? I aim to answer these lofty

questions by giving some concrete resources for teachers to get started in their practice, not just in their pedagogical framework.

### **Summary**

This literature review has provided a snapshot of the research that has been done in the field of literacy instruction and pedagogy. These best practices are guideposts for educators to follow, and I aim to make these practices into concrete learning opportunities for educators to use within their classrooms. In chapter three, I will outline the key information to be included in my website, and its organization. This information will be built around what we already know about literacy instruction from the literature reviewed in chapter two.

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## **CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

### **Introduction**

Chapter Two: Review of Literature provided information about student choice in reading and current methodologies of reading instruction. Chapter three will illustrate my proposed project and give context to its importance in the current teaching landscape. The methods outlined in this chapter outline the procedure for answering the question: *How do teachers initiate and nurture joyful, personally meaningful opportunities for reading in the classroom?*

### **Overview of the Chapter**

In years past, I have worked with students from kindergarten through sixth grade in both classroom and small group intervention settings. I established classroom

communities from the first day of school as a classroom teacher, and stepped in mid-year to reestablish communities that had been uprooted. In every instance, I found that intentionality in the way in which these communities grow was the key to success. In instances where I stepped into positions mid-year, this was especially true: without building community and centering a classroom around shared values, behavior, classroom management, and ultimately academic success will devolve. I have been interested in ways in which community building could be centered around not only identity and belonging, but centered around learners as readers, with their own voices and decision making powers. I will discuss the rationale behind choosing to design a website for my culminating project, and describe the website itself. I will also discuss the frameworks by which the website will be designed and the plan for making it usable for teachers in upcoming school years.

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### **Project Overview, Participants, and Setting**

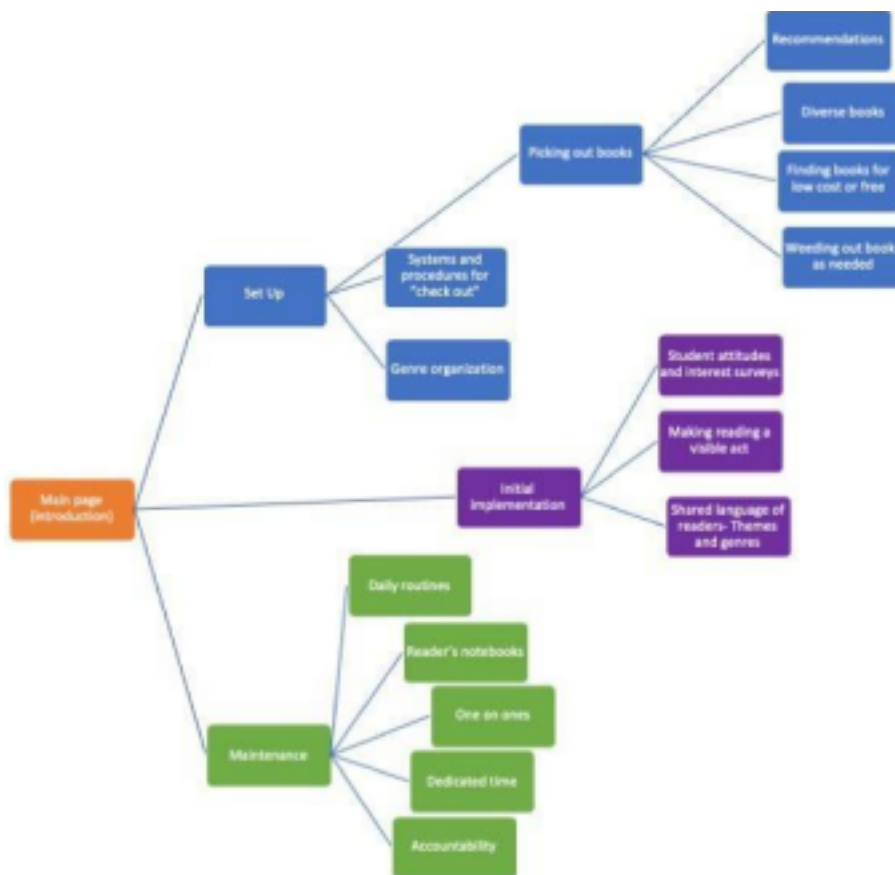
Between curriculum, professional development, district resources, and personal collections, teachers have a lot of resources to reference and managed. Streamlined, research-based online tools are invaluable for educators, because they can utilize searches to find exactly what they want, and online bookmarks to save information they might need in the future. With these functionalities top of mind, I have decided to create a website as a sort of “digital filing cabinet” for teachers focused on student autonomy in reading. The website will serve as a guide to setting up and implementing multiple components of a choice-centric reading classroom. Sections will include procedures for setting up a physical space that emphasizes student choice, as well as guidelines for

establishing a community of readers as a part of community building at the beginning of the year. I will also include practical steps for dedicated reading time, daily routines, and monitoring student accountability.

## Project Format

The website, *Blissful Bookworms*, will be streamlined into major categories. The bulk of the website will fall under three main categories: setup, initial implementation, and maintenance.

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Setup will be focused around curating and maintaining a classroom library which encourages students. Classroom libraries built for authentic reading should be fully integrated into the classroom, not sectioned off into a corner. The classroom is the

library, and the library is the classroom in this type of set up (Miller & Kelley, 2014). This section will contain considerations when purchasing books including the need for diverse books that reflect the school community they serve (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). In addition, it will outline ways in which teachers may choose to organize their collection for optimal student usage. This section will also include resources for finding free and low cost books that are still high quality and of interest to students. Lastly, this section will include procedures for checking out books, going to the library, reading on

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screens, and other considerations that might be useful when creating a classroom library space.

The initial implementation section of the website will focus on what to do with students in those first days and weeks in order to establish routines and get students excited about reading. This section will include initial reading inquiries for students, including surveys about their reading attitudes and reading preferences. In the early days of school, the importance of students seeing themselves as readers cannot be overstated (Barone, D., & Barone, R., 2016). In addition, it will outline the ways in which teachers can “make reading visible” in the classroom from the very first moment (Miller & Kelley, 2014). Lastly, this section will have resources for creating a shared language around books.

Because students will be reading their own books, being able to speak about books through the shared vocabulary of genre and themes are very important, and will need to be introduced early and revisited often. The content on this page is centered around Beers and Probst’s *Notice and Note* system, as well as my own classroom experiences and trials. The “signposts” of *Notice and Note* are a concrete example of how to teach strategies for reading that are generalizable across many texts of many genres.

The last section of the website is maintenance: keeping the systems up and running throughout the year. Dedicated reading time will be addressed in this section, as well as student accountability and ensuring that students are continuing to read throughout the year. The bulk of this section will fall into three subcategories: one-on-ones, readers' notebooks, and daily routines.

Reading conferences are a vital part of the authentic reading classroom, creating a space for dialogue between teacher and student. Drawing upon the literature of Miller and

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Kelley (2014) and Lillge and Crane (2019), as well as reflection upon my own classroom conferencing methods helped in creating this section about conducting reading conferences in the classroom. I will include examples from Lillge and Crane of open ended questions to use during reading conference, and ways of shifting the focus of questioning during the conference to ideas of importance to the reader, rather than to the student (Lillge and Crane, 2019). This section will include information about how to conduct reading conferences, as well as a few different materials for taking notes and keeping track of reading conferences over time.

Donalyn Miller's detailed approach to readers' notebooks has transformed reading in my classroom and changed my approach to "writing about reading" with students. As such, the "reader's notebook" section of the website will help other teachers set up a system for written communication that works for them. This section will outline how to set up a notebook (digital or print) for student record-keeping, drawing heavily from Miller's recommendations as well as my own suggestions from trying reader's notebooks in real middle-grade classrooms.

The “daily routines” section of the website will go over procedures for recording progress in books, tracking reading genres, quitting a book, recommending a book, reviewing a book, and deciding on a book. This section will draw upon literature from Lillge and Crane, Miller and Kelley, and Rothstein and Santana. My own lesson plans for teaching and implementing these daily routines will be linked, as well as examples of anchor charts, checklists, and other visuals I have used in the classroom.

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### **Project Design**

The design and user features of the website will be key to its usefulness to educators. I will create a website with step by step guides for setting up and implementing a choice-centered reading classroom. The functionality that is most important to me in this website is searchability. Many times in my teaching career, I have turned to the internet for a resource or tool, only to find that the piece of information I needed wasn't accessible to me due to poor formatting or incomplete search terms. Therefore, attention will be paid to not only the content on the website, but the user experience of finding that content. I will set the website up with Google Analytics, in order to track keyword searches and adjust search engine optimization as needed to get people to the correct landing pages on the site. Each section of the site will use keywords for easy categorization and search within the site itself, and will include hyperlinks to relevant outside sources.

### **Setting and Participants**

This website is designed for upper elementary and middle school teachers of reading. Teachers in these middle years have a unique perspective of teaching students who have



transitioned from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” and are finding their voices and preferences as readers. Teachers with a desire to empower their students as readers can use the website as a jumping off point to inform their classroom setup and instruction. New teachers, or teachers new to the middle grades, may find these resources especially important as they establish their classrooms as reading-rich environments.

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### **Timeline**

I will complete this website in the fall of 2022 as a part of the capstone project course. I will work with teachers who structure their reading block around student choice and voice, and have specific knowledge of choice-centric pedagogy. The website will be published upon completion in December 2022.

### **Summary**

Chapter three outlined the format and planned design of the website project. It included the audience for this project, and a proposed timeline for completion. It is my goal to create something that can help teachers get started right away, no matter where they are in their journey towards more student-driven reading choice. Chapter four will be a reflection upon the project, including possibilities for its growth in the future. I will reflect upon the creation of the website, the insights I gain along the way, and changes that I make to my original plan. I will also reflect upon ways in which I will continue this work both in the online space and in my own classroom.

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## **CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION**

## Findings

This capstone project aims to answer the question: *How do teachers initiate and nurture joyful, personally meaningful opportunities for reading in the classroom?* My hope in this project is to help other teachers on their journey towards cultivating independent, joyful readers in their classrooms. The increasing demands in schools focus on test scores and data points, but the real crux of the learning that is most important classrooms centers on joy. This website is one tool in an educator's toolbox to help recenter our practice and remember our place in the classroom and the educational landscape at large. In my view, that place is as a guide and co-learner, modeling and expressing joy for students, keeping the magic of learning alive as they progress past their primary years.

This project has morphed many times from its original idea to now. When I first began writing, I planned on doing a research thesis using my fourth grade students as respondents to help me collect data about how students find joy in reading. Over the course of a semester, I came to find that very few students were able to express what they liked about reading, who they were as readers, or why reading was important to them. While students who had these practices modeled at home could somewhat express their thoughts, students whose primary reading environment was school had not learned the introspective, metacognitive tools to reflect upon their reading. Upon realizing this, my focus began to shift from student attitudes to the ways in which we set students up for success to realize those attitudes in the first place. In creating this website and

researching the tools that go along with it, I have learned to more properly model these metacognitive strategies for students, and have re-centered my reading classroom around student need rather than prescribed curriculum. In short, working on this project has pushed me to practice what I preach, and allowed me to reflect upon my own practices as an educator.

### **Literature Review**

Looking at the news or headlines today, you will hear a lot about education being in decline. Reports about falling test scores and student outcomes dominate the news cycle. However, “education” has and always will be far too complex to create one narrative for the entire system. Schools, districts, and classrooms, are all made up of students who are diverse in their backgrounds, their thinking, their talents, and their goals. To paint any system with a broad brush is a mistake, but especially in the world of education, each classroom microcosm is truly unique. The overarching themes in the literature I reviewed may or may not be accurate to the individual teacher’s situation, but they frame the issue of reading in such a way that we can root our pedagogy in evidence based practice. Two of the overarching goals of the literature I reviewed were: giving students time to read, and the teacher acting as a guide rather than an authority.

Giving students time to read in the classroom is a pedagogical practice that has swung back and forth on the pendulum for many years. Many teachers assign independent reading for homework, and while some may have a reading log or tracker, there is little way to make sure that students are not only reading out of school, but understanding what they read. Thus, reading in the classroom is of paramount importance if we are to help readers reach their full potential. “We have two equally important

reading goals: to teach our students to read and to teach our students to want to read...

Teaching students specific reading skills is important, but it is equally important to give them the time and opportunity to read so that they develop a love of reading.” (Gambrell, 2015).

When we open ourselves up to uncertainty and allow student inquiry to initiate discussion, our students thrive and feel seen and heard. We can still teach lessons, impart wisdom, and hold students accountable, of course. But in our daily routines, including reading notebooks and conferencing one on one, there is a lot of time to let student inquiry come to the forefront. In our willingness to discuss what is most important to students, we model the joy and the art of reading, not just the science and mechanics that are often the focus of school reading time. Our presence as teachers in these times, is as guide. Instead of assessing or asking specific questions, we engage in co-learning, acting as a guide who is also along for the journey. “[Teachers] need to be aware of how their own interactions may enhance or inhibit the creation of a community of learning- even when working one-on-one with students. Recognizing the importance of full student engagement in the reading conference, teachers may wish to adopt [the] mantra of ‘talk less, listen more.’” (Porath, 2014). Releasing our role as authority and embracing our role as guide is an important step to cultivating joy in the reading classroom. **Limitations and**

### **Future Research**

In my perfect world, almost all routines, procedures, and lines of inquiry would be directed by students guiding their own learning. In the classroom, even with the best of intentions, this is simply not possible. However, there are small steps that we can take to empower students during the day, while also helping them grow in meaningful ways as

students and as young people. Independent reading is a time to truly let students lead their own learning, and practice our teaching role as guide and counselor rather than holder of information to be taken in. The major limitation of my website is that it is entirely teacher-focused and informed, rather than student co-created. Because of online privacy matters, I made the intentional choice to focus my content on how *teachers* can implement systems that work for them. However, in an ideal world, student input would be of paramount importance for teachers as well. In future projects, I would love to see students come up with their own system of the best ways to share language and experiences around reading.

Another limitation of this project will be individual schools' and districts' policies and flexibility regarding reading material. While many schools allow teachers to choose reading materials, many do not, and teachers have very little choice in book selection. In other situations, some teachers aren't allowed to have classroom libraries that aren't prescribed by a curriculum or the district. As communities continue to ban books, teachers will have to be cognizant of the specific circumstances in which their classroom exists. While I certainly believe that these bans and limitations need to be challenged, I realize that not every classroom teacher will have the support or freedom to do so in their own practice. As educators, censorship in classroom libraries is yet another important topic about which we must make our voices heard.

Lastly, I know that schools are not likely to change their focus on data and test scores any time soon. Therefore, I believe that further study of the impact of reading choice on test scores could be of great benefit to teachers advocating for student choice. I think that longitudinal studies that follow students through school and into their adult

years would be of the utmost importance, as they would show the true results of the effort to cultivate lifelong readers.

### **Communicating Results and Benefits to the Professions**

This capstone website will be available to the public as soon as it is published. As I continue to create and use resources in my classroom, I will continue updating the website links so that other teachers can see the resources. My own created resources that are on the site are linked through Google Drive, making them easy to access and download for educators. In addition, the text of this paper and of the website project will be available on Hamline University's Digital Commons, where other educators can read about my project and the research behind it. My hope is that other teachers will find this information helpful and adapt it for their needs in their own classrooms. Finally, I will continue to share this resource with my colleagues, and hope to share it district wide in order to open up a discussion about how we are fostering independent reading within our district curriculum. In the future, I plan to add more sections to the site that are specific to our district and teams.

The primary benefit of this project is to provide resources and information that aids teachers in encouraging independent reading in the classroom. Ideally, this practice will give teachers back time in their day and recenter joy in the classroom. My hope is that with the creation of these resources, teachers will feel as though some of the groundwork is already set for them, and they are not having to start from scratch. Although no two classrooms will have identical readers or identical setups, my goal was to create resources broad enough that they could be helpful to a variety of classroom teachers. The section "Getting to Know Your Readers" is especially important, as it

informs how the rest of the routines and procedures should be implemented, given the population the teacher is serving.

## **Summary**

This chapter aims to wrap up all of the insights I have gained through creating this project: from the initial ideas to the literature research, to the website creation, to the critical reflection upon my own work. Throughout the process, my aim has been to answer the question: *How do teachers initiate and nurture joyful, personally meaningful opportunities for reading in the classroom?* The project website, *Blissful Bookworms*, includes many of the resources I've created in order to help teachers recenter student choice and reading joy in their classrooms. While there are various limitations to this project, including curricular and district mandates, this project aims to be as universal as possible, allowing for teachers to put the ideas to use in their own unique ways.

When I think back on my experience as a teacher early in my career, I wish that I had more resources that empowered me as a professional, rather than prescribed scripts or other resources that gave just “one right way” to teach reading. As I look at my journey as an educator, I see the value that I've placed on letting go and decentering my experience, and this has only been possible as I've learned and become more comfortable in my role as a teacher. I struggled early in my career with wanting very much not to be authoritarian in my approach, and it has taken me a number of years to find a balance and inner peace that straddles both effective classroom management and meaningful classroom relationships. Reading, in the way that I have laid out in my project, is one way that I have cultivated and come to truly enjoy those classroom relationships. Empowering students as readers has empowered me as a teacher, and given me a new

outlook on how upper elementary classrooms could function, keeping standards high, and curiosity and joy at the forefront of the classroom experience.

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