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The Impact of Prioritization of Independent Reading on Male, Struggling Adolescent Readers' Engagement, Motivation, And Achievement

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THE IMPACT OF PRIORITIZATION OF INDEPENDENT READING ON MALE,
STRUGGLING ADOLESCENT READERS' ENGAGEMENT, MOTIVATION, AND
ACHIEVEMENT

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DEDICATION

So many experiences in my life led me directly to this chosen path. Thank you to my husband, Michael, for supporting and encouraging me in 2002 when I first mentioned I would like to achieve a doctorate someday and the support every day since. For cooking, cleaning, and playing with our children while I locked myself in the office to read or write. For celebrating with me every finished assignment, every aced class, and every other small victory on this journey. You are my absolute everything and this would not have been possible without you.

For my four boys: Luke, Noah, Joey, and Will. You are the reason I jumped in to this program and this problem of practice. I hope that you learn that you can do absolutely anything you put your mind to. Read what you want. Write as much as you can. Never stop learning.

For my parents: Lonnie and Sue Todd. Mom, you fostered in me the love of reading. It is our truest bond and I love that it came from you and guided the course of my entire life. Dad, you showed me that hard work pays off and that it is never too late to further your education for the betterment of yourself, your career, and your family. I hope I have made you both proud.

For my in-laws: Scott and Suzanne Savoie. Your devotion to helping us grow and succeed is evident in everything you do. You showed me that you believe in me and want to support me in my dreams. I am forever grateful.

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I would like to acknowledge my school family: the students, teachers, administrators, custodians, secretaries, and parents with whom I work every day. I am so proud to be a part of our school system and to have my children here.

I would especially like to acknowledge the English language arts teachers within my building. You have opened your hearts, minds, and classrooms to me as a literacy coach and for that I am humbled and grateful. That is why I pursued further learning: I want to better serve you every chance I get.

Thank you to my dear friend and colleague for your invaluable time, encouragement, flexibility, and for the sharing of your classroom and your students while I conducted my action research.

ABSTRACT

To become better readers, students must read more and more, increasing the volume, complexity, and variety of books chosen. While independent reading is the best avenue by which to do this, many teachers still struggle to devote their limited instructional time to independent reading. Specifically addressing the context of my school, there was a clear distinction in gender and reading: boys were falling behind, less engaged, less motivated to read than girls. This research aimed to address the gender gap in reading by making independent reading a priority in the classroom. As a case study, five male eighth graders were studied with a focus on reading achievement, engagement, and motivation. Findings suggest prioritizing independent reading is beneficial for struggling readers: the individualized mini-lessons, read alouds, surveys, conferences, and student work all showed growth for the boys in reading achievement, engagement, and motivation.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

What kind of reader are you? What are the titles of books you have recently loved or hated? What are your strengths as a reader? Fourteen years as an educator of students ranging from age 11 to age 18 -- in vastly different schools, districts, and states -- have gleaned remarkably similar answers to those questions. Every single year, the conversation is very much the same. Students hesitate, avoid eye contact, or laugh off the questions with a shrug of the shoulders. Yearly, at least one student will proudly amuse his peers by announcing, of his own accord, “I have *never* read a book from start to finish” as if this were an achievement. As if somehow not experiencing the vast reading opportunities presented by previous teachers was something of which to be proud. Often, the answer to all three questions is a simple “I hate reading.” I then proceed with my most pressing goal as an educator: spending the school year attempting to change these nonreaders into readers. I have never given up on this focus because one observation and assumption I have made through the years always seems to ring true: when a student says, “I hate it,” this is typically just code for “This is too hard for me.” Most of the time, adolescents do not even realize that this is what they mean. That part is up to me.

The conversations with my students have not changed over the years, even as my professional role has. I am the literacy coach and interventionist for a rural, low-income school district’s one middle school and one high school. Within this context, I continue

to experience students' inability to profess a love of reading, their strengths as readers, or even one specific title they recall reading recently. While this is certainly not true for every student, it is most definitely true for the students with whom I work as an interventionist. While I was a classroom English language arts (ELA) teacher, changing students' nonreader lives was just one of a myriad of responsibilities I took on, and it often became a problem that got pushed to the backburner for more pertinent tasks including everything from high-stakes, standardized test preparations and college entrance essays to parent contacts and special education paperwork. Now that my day-to-day interactions with students focus solely on growing striving readers, I find the ever-present problem to be a major priority. Similarly, as a literacy leader also tasked with growing teachers, recognizing reading problems and discerning effective means to meet those needs is more important than ever before.

Emily, a high school freshman with a bad attitude to accent the chip on her shoulder, firmly told me in our first few weeks together that she would never read a book in her life; she would simply Google what she needs to know to get by. And "get by" she did -- barely. That is, until I began a read-aloud of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008). Each chapter finishes with a cliffhanger, and Emily became one among many in that lower-track English I class who slowly transformed from staring and disinterested to entering my classroom asking, "Will you read to us today?" or "Please, just one more chapter?" To summarize her happy ending Emily bloomed into an outgoing and confident reader who spent her spare time in my classroom showing me what series she was reading next. Many more anecdotes and experiences like Emily's have occurred throughout my career. However, upon closer retrospection, one realization

emerges like a large red flag: every one of those happy stories features a female student. The red flag had been waving for many years, but I have only just looked up to see it.

Problem of Practice

Workman Middle School (WMS) (pseudonym) prides itself on rich history, high expectations, academic rigor, and supportive relationships. These traits drive my considerations as a literacy coach / interventionist and impact my day-to-day work with students and teachers. To maintain high academic rigor, I am tasked with growing our striving and reluctant readers through small group interventions and through co-teaching in ELA classrooms. My rosters of intervention groups, which were determined based on MAP data, teacher observations, and anecdotal notes consisted of more than sixty middle schoolers. The red flag once again appeared into view upon closer inspection of these rosters: 65% of these students were male. These were not the only struggling readers in the building. Grade-level analysis revealed that, of 224 sixth graders at WMS in 2018, 66 were reading below grade level, 49 of whom were male. To put it another way, a staggering 74% of the sixth grade struggling readers were boys. In seventh grade, 61% of struggling readers were boys; in eighth grade, 63% were boys. These data further demonstrated the need to address male reading achievement within this school system.

Globally, this pattern of male adolescents as struggling readers is nothing new. Lipsyte (2011) summed it up: “Boys’ aversion to reading, let alone to novels, has been worsening for years” (p.1). Likewise, Bozack and Salvaggio (2013) discussed the skill deficits commonly found within adolescent readers and also observed that any achievement gains in elementary grades have not maintained just a few years later. Therefore, they emphasize the urgency of the pattern: “The current status of literacy in

adolescents -- and adolescent boys in particular -- has reached a point of triage in the United States” (p. 507).

Literature exploring reasons *why* male adolescents are struggling or reluctant readers focuses on several possible elements. These elements include, but are not limited to, lack of motivation, social identity, brain development, and lack of relevance (Senn, 2012). Additionally, early efforts to provide equity for girls in education caused inverse problems for boys: they are no longer thriving, more withdrawn, less involved, and less academically successful (Brozo, 2010). Now, equity for boys needs to be brought into the limelight because, as Brozo stated, “Boys are being left behind” (p.ix).

Tumultuous is the adjective used to describe adolescence by Gregory and Kuzmich (2005) when considering juvenile developmental stages and connections to literacy learning. Middle school, in this case grades 6 through 8, is a unique stage of development with a focus on self-awareness and relationships with others. The physical, social, emotional, and intellectual traits of adolescents all impact educational development and literacy learning. This coming-of-age time provides new difficulties and new opportunities on which to capitalize, especially when connecting students with similar characters and experiences through literature. These difficulties are further intensified for male adolescents: “The chasm between what teachers think boys should be reading and what boys want to read seems very wide. And our boys are losers for it” (Brozo, 2010, p. 10).

Because the word tumultuous still rings true a decade later and armed with the knowledge that this issue permeates the hallways of my own school, I tried to intervene. Given my role as interventionist and coach, I: not only sought a way to impact the

reading lives of adolescent boys in my small groups, but also attempted to support teachers throughout the school using applicable pedagogy as a foundation for classroom-based interventions. Robb (2000) suggested, “A productive reading program for middle schoolers considers and makes use of research in these areas: 1) strategic reading; 2) motivation and involvement; 3) a workshop environment” (p. 13). Further study describes the teacher read-aloud, independent silent reading, and strategy mini-lessons as key components of a successful approach to improving reading for all students. These components are easily incorporated in a reading workshop model. Many researchers have found direct correlation between reading motivation and achievement, especially moving into adolescence. In fact, researchers discovered “Differences according to grade level and gender, with eighth-grade students demonstrating higher self-efficacy than did sixth-grade students and girls exhibiting higher reading motivation than did boys” (Cantrell et al, 2018, p. 418).

On a grander scale, it is not unknown that reading ability impacts far more than the English language arts classroom and this is a point that cannot be ignored. International studies show time and time again that “Boys have the lowest scores on standardized measures” of assessment and furthermore, “make up the largest group of dropouts and delinquents” (Brozo, 2010, p. 3). This is one of many reasons that my focus on adolescent boys and literacy was so important.

This study was designed to evaluate the impact of a daily, prioritized independent reading model on boys’ reading engagement, motivation, and achievement. The prioritization of at least 20 minutes of an 84-minute reading workshop block included independent reading, one-on-one reading conferences, teacher read-aloud, and book talks

– in order of importance. The intervention group was comprised of five students, identified based on a combination of formative assessments, teacher observations, and reading inventories, who each identify as male. These students were all reading well below grade level but were willing to participate.

It was my hope that relevant findings would help these boys grow as readers and inform me in my ability to influence change as a leader. In fact, an equally pressing ambition is that the findings assist in my role of coaching English language arts colleagues toward prioritizing independent reading in each of their classrooms throughout the middle school building in a consistent manner. Through a process of scaffolding, I will gradually release this model and new learning into each ELA classroom for a larger impact at my school in the upcoming school year. Efron and Ravid (2013) stated that “the workability of the methods and the usefulness of the results are the most important factor in planning the [action research] study” (p. 46). The new learning achieved from this action research became serviceable not only in my small groups, but in English language arts classrooms across the building.

Theoretical Framework

This action research was approached from a lens of gender-relevant pedagogy (GRP) theory with additional framing from engagement theory and expectancy-value theory. Defined as “a teaching practice that requires practitioners to examine how they have formed learning conditions that enable or constrain boys’ learning” (Bristol, 2014, p. 61), GRP guided my examination of potential causes for the literacy achievement decline within male students and guided my provision of practical strategies to better facilitate the needs of male learners. GRP included first gaining an understanding of

gender intricacies, then developing and applying a pedagogy that was engaging, meaningful, and effective according to those new understandings. Bristol (2014) argued that GRP framework will not only increase achievement but will also increase student engagement through learning opportunities. Lastly, one example of GRP framework in action showed that students' individual beliefs about what they themselves were capable of doing improved, which directly coincides with expectancy-value theory (Welch, 2007). This study utilized GRP to guide the process of literacy interventions for male adolescents and shared the pedagogy with colleagues to increase contextual impact over time. Delamont (2002) stated that "the deployment of theoretical or analytical concepts is what separates social science from journalism" (p. 20); therefore, it was appropriate to guide this study with foundational concepts from gender-relevant pedagogy theory.

Engagement theory guided my beliefs when considering intervention approaches to my problem of practice. Defined as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning" (Pittaway, 2012, p. 3), engagement is a fundamental starting point for intervention. Pittaway described four key principles to the engagement framework, which provide the underpinnings of my interventions: To engage students, we as faculty must also be engaged; relationships are key; responsibility for learning is given to the student; and, scaffolded higher-level skills are developed when well communicated. Both boys and girls in my intervention groups needed to be engaged personally, academically, intellectually, and socially to succeed.

Finally, expectancy-value theory guided my focus on boys' engagement, motivation, and achievement because of its principal belief: The success of each student, in this case male readers, depends on their individual subjective feelings about what they

expect to be able to do. “When students believe that they are competent readers and expect that they will be successful at reading tasks, they are more likely to achieve at high levels in reading” (Cantrell et al, 2018, p. 418). Students’ beliefs about ability will impact their achievement. Creating attainment value by establishing the importance of reading for each student, especially intrinsically, assisted in motivation. Additionally, utility value of expectancy, or extrinsic motivation, also impacted these readers. This knowledge and theoretical framework provided the lens through which I saw my work with male adolescent readers as a literacy coach.

To create gender equity by increasing literacy achievement for male adolescents, I focused my work on gaining understanding of gender learning differences, creating engaging and interest-based lessons that also motivated and culminated a growth mindset, ultimately giving each student a stronger belief in what they thought they could do.

Figure 1.1 shows that each theory is interrelated.

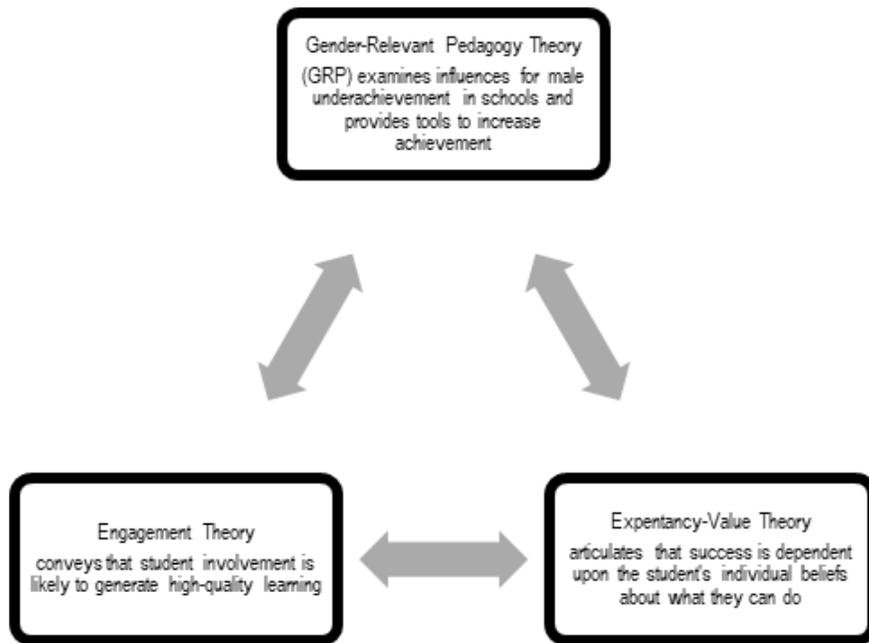


Figure 1.1 *Three Major Frameworks Provide Initial Lens for Study*

In summary, Lynn, Benigno, Williams, Park, and Mitchell (2006) pointed out that “theory can provide us with the tools to not only examine inequalities and their root causes, but also to work toward the development of ‘projects’ aimed at transforming existing inequalities” (p. 19). Not only did I examine root causes of reading struggles for adolescent boys, but I also prioritized independent reading that engaged and motivated all adolescent readers and, as a result, increased achievement and gender equity.

Research Questions

To meet the problem of practice head on, I approached my case study participants with a focus on independent reading within a balanced literacy classroom. Lynch (2018) defined balanced literacy as “a curricular methodology that integrates various modalities of literacy instruction, which are aimed at guiding students towards proficient and lifelong reading” and easily integrates the components needed for successful independent reading programs: read-alouds, shared reading, reading mini-lessons, independent reading, small group work, and assessment (p.1). Balanced literacy is just that: a balance of many skills in a short amount of time.

In the context of WMS, this action research study was attainable through the reading workshop model because it lends itself to multitasking with a balance of reading, writing, and vocabulary study. These elements allowed me to get to know each individual student and learn about their reading struggles, reading abilities, reading preferences, and motivations. Through this format, I was able to provide differentiated strategies to each student based on their individual needs. Within workshop time, I prioritized independent reading through one-on-one conferencing, read-alouds, and strategy work. Due to my position as a literacy leader, I chose this specific prioritization

because it will transfer well within the ELA classrooms. I wanted to “practice what I preach” before I preached it. I wanted to show the effectiveness of these practices and provide specifics to my colleagues in order to coach the process throughout the building with all students, not just my struggling boys. Because of this problem-based intervention process, one overarching question guided my work:

What is the impact of prioritizing independent reading on male adolescent reading achievement? Additionally, two sub-questions were also investigated:

1. How does integration of personal interests impact reading engagement in male adolescents?
2. What is the impact of individualized reading strategies and texts on male adolescent motivation?

The elements of focus within these questions connect engagement, expectancy-value, and gender-relevancy through a balanced literacy, reading workshop approach and greatly informed and improved my practice as a literacy coach and educator.

Research Positionality

A product of the public-school system, I myself experienced an educational upbringing that encouraged females to succeed academically. In fact, as the third of four children and the first girl, I felt compelled to meet and exceed my older brothers’ exceptionalities. I was an overachiever in everything: sports, academics, and part-time after-school employment. I graduated from high school with many college credits from a local community college. I completed my Bachelor of Arts in English Language Arts Education in only three years from Wright State University. Immediately, I achieved my Master of Education in exactly one year. I was the first of my family to obtain a master’s

degree. The majority of my peers in college were female and they were as driven and overachieving as I was. After 12 years as an educator, my position evolved into more leadership and change-making than ever before. The patterns of gender inequity grew in breadth and depth as I have acknowledged and paid closer attention to them.

As the literacy coach working directly with the adolescent male readers, my position was that of an insider-researcher. Committed to the success of my action research, and truly learning to learn, it was my genuine desire to improve my own practice as a coach and leader (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Within the context of interventions as a literacy coach, students are pulled out of their normal class during computer time. This was an opportunity that I used to my advantage and helped with student engagement and motivation because my students knew that I did not give them grades. While this point could be cause for students to lack effort, I found that the opposite was true: since the pressure was off, students were more motivated to try and work with me.

I acknowledge that being a female and a figure of authority in the boys' reading lives may have impacted the study. Additionally, on a more personal note, I acknowledge that, as a mother of four boys, bias could create temptation to "put a positive spin on data", as Herr and Anderson (2015) cautioned. Validity criteria helped create equity in my position. The interventions used through the balanced literacy approach were true and researched best practices, which, no doubt, positively impact all readers.

Research Design

Although traditional educational research has contributed much to the field of education, the nature of this project lends itself more explicitly to an action research methodology. Action research focuses on the generation of knowledge and contextual understandings. The process requires a thoughtful and systematic approach, reflection, and often, collaboration (Herr & Anderson, 2015). For the purpose of this study, I undertook the primary steps of action research: developing a plan of action to improve male adolescent achievement, implementing the plan of prioritizing independent reading in the small group setting to meet boys' interests and needs, observing the effects of the intervention, and reflecting upon any effects. Subsequent action will occur in two different forms as a result: the effective aspects of interventions will be shared with colleagues and so they may be able to apply methods within their own classrooms. This action research project provides true external validity within the context of my school.

Within the study, I conducted convergent mixed-methods research. This design “occurs when the researcher intends to bring together the results of the quantitative and the qualitative data analysis so they can be compared or combined” (Cresswell & Clark, 2018, p. 65). Reading engagement and motivation are insightful underlying reading concepts, warranting use of qualitative measures of data collection, whereas reading achievement is more numerically computable and appropriate for quantitative measures. Since “The goal of mixed-methods research is to draw on the strength of both quantitative and qualitative research to enhance school improvement” (Efron & Ravid, p. 46), it is an ideal design. Reading motivations impact reading engagement, which

impacts reading achievement. The concepts themselves converge, which is why converging qualitative and quantitative measures was appropriate for this study.

Within convergent mixed methods research, an evaluation design allows both data types to be collected to focus on “Evaluating the success of an intervention” (Cresswell & Clark, 2018, p. 106). The intent of my action research was to evaluate the success of prioritized independent reading specifically with adolescent male readers. Because the overall objective in evaluation designs of research is to evaluate a program or process, this methodology was suitable.

The strategic modes of research design described here promote true rigor and quality throughout the process. The evaluation design itself provides outcome validity in this study, which forced me to reconsider the problem of struggling adolescent male readers in many profound ways. Democratic validity occurs due to the local nature of the problem. The results provided new learning for my own small group interventions in literacy, and also within each English language arts classroom throughout the building. Similarly, “The most powerful action research studies are those in which researchers recount a spiraling change in their own and their participants’ understandings” (Herr & Anderson, p. 69). As a lifelong learner myself and as a change agent leader within the school, close monitoring of new learning and changes therein was at the forefront of deepening my understandings during and after this process.

This convergent, evaluation mixed-methods design took place in a small classroom centered within Workman Middle School. I serve a faculty of more than 40 teachers and a student population of almost 650. WMS is a small, rural school in South Carolina that services mostly low-income families. Dubbed “The Lit Room”, my

classroom consists of a large classroom library, several student tables, one small-group kidney table, and teacher workstation. There are also several comfortable reading chairs. This context and environment are important to the success of a reading classroom setting. The students served in the Lit Room receive literacy interventions on a weekly basis. The participants involved in the study were eighth grade boys identified as needing reading interventions through a rigorous process developed by the school and implemented by the ELA teachers. A typical intervention group is between 3 and 6 students.

Four specific instruments of data informed this study: NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) data reports, Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA), Reading Conference logs & transcripts, and additional artifacts & documents. MAP data provided a myriad of quantitative information which informed the intervention, including student reading growth, Lexile reading levels, weaknesses, strengths, and formative reading achievement. DRA is an assessment given prior to intervention, during (called progress monitoring) and after; it provided both qualitative and quantitative data on each reader's motivations, engagement, fluency, and comprehension achievement. Reading conferences were conducted before the intervention cycle with individuals to gauge reader interests and needs, motivations and engagement. Due to the convergent nature of this research, additional artifacts were useful to create an all-encompassing perspective of the intervention for evaluation. These artifacts included reading engagement inventories and student work samples. These data created a full representation of male readers' motivation, engagement, and achievement throughout the intervention cycle.

Data analysis within a convergent mixed methods design should “Develop results and interpretations that expand understanding, are comprehensive, and are validated and confirmed (Creswell & Clark, year, p. 221). Results from the action research study were compared, organized into concepts of engagement, motivation, and achievement via several joint displays. These results were analyzed to determine whether they confirm, disconfirm, or expand each other. Connections between the quantitative and qualitative data provided a deeper understanding of male adolescent readers who struggle academically.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to the field of adolescent literacy, a growing field considered a ‘hot topic’ in education. In fact, the National Council of Teachers of English recently published a call to action, identifying the need to research, act, and critically examine the specific nature of adolescents and what adolescent readers need (NCTE, 2018). Additionally, the independent reading prioritization is highly effective in elementary grades. However, the at the middle school level is knowledge relevant to the local, state, and national contexts. Middle schools, intermediate schools, and even high schools will benefit from this study by gaining an understanding of prioritizing independent reading at an adolescent level and by gaining a deeper understanding of the problems facing male adolescent readers.

At Workman Middle School, growing our students is a serious endeavor. Year after year, state assessments indicate that students are reading below grade level at an increasing rate. Implementing a independent reading prioritization within my own classroom will be the first step in sharing learning with colleagues. Through future

coaching cycles, I will use my role to guide teachers into similar approaches both with independent reading and meeting the unique needs of male adolescent readers.

Limitations of Study

One limitation of the study is the lack of random sampling of participants. Student participants are selected based on reading ability, attendance records, discipline considerations, and gender. This limits the generalizability of the results. Another limitation is the unique role of my position as the researcher practitioner. Another limitation of the study is the timeframe of achievement. The ideal study of this nature would examine students throughout their reading growth of an entire school year, maintaining data collection comparable to one year's growth in reading achievement. Being that the intervention only lasted 12 weeks for the purpose of this action research, generalizability is further limited.

Organization of the Dissertation

After introducing the problem of practice, a literature review first focuses on male adolescent readers. Research reviewed includes exploration of root causes for male adolescent reading struggles, from brain development and impact of puberty to societal expectations. Chapter Two also includes additional research on adolescent literacy and the many components related to independent reading. Following the review of literature, a detailed chapter of the research design and methodology explains the process conducted during action research, including rationale, process, participants, data collection, and data analysis. This section, Chapter Three, provides the narrative and explanation of the entire process from start to finish including discussion of monitoring and adjustment observed during the action research. Chapter Four analyzes the results of quantitative and

qualitative data collection methods, respectively. Then, new learning on the male readers' motivation, engagement, and achievement is converged from close analysis within further discussion. Finally, the dissertation concludes with interpretations, generalized findings, and recommendations discerned from the action research. Specifically, it demonstrates the effectiveness of a prioritization of independent reading model with recommendation to implement it in all ELA classrooms within my building. Overall, the prioritized approach has been a truly powerful learning experience for all stakeholders involved.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is no secret that boys are falling behind. According to Whitmire (2010), it boils down to literacy: “If forced to conjure up a single sentence summarizing what I learned researching this book, it would be this: The world has gotten more verbal; boys haven’t,” (p.28). In fact, Whitmire asserted that across the nation, male readers are not keeping up. The faculty at Workman Middle School agreed that our boys are falling behind in reading. During ongoing observations of English language arts classes at WMS, male readers were frequently less engaged and less motivated to read than females within the same class. As a literacy coach and interventionist, helping students reach their potential, especially in literacy, is of utmost importance. During small group interventions, more than half of the students requiring intervention were male from every ELA class, building-wide. Multiple measurements of reading, including MAP growth reading assessment and Development Reading Assessment showed that males are struggling in reading, falling behind a grade level or more. For example, the majority of my male students in 2020 were reading on a third or fourth grade reading level.

Decades of research on gender inequities in education suggest that physical, cognitive, social, and emotional differences all contribute to the problem of boys falling behind. Physical differences include biology, neurology, and chemistry of hormones that vary between boys and girls (Sax, 2016; Whitmire, 2010). Cognitively, socially, and emotionally, boys have different motivations, urges, impulses, and interests -- all of

which impact their learning. Closer analysis of root causes guided this action research intervention.

The purpose of this action research study was to evaluate the impact of prioritizing independent reading on male striving readers' engagement, motivation, and reading achievement. Student participants were 8th grade English language arts males in a low-tracked class within a Title One school. Prioritizing independent reading means that the 84-minute ELA block will devote at least 20 minutes daily to independent reading components like silent time to read, reading conferences, book talks, and shared reading opportunities. Therefore, the main research question guiding this action research was: What is the impact of prioritizing independent reading on male adolescent reading achievement? Additionally, two sub-questions were researched:

1. How does integration of personal interests impact reading engagement in male adolescents?
2. What is the impact of individualized reading strategies and texts on male adolescent motivation?

This review of literature analyzed relevant theoretical frameworks, considered historical perspectives and gender equity in education, and explored the potential causes of male adolescent struggles. Additionally, related research on adolescent literacy, independent reading, reading motivations, reading levels, reading conferences, and shared reading experiences were analyzed to guide the intervention at WMS. Lastly, the review of related action research and similar intervention approaches were considered to affirm and further guide this action research.

Methodology and Purpose

To be most effective in impacting real change as an action researcher, one must first consider the prevailing knowledge base about a given topic before taking action (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). In doing so, a progression of critical considerations around the problem of practice occurs. Further brainstorming, alternative perspectives, and expanded ideas bloom throughout the process. Familiarizing myself with the current research related to boys and literacy and then synthesizing that collection of information is an experience that proved beneficial as a practitioner (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

What began as a curiosity about the high number of boys on intervention group rosters became a highly important exploration into the gender inequities, gender differences, and gender needs in education and literacy. Starting with the most current and relevant literature within the last five to seven years, commonalities emerged about the gender gap and struggles with adolescent boys and learning (Mertler, 2014). Expanding the range of literature back as far as the 1970s, the same commonalities were being discussed in various ways, saturating the topics but providing historical context. Each inquiry proved helpful to my role as a literacy coach and personally meaningful as an educator and mother of four boys, just as action research should (Efron and Ravid, 2013). Indeed, skimming the texts, re-reading, annotating, and summarizing research over the course of several years allowed common themes to emerge. These themes became the keywords to guiding further research. Using databases such as ERIC and Education Source, articles, action research projects, and dissertations in practice were taken into consideration using Boolean phrases that included many combinations of the following: boys, literacy, gender inequities, gender gap, reading motivations and reading

engagement. Later, the intervention-specific terms were added to the keyword searches: independent reading, conferences, book talks, gender differences, adolescent literacy, balanced literacy, and more.

Professional development experiences provided supplementary research opportunities. From the fall semester of 2017 to the present, I have learned through VirtualSC PD, which is an online professional development platform for South Carolina educators. While there are a myriad of course offerings, my focus was on achieving the required Read to Succeed endorsement required by the Read to Succeed Act 284 legislation (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). Each course required study and analysis of many articles related to literacy, several of which I found applicable to my dissertation work. In fact, numerous articles evaluated within my Read to Succeed coursework encouraged and affirmed my focus on increasing student literacy achievement at the middle school level. Coursework on content area reading and writing, foundations of reading, instructional practices in reading, and assessment of reading provided many resources used throughout this literature review.

Additionally, researchers in the field of literacy, such as Atwell (1998), Gallagher (2009), Kittle (2013), and Serravallo (2015, 2018) came to mind as I perused texts about middle and high school reading. I accessed some from public libraries or the WMS literacy room, listened via Audible, and read others after purchasing online. Throughout this process, I organized every piece of literature alphabetically after reading and annotating. Maintaining an annotated bibliography from day one also proved to be a powerful strategy in recalling pertinent texts and identifying patterns in the literature.

Lastly, analyzing the sources provided within and cited by other substantial texts allowed me to identify additional sources of relevance to my problem of practice.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, many frameworks guide this action research. Key in determining how to progress through a gender-based action research project is the application of multiple theoretical frameworks. As Warren (2007) asserted, a framework that focuses solely on gender is only one step of the puzzle. Utilizing other frameworks that relate specifically to a researcher's context and goals holds equal importance. Therefore, the first of many frameworks guiding this research is that of gender-relevant pedagogy (GRP). Defined as "a teaching practice that requires practitioners to examine how they have formed learning conditions that enable or constrain boys' learning", GRP provides guidance and strategies to improve achievement for underperforming boys (Bristol, 2015, p.61). Specifically, GRP process encourages educators to focus "on boys' gendered everyday interests, create a bridge from these students' interests to the content, and then design an assessment that align[s] with the course's goals" (Bristol, 2015, pp.63-64). GRP also encouraged the desire to find texts and opportunities that are interesting and important to the boys in my class.

The prioritization of independent reading is an intervention exhibiting gender-relevant pedagogy in many ways. First, focused time was spent on discerning the boys' unique interests, through surveys and conferencing. Recommendations were made to individual male readers based on their ability levels and personal interests. Further bridging their interests to the content, reading skills and English language arts standards taught related to their independent reading in an ongoing manner.

Expectancy-value theory proclaims that students who believe they will not do well, usually do not; likewise, students who expect to succeed usually do (Meyer et al, 2019). Additionally, expectancy-value suggests that an individual has higher success when he or she attaches a higher value to the task itself. Related to reading, expectancy-value researchers have found that the traits of the theory are always “possessed in abundance by individuals who are engaged readers” (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p.226). This leads to overall higher reading achievement in literacy and standardized tests alike. Therefore, elements of expectancy value guided how students were approached, encouraged, and expected to perform. Building relationships with each individual student through the initial reading conferences allowed me to boost their confidence, and ultimately, their expectancy value. Achievement, no matter how small, was an important aspect to celebrate during independent reading time.

Specific to the context and content of this problem of practice, two literacy frameworks further guide this action research project: transactional theory of reading Rosenblatt (1982) and reading styles theory (Martin, 2016). Rosenblatt (1982) determined that “reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (p.268). She identified two specific purposes for reading: the efferent stance, in which a reader transacts with text in order to glean information; and the aesthetic stance, in which a reader transacts with text for pleasure.

The stance a reader takes greatly impacts what he or she obtains from the reading. While a literate adult has the subconscious ability to take one stance over the other automatically, a young reader must be taught how to focus while reading. In other words,

teaching readers from an early age that the process of reading is purposive and powerful, no matter what the context is, will set the stage for natural emergence of both stances of transactional reading. While both the efferent and aesthetic stances are experienced through independent reading, most important to me is that the latter stance bloomed within each male reader through this process. Indeed, guiding my male novice readers toward more enjoyable reading experiences was of utmost importance. Figure 2.1 shows the frameworks combined that directed this study.



Figure 2.1 *Categorized Theoretical Frameworks*

Extending the work of Rosenblatt (1982), Martin (2016) introduced the reading styles theory, which identifies four main styles of reading: efferent (what the reader takes from the text), aesthetic (the experience of reading), public (communal, with and for others), and private (personal, with and for the self). Interestingly, results from Martin's (2016) research suggest that readers prefer aesthetic, private experiences transacting with text – a powerful note, since most reading that occurs within school is likely to be both efferent and public in nature. What is important for educators and for this problem of practice is that Martin's (2016) theory encourages “Educators to consider the benefit to students (and themselves) in understanding and learning to distinguish where and when to adapt one or another reading stance” (p.36). By doing so, a reader can better transact

with the text altogether – which is ultimately the desired result of my action research project.

In summary, improving boys' reading, in an effort to close the gender gap in education, is a multifaceted approach. Analysis of gender-relevant pedagogy guides the book choices and activities for boys in my intervention group. Expectancy-value guided the rapport and classroom environment necessary for boys to feel successful as they approach reading growth. Understanding of reading styles and reading transaction also assisted in meeting boys' individual and unique needs as striving readers.

Historical Perspectives

Historical notions of what it means to be literate and notions of gender have changed immensely. Literacy in 1800s England, for example, was focused on improving the conditions for workers or gleaning political prowess (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Indeed, one only became literate for a specific purpose or gain. Later in the century, it was a truly negative concern of the working-class that male adolescents were spending too much of their masters' time reading instead of working. Fast forward to modern day, illiteracy is deemed unacceptable and shameful, because one must "use their literate power to exercise personal power and choice" (p.17).

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) show how gender inequities in literacy have been at play for decades. One example was astounding: "In a later IEA study begun in 1988 and involving thirty-two nations, girls achieved higher total reading scores in all modes" (p.2). Many studies done by many different experts convey the same growing inequity within gender and literacy, but various possible causes are where each study varies.

In more than three decades as an educator, Brozo (2010) observed disengagement and literacy struggles with male students. Even as a rudimentary and novice educator, Brozo knew boys were falling behind, even reporting that some high school boys admitted to not being able to read (2010).

Sax (2016) had a unique position of being both a PhD psychologist focused on scholarly research, while also being a board-certified family doctor who has met with thousands of concerned parents and families for more than fifteen years to explore boys' struggles in school and beyond. His work synthesized decades of research and is aptly titled *Boys adrift: The Five factors driving the growing epidemic of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men*. Those 5 factors included: changes at school, video games, medications of ADHD, endocrine disruptors, and the transition to adulthood. Each item was explored with examples from his work and argued that current elements are driving the epidemic. An epidemic it is -- historically prevalent and ever-growing, boys are losing in education as a result.

Gender Equity in Education

Gender inequality is a social injustice that has significant social and cultural impact, none greater than education. Gender research truly began to develop in the 1970s (Francis & Pachter, 2015). As gender roles, identifiers, stereotypes, and definitions have evolved, so have the educational opportunities and the educational needs. As the old adage goes, fair is not everyone getting the same thing; fair is everyone getting what they need in order to succeed. As gender explorations and evolution continued in the late 20th century, academic decline suggests that every student is not getting what they need in order to succeed.

Jones (2008) argued that literacy teachers can be and must be leaders for social justice: “The teaching of language and literacy is a democratic act inextricably linked to issues of emancipation and empowerment” (p. 9). Literacy teachers, then, are charged with teaching students how to critically think and read in the real world. With critical pedagogical knowledge and key instructional strategies, literacy teachers have the opportunity to provide students with exposure to social injustices, the language to effect change, and practice with critically reflecting upon differing viewpoints. Shared reading experiences, like book clubs and response journals assist in approaching social injustices within the literacy classroom and are vital to growing students toward social justice. Indeed, “Social justice leadership demands that organization members consciously attempt to engage in dialogue about a level playing field” (pp.13-14). By constantly exploring what the level playing field truly is, students will grow democratically in favor of social justice.

Gender equity is one of many social justice filters through which all literacy considerations should be made. Through the process of constructing meaning with texts, literacy is truly “unique to each individual exclusive of gender and supports the differences in student experiences in our classrooms” (Velluto & Barbousas, 2013, p. 7). In fact, “Adolescent boys need special attention with respect to their literacy development and attitudes” (Brozo, 2010, p.3). Understanding the unique needs of male adolescent learners and meeting those needs, is my hope as an educator and researcher.

Through the framework of gender-relevant pedagogy, Bristol (2015) explored the lives of young males and literacy, to discern what specific characteristics perpetuated their struggles with reading. He found an obvious need for gender-centered curriculum:

teachers must create learning experiences that are meaningful and engaging to girls and boys alike. Bristol also observed that boys were more engaged in literacy activities when they felt that they had the ability to achieve within the task – expectancy-value theory yet again being enacted.

Gregory and Kuzmich's (2005) research provided a quick view resource of basic strategies for growing literacy in different diverse student groups, including gender groups. They suggested that the biggest roadblocks to literacy, when it comes to boys, include: boredom, lack of relevance, lack of interest, lack of choice, and lack of autonomy. Likewise, they suggest that prioritizing personal interests, purposes, relevance, choice, and more will aid in growing students in literacy. Only through knowledge of what each gender needs can we provide the tools to grow them and close the gender gap.

In an analysis of professional development practices, Towery (2007) explored teachers' perceptions of school climate, specifically focusing on gender inequity and their perceptions on how to handle inequities within school. Gender equity in school is no easy feat and requires much of the educator: personal reflection, awareness, and willingness to change. Gender-focused education is a clear necessity. Towery (2007) observed that teachers lacked awareness of gender inequity within the context of their school. However, through reflective professional development, it is possible to guide teachers to disrupt biased behaviors in order to create more gender- equal curriculum.

One contextually larger implication of this focus on gender equity lies in the application within WMS. Curriculum, book choices, authors, texts, art, music, and more must all be gender-relevant and include a myriad of topics for each unique learner. As

literacy coach and interventionist, my leadership role is vital to increasing the gender equity throughout my building and, as a result, increasing literacy achievement.

Root Causes of the Gender Gap

Historically, male underachievement has been blamed upon many factors. Biological determination is often the main cause to blame. Boys' behaviors are riskier and aggressive, attributed to higher levels of testosterone (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Likewise, boys have a higher need to be active, require louder sounds, prefer visual teaching styles, and tend to enjoy nonfiction or historical texts (James, 2015). Kitchenham's (2002) continuum of gender differences suggests that boys' behavior and interests are based upon societal masculinity expectations, rather than biology. Boys are often subconsciously taught what it means to be a boy, and, unfortunately, reading is seen as a girlish task.

Before successfully closing the gender gap, one must further develop their knowledge base of the many possible underlying causes. Many experts believe that biological determination is the main cause for the gender gap in academic achievement. In fact, Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) summary of the literature sanctions that boys' testosterone "propels them toward activity, risk taking, and more overt forms of aggressive behavior", which damage their ability to function successfully in educational environments (p. 5). Through the lens of social construction, however, they argue that biology does impact boys' behaviors, but that gender is more of a social construction -- a perspective that more directly assists educators in preparing to help their students achieve. In an effort to summarize their research on boys and literacy, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) provided a lengthy and authoritative list of takeaways regarding gender

and literacy under the following categories: achievement, attitude, choice, and response. Those categories guided decisions regarding the chosen intervention because independent reading lends itself to more student choice and personalized responses.

Biology is just one of many possible causes to the gender differences apparent in education today. James (2015) asserted that advancements in medical technology have allowed for brain images to show many gender differences regarding the brain structure and its function. For example, girls tend to develop their prefrontal cortex earlier than boys, which controls impulse and sudden urges. This suggests that while a girl might be able to control a response, a boy is more likely to have violent, sudden responses or the “fight or flight” tendency in certain situations. This also supports the notion that boys are more active than girls, a pattern that appears as early as age two. The development of the female brain also provides her with advantages in verbal fluency as well as stronger taste, smell, and hearing. Speaking of hearing, boys are more likely to prefer lower yet louder sounds. Boys’ tend to be more visual observers, attracted to movement than stagnancy. James suggested that teachers move frequently about the room while teaching while also making a conscious effort to ensure all boys can hear them well. Also brain-based was the fact that boys tend to prefer historical or nonfiction titles because of their advantage at recalling factual information.

Social and emotional causes for the gender gap must not be ignored. While James (2015) negated the stereotype that boys do not care about feelings, she suggests that boys’ inadequacy with language skills causes them to struggle with adequately communicating their true feelings. Societal pressures may also cause social and emotional difference because they tend to “genderize” behaviors, toy choices, clothing,

colors, and even expectations. Kitchenham (2002) presented an interesting continuum of gender difference research from 1990 to the present and believes that “males and females act and achieve differently because of what society expects of them” (p.34). Kitchenham also reported that reading is arguably female, an assertion that Newkirk (2004) later argued, stating that “Boys are conditioned to view some forms of reading and writing as unmasculine” (p.13).

Related Research

English language arts is no easy one-size-fits all subject area, nor is it a one-topic exploration. For the purpose of this study, it was imperative that a deep understanding of many aspects be considered in evaluating literature and planning intervention.

Adolescent literacy is one topic, because these students are at a step in their educational careers where they are reading to learn, not learning to read. However, for those who have not fully learned to read yet, steps must be taken to increase understanding and lead them toward reading to learn. Next, the power of independent reading must be studied to promote effectiveness of the intervention. Reading motivations are studied in order to discern what will truly motivate these male striving readers to grow. Reading levels must be explored so as to guide readers toward attainable texts. Modern work on reading conferences in an important aspect of related research that ensures effectiveness of each brief conference with the male readers. Lastly, consideration of other shared reading experiences is taken in order to promote further autonomy and engagement of all readers.

Adolescent Literacy

Adolescents present a unique clientele of students: no longer child-like and learning to approach adulthood. No other time period in life is more unpredictable. “One

of the best things middle school teachers can do for our students is acknowledged that the thorns of adolescence are real and cause real pain” (Atwell, 1998, p. 55). Atwell (1998) encouraged educators to make the best of this age group with three principles: accept the reality, recognize the importance in a reader’s development, and help kids adjust accordingly: “We won’t get the best from middle school students until we stop blaming adolescents for their adolescent behavior and begin to invite their distinctive brand of middle school best” (p. 54). In other words, adjusting to the specific and unique audience of middle school readers will, indubitably, increase success and lessen frustrations.

The International Reading Association (2012) defined adolescent literacy as “the ability to read, write, understand and interpret, and discuss multiple texts across multiple contexts” (p. 2). Texts include traditional print texts, digital texts, and visual texts. The National Council of Teachers of English (2018) added that adolescent literacy is a lifelong process for every individual, that increases in breadth and competence as experiences and purposes of reading increase. However, adolescent literacy is not just for the reading classroom; it is key to a student’s success in every subject. Discipline-specific practice in reading, writing, understanding, interpreting, and discussing are all imperative. In order to support and grow adolescent literacy for students, educators must provide rich and authentic opportunities to interact with a diverse reading in each subject area. As Brozo (2010) so aptly put it, “In other words, good readers are better students in every subject area” (p.12).

Independent Reading

Teaching reading to adolescents is an art form that requires open-mindedness, nontraditional texts, and discipline-specific strategies (Brozo, 2010). One specific format

of increasing adolescent literacy achievement is that of independent reading. While the benefits of IR are obvious, many teachers struggle to devote a certain amount of their limited instructional time to the process. Still, Ivey and Broaddus argued that IR should become one of the main aspects of reading curriculum (2000).

Independent reading provides students the opportunity to select and read books that interest them personally. It can take many forms: the first twenty minutes of a class block, a nightly homework task, or a building-wide scheduled time every day, for example. Also called sustained silent reading, independent reading is a valuable use of time that is, unfortunately, falling to the back burner in many schools as a result of the test-prep era (Gallagher, 2009). This is a shame, because while research suggests that adolescents read less than they did in earlier grades and may not often choose to read during their own free time after school, “they value time to read in school, and they are more inclined to read when a specific time is set aside to do so” (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000, p. 69).

The benefits of independent reading are unparalleled. It allows control and choice during a school day that may otherwise be completely determined by state standards or school curricula. It strengthens reading endurance and stamina for students. Independent reading increases background and prior knowledge, which increases comprehension (Gallagher, 2009). Because of these and many other benefits, Ivey and Broaddus (2000) suggested that independent reading should become the main mode of reading curriculum within a language arts course. Instead of focusing on whole-class novels or short stories, devoting a significant amount of the time on students’ independently chosen books,

individual needs and abilities, and reading strategies would be more effective. It is this suggestion, in fact, that first guided my chosen intervention.

Reading Motivations

Encouraging students' autonomy, competence, relatedness, and relevance all aid in inspiring intrinsic motivation with students (Ferlazzo, 2015). Autonomy through student choice can be achieved through problem-based learning, thinking routines, and independent reading. However, boys and girls differ in what motivates them regarding the aforementioned factors. For boys, informational texts, sports books, and adventures are a few popular interests; for girls, real-life fiction and poetry tend to be popular (Brozo, 2010; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Weih, 2008). Regardless, the key to engaging reader of both genders (and in turn, increasing gender equity) is through providing choice and individual inclusion of their interests. Additional gender differences in reading motivation occur when considering the value assigned to reading. Girls are more likely to read just because it is assigned, whereas boys prefer to have personal value attached to the text.

Encouraging student competence occurs most successfully by praising effort while providing critical feedback for growth. Ferlazzo (2015) suggested that relatedness is the rapport and respect shared between a student and their teachers, which develops a deeper intrinsic motivation for the student. Last but not least, students need to experience a personal relevance to what they are learning or reading in order to be motivated to work through the learning themselves.

Thoughtful analysis of reading motivations indicates major differences between males and females. In general, "reading motivation levels of females are consistently and

significantly higher than those of males” (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p. 226). Also different is the value students assign to reading: boys are less likely than girls to find reading valuable. Kent (2004) noted that “the key to success with many reluctant boy readers was to connect to each boy’s interests – and those interests varied greatly” (p. 7). In general, boys tend to prefer informational texts, sports books, adventures, scary stories, and historical fiction (Brozo, 2010; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Weih, 2008).

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that “boys felt that interests were developed before reading and then could be fed and nurtured through reading” which is why individual choice is so important (p. 108). After all, the ability to have choice in their reading is a democratic liberty so easily taken in education. While reading motivation tends to decrease as students age, all students – regardless of gender – are more likely to read and discuss texts of more personal interest to them. Indeed, personal interest and personal choice were key to all readers (Bozack & Salvaggio, 2013). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) suggested using texts outside the box, like music, videos, visuals, and websites to engage and sustain enjoyment for male readers.

Reading Levels

While student interests and student choice are the most engaging ways to motivate readers, considerations of a student’s reading levels is an important aspect to their success. As Fountas and Pinnell (2017) stated that, “It is important for all students to receive guided reading instruction at a level that allows them to process texts successfully with teacher support” (p. 8). Texts that are too difficult for a student will leave them feeling disengaged and frustrated; texts that are too easy will fail to enrich and grow them as readers. It is true: “reading lots at your reading level is what makes you a better reader

-- just like most things in life, actually” (Kittle, 2013, p. 7). Reading levels help the teacher when grouping students for book clubs, or when selecting specific reading strategies or vocabulary with which to differentiate. Serravallo (2015) encouraged conscious effort to record reading levels for students: “Knowing text level characteristics coupled with knowing a reader’s abilities can help us match students to texts, ensuring that their time spent reading is not a struggle, but rather an engaging time to explore books and work on goals” (p. 378). This is especially important since our instructional time with students is already so limited.

There are many variations of reading level measurements, but the most commonly used ones are the Fountas and Pinnell Text Level Gradient, DRA levels, and Lexile levels. Serravallo (2015) provided a level correlation chart that provides comparable numbers between the various levelling systems. However, reading level measurement is not a perfect science. What a student can do on their own independently will differ than what he or she can do with a teacher’s guidance and modeling. Many other variables impact a student’s reading level as well, like their stamina, prior knowledge, age or the text’s content, cultural relevance, personal vocabulary, or genre of the text. However, utilizing reading levels to help students choose texts will positively impact their success.

Reading Conferences

Reading conferences, if done well, have the ability to positively transform reading instruction (Costelle, 2014). In fact, “conferences with individuals are more important than mini-lessons to the group” (Atwell, 1998, p. 17). In its most basic form, a reading conference is a quick conversation with a student about their reading. A valuable teaching opportunity, one-on-one reading conferences between the teacher and the

student provide the structure needed to build relationships, identify interests, assess ability, assess fluency, discern weaknesses, set goals, and model strategies. As Serravallo emphatically exclaims, “There is no substitute for the one-on-one conference!” (2018, p. 181).

As a reading teacher, being systematic yet flexible is important to consistently conferring with students (Costello, 2014). Every student has different needs. Some students may require more or longer conferences than others. Student input and reflection should be one aspect of the conference in order to engage accountability (Costello, 2014). For Kittle (2013), reading conferences have one of three objectives at any given time: “Monitoring the student’s reading life, teaching strategic reading, helping the student plan the complexity and challenge of her reading.” (p. 79). Regardless, slowing down to focus on one student at a time is powerfully effective.

Sharing Reading Experiences

In Velluto and Barbousas’s (2013) investigation of the impact of silent reading on boys’ literacy, the most powerful aspect of independent reading was the opportunity to express themselves through social interaction that improved their reading abilities. When students were expected to share their reading with one another, involvement and engagement increased, and the reading suddenly had a purpose. This investigation exhibits the importance of using multiple structures or protocols during independent reading, including but not limited to read-alouds, book talks, book clubs, response journaling, and guided reading (Serravallo, 2018).

Miller suggested that whole class novels take up too much class time, but that a great compromise is to conduct a read-aloud instead (2009). Dubbed a sacred anchor of

reading workshop by Robb (2000), read-alouds engage students in a variety of texts, model ready fluency, increase vocabulary, and provide opportunities for discussion, comprehension practice, and analysis. “Read-aloud is a long-term investment in students’ growth and development -- as humans, as members of a community, and as readers” (Burkins & Yaris, 2016, p. 31). In her “Ten read-aloud commandments”, Fox (2013) suggested that reading aloud should happen every single day from birth, with joy and excitement, conveying a true enjoyment for literature and for being with children

Variations of the read-aloud exist, depending upon the educator’s objective. A share-read of the book “involves you reading aloud to students while they each follow along” and can yield many of the aforementioned benefits (Miller, 2009, p. 126).

Reading aloud a short but powerful passage during a book talk helps students connect with books by exemplifying writer’s voice and exposing them to new content (Kittle, 2013). In fact, book talks are a means for spreading the contagious passion for reading and turning students into lifelong readers.

Guided reading is a form of differentiation in which the teacher works with small groups of similar ability on reading skills. A practice that is more commonly found in upper elementary schools, guided reading provides an opportunity for students to experience independent success while already receive the guidance they need from a teacher to improve their reading skills (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). Some, but not all, middle schools take the guided reading approach or similar variations, including book clubs and literature circles – thus providing the shared reading experience in ways that fit their unique contexts.

Similar Intervention Approaches

The research is glaringly clear: increasing the amount of authentic, independent reading within the classroom is a highly effective way for readers to grow. However, “there is a lack of research in reading intervention in the secondary setting and some ingenuity is needed” (Swingler, 2017, p. 6). For these reasons, a synthesis of related research was necessary here in order to further guide this dissertation in practice.

Williams’(2009) research on sustained silent reading within her middle school supported this notion. Through a lens of leadership theory, Williams analyzed her growth as a leader while also synthesizing the impact on the literacy culture of her school after implementing a school-wide silent reading initiative. The results supported her research findings: silent reading had a significant positive impact on students.

Sarroub and Pernicek (2016) presented a case study of high school boys and their experiences with reading. The major findings presented that all three boys studied lacked engagement in reading throughout the study, which was paramount to their success. Also of note was that all three boys had tumultuous or nonexistent relationships with parents which seemed to impact their day to day lives at school. More importantly, Sarroub and Pernicek observed that all three boys had feelings of failure from years of academic struggles (2016). They viewed themselves as weak learners and their learning was negatively impacted as a result. This supports the expectancy-value framework that guides my intervention.

Velluto and Barvousas (2013) aimed to discern whether sustained silent reading time was an effective strategy for male readers in their action research investigation. Their results were directly applicable to my action research. For one, boys were unsure

how to select appropriate texts for themselves. Disengaged, struggling readers within this action research reported that SSR was an intimidating process. However, Velluto and Barbousas reported that when the structure of SSR increased with more specific accountability, engagement increased, and boys read more (2013). This encourages the use of reading response journals and reading conferences within my action research to maintain structure and accountability for my readers. Krulder (2018) supported this notion, using the reading conference as the main means of accountability in a high school English classroom. She found that, logistically, conference required consistent and established norms during choice reading. When effective, Krulder found that the conference provided students a chance to talk about their struggles and gave her all the information she needed to help them as individual readers (2018).

Welch (2018) conducted an action research study that explored the effects of student choice when reading, specifically on literacy achievement and masculine identities. She found that male middle school students conveyed a need for more gender-relevant pedagogy. Through a reading workshop model, she revealed a positive impact for the students and the teachers in building rapport and finding better ways to support individual male readers: “These teachers were convinced that the reading workshop model significantly influenced boys’ engagement in literacy practice – even those who were initially the most reluctant readers” (p.53). One of many reports on the success of reading workshop, Welch’s GRP-focused work further guided the action research.

Though the context of WMS is unique, much can be learned from these similar intervention approaches. Williams’ (2009) study noted that silent reading is a powerful strategy for increasing reading achievement, affirming my prioritization of time spent on

independent reading. Velluto and Barvovas (2013) proved similar findings, adding that accountability is key to engagement—considerations that were helpful in fine-tuning the details of my intervention process. Welch’s (2018) focus on the impact of choice not only supports the prioritization of independent reading, but also confirms the influence that such reading opportunities can have on male striving readers.

Summary of the Literature Review

With sources like *Why Boys Fail*, *Boys Adrift*, and *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader*, it is painstakingly obvious that boys are struggling academically, especially when it comes to literacy. The causes of such struggles include biological, cognitive, social, and emotional differences between girls and boys and leave boys less equipped to cope in today’s school settings. However, this is not a new problem. Historical evidence suggests the gender gap, or boys falling behind girls, has been widening for decades with very little successful progress toward closing the gap. A combination of gender-relevant pedagogy, expectancy-value theory, engagement theory and supplemental guidance from transactional theory or reading, and reading styles theory all lead the work done in action research and provided the lenses through which all literature was considered.

Adolescent literacy is a very specific niche of readers – unpredictable, difficult, and individualized. While adolescence is a unique time that often seems devoid of academic motivations, students can be motivated to read, if provided student choice, critical feedback, positive rapport, and personal interest in the topics all increase a student’s motivation and engagement in reading.

With the importance of personal choice as a motivator, it may seem that reading levels are unimportant, but this is not the case. Providing students with texts that are

comprehensible at an independent level will help nurture their love of reading. The reading conference is a key aspect of discerning a reader's interests and reading levels. Also important in the literacy experience for adolescent boys is the opportunity to share the reading in other ways, which include read-alouds, book talks, reading response journals, book clubs, and more.

The literacy research presented in this review lead my intervention approach of prioritizing independent reading within the classroom as a means of increasing literacy achievement and gender equity. In recent years, there have been many similar approaches that further guide my work. Exploration of independent within a middle school, gender differences with reading, and increasing student choice while reading all support the literature within this review in being successful interventions, thus affirming this action research project. For my intervention, the middle school boys received at least 20 minutes of time for independent reading every day that they were in attendance for the entirety of a 12-week cycle. They got to choose what they read independently and often, what we read together. They received positive affirmation in feedback through one-on-one reading conferences to increase their expectancy value. I conducted read-alouds and book talks of nonfiction texts, historical fiction, and other collections based on gender relevant pedagogy. The works reviewed here truly guided the action research.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Overview of Study

Year after year, state-mandated formative assessments indicate that WMS's males are falling behind their female classmates in terms of academic achievement, especially in reading. In fact, a staggering 74% of the rising seventh grade students who are reading below grade level are boys. However, the numbers do not surprise the faculty. Any ELA teacher in the building will report the same observations: our boys do not want to read and do not choose to. They are disengaged in class and are largely unmotivated to seek success. Teachers are unsure how to help these students because they are unsure of what each individual student needs, likes, or wants.

The purpose of this action research case study was to evaluate the impact of a prioritized independent reading model on male struggling readers' achievement, engagement, and motivation. Reading engagement, in this study, means that each student-participant is immersed physically, mentally, and emotionally in the act of reading whatever text they have chosen. Additionally, the Developmental Reading Assessment scores reading engagement, a score that takes into consideration a student's quantity of reading, knowledge of titles and authors, variety of materials read, and the student's personal awareness as a reader. Similarly, reading motivation is the student-participant's value placed on reading; which may include their personal connections to a text, self-confidence in ability to read a text, and more. The following research questions

provided focus to my work: What is the impact of prioritizing independent reading on male adolescent reading achievement? How does integration of personal interests impact reading engagement in male adolescents? What is the impact of individualized reading strategies and texts on male adolescent motivation?

Student-participants were 8th-grade English language arts males in a low-tracked English language arts class within the Title One School. Each week, student-participants came to the Lit Room for twenty minutes. All students in the action research study were given daily opportunities to read independently texts of their own choosing and constructed responses in their reading notebooks. These reading notebooks served as a tool during conferences as well as a data collection method. Data collection, data analysis, and further strategic professional development in reading conferences will be provided to ELA teachers in order to assist them in meeting their students' needs as individual readers.

Research Design

A case study by design, this mixed methods action research was bounded within one classroom with myself as the sole researcher for data collection and analysis. The primary constructs in this study are that of independent reading, reading behaviors, and reading engagement. The variables in this study include prioritized independent reading time, reading choices, and reading mini-lessons – the latter of which will be designed to meet the needs and interests of each participant. The results required in-depth description in order to promote understanding of the intricacies of male readers and their struggles. The units of analysis, ultimately, were five male readers selected as participants.

The intervention implemented in this action research study was consistent, prioritized independent reading time within a reading workshop model. This included reading conferences, read-alouds, reading strategy mini-lessons, and independent reading. The intervention is provided to five male adolescent striving readers in one middle school ELA classroom. The brief, five-to-ten-minute reading conferences occurred during independent reading time in the classroom. In other words, all other students will be engaged in reading or reading-related work during the times when individual student-participants are pulled aside for a conference. What makes this a unique intervention within this context is the fact that, most days, students only read for ten minutes – if at all. Sustained silent reading, independent reading, or time to read – whatever teachers may call it – often gets removed from the block of learning time for other content. Prior to the intervention, no conferences or personalization of reading needs occurred.

Prior to the starting the intervention cycle, two important steps were taken: evaluation of each student-participant's permanent record and administration of individual Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA). Evaluation of each student-participant's background files, including previous interventions utilized (if any), reading levels, and formative assessment data was an important first step because it provided information on where to start with each student. Specifically, ascertaining a reading level for each student guided them toward selecting independent reading that is both attainable and challenging to help them grow as readers. Conducting a DRA with each student gleaned additional important information: it verified a reading level range, while also scoring the student's reading engagement prior to the intervention. Additionally, the

DRA included a reading interest survey, which each student-participant completed. This final piece provided genres, interests, and topics that I used to plan instruction.

The intervention occurred over a 12-week period beginning in October and ending in December. This duration of time was chosen in order to create adequate engagement in data collection. The first few weeks of initiating any reading workshop approach establishes routines and gets students comfortable with the procedures. It is not until the second month that the work really starts to show effectiveness. Therefore, 12 weeks provided adequate time to create saturated findings to better ensure internal validity. During the initial reading conference with each student-participant, I explained the process of conferencing and broke the ice with a few simple questions / commands, such as:

1. Tell me how your book is going.
2. What do you like / hate about it?
3. Do you consider yourself a reader?
4. What do you like or hate about reading?
5. What are your reading goals this year?

The purpose of these initial questions was to get to know the student-participant as a reader: to discern how they perceive themselves and how they are able (or not able) to communicate about their own reading life.

The reading intervention occurred during the first 20 minutes of an English language arts block (of 84 minutes total). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, WMS was on a hybrid schedule. This means that the student population only attended school two to three days a week, on A-Day or B-Day, determined by their last name, alphabetically.

A-Day students attended Mondays, Wednesdays, and every other Friday; B-Day students attended Tuesdays, Thursdays, and every other Friday. It is important to note, therefore, that students only received the intervention two or three days a week, instead of five days a week. Also important was that while students were encouraged and tasked with independent reading at home, many failed to do so. These annotations acknowledge the first of many limitations and changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be discussed further in subsequent sections.

When student-participants were not conferencing with me during the intervention, they read one to two hours a week in class and beyond. Additionally, they recorded their responses to texts within their reading notebooks. Students had choice in what they choose to include for responses but were often encouraged to practice a reading strategy I had taught them, like making connections with the text or predicting what may happen next.

After the first conference, subsequent conferences took on a mind of their own based on each student-participants reading, interests, and needs. Each week, the students brought the aforementioned Reading Notebook to the conference. This provided a starting point for book discussions and also helped the reader feel more comfortable in talking about text. I utilized the work in their reading notebooks and the statements that they made to better meet their individual needs as readers. Throughout the intervention cycle in an ongoing manner, reading conferences guided my individualized work toward engaging and motivating each student. Through these conferences, student interests and personalities guided choices for books, topics, and strategy mini-lessons. In alignment with gender-relevant pedagogy, individual male readers received differentiated

pedagogical strategies to better help them as readers. While I avoided “overteaching” within the quick conferences, especially at first when I was trying to generate an open-mindedness in everyone, I did utilize them as a means to provide such best practices to the students. In subsequent conferences, I received feedback from the males on how their strategies are or are not helping them as readers. Figure 2.2 provides a brief timeline of the action research intervention plan, focused on the actions I planned on taking while the boys read. Whenever I was engaged in a conference with an individual, the other four were reading independently. Whenever a minilesson or book talk ensued for a few minutes, the boys read silently afterward.

Action Research Timeline	
	Teacher-researcher actions while students read independently:
Before the intervention cycle	-Collect data from permanent records, including previous MAP scores, reading levels, any previous intervention experience, and behavior records -Administer Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to participants -MAP assessment administered first week of school
Week 1	-Administer DRA reading survey -Begin with an intro reading conference with every student to establish rapport -Administer whole-class set up of Reading Notebooks, including reading rate formula
Weeks 2 - 5	-Conduct bi-weekly reading engagement inventory -Conduct book talks and model students writing down books they want to read -Conduct 1 read-aloud -Model silent reading while students read
Week 6-7	-Continue book conferences -Conduct DRA Progress Monitoring on participant pool
Week 8-11	-Conduct 1 book talk and model students writing down books they want to read -Conduct 1 read-aloud -Model silent reading while students read -Confer with five to ten boys
Week 12	-Conduct final DRA assessment -Collect Winter MAP assessment data
After the intervention cycle	-Administer Winter MAP assessment data

Figure 2.2 *Action Research Timeline*

Participants

The sample of participants came from one 8th grade regular ELA classroom-- which is the school's name for the lowest tracked ELA, primarily made up of students reading well below grade level and not meeting grade level standards on standardized state tests. This demographic of students often struggles with behavioral choices resulting in in-school suspension and also struggle with school attendance. Therefore I chose to narrow down to a convenience sample of five participants. Additionally, this sample was criterion-based: each participant must be male, reading two or more levels below grade level, and who spoke English fluently. This latter consideration is due to the fact that our lower-track ELA classes often include English language learners who speak little to no English. While I look forward to my work with those individuals, their inability to communicate creates irrelevancy for the purpose of this particular study. This selected ample provides a representation of most Regular ELA classes throughout our school. To illustrate the participant sample more specifically, the Table 3.1 includes the participants chosen and some basic demographic information.

Table 3.1

Student Participant Demographics

STUDENT	LEARNING DIFFERENCES / NOTES	AGE	GENDER	ETHNICITY	2020 MAP SCORE	READING LEVEL
A		13	M	WHITE	222	1010
B	IEP-LD	13	M	WHITE	186	285
C		13	M	BLACK	216	890
D		14	M	WHITE	215	879
E		14	M	HISPANIC	200	565

Data Collection

The first data collection was a Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), conducted with each student directly prior to the study. The DRA provides measures of student engagement, oral fluency, and comprehension. While the latter two are quantitative measures, the former will further inform this study. The DRA includes a student survey, a read-aloud, and comprehension questions. First, each student completed the survey, sharing their personal opinions about reading. Then, in a one-on-one setting with me, each student read a short passage at their reading level aloud to me. While they read, I conducted a running record to note reading errors, fluency, and more. Lastly, each student completed independent work answering comprehension and critical thinking questions about the text they had read aloud. Upon completion, the entire packet was scored according to a rubric, giving the student an engagement score, a fluency score, and a comprehension score. Once the intervention window ended, the students experienced the DRA again, to assess any changes in student engagement. However, the numbers provided by DRA rubrics are just one small part of the picture. The DRA is a product developed by Pearson for the purpose of providing educators with tools for monitoring reading comprehension and fluency to inform instruction. This assessment is required by the district as a means for testing all readers as needed.

Next, each student-participant's reading notebook was maintained as an ongoing data collection tool. This notebook has a few specific elements that provided information: the reading log, on which a student notes titles and number of pages read; a stamina log, which assess how long a student remains engaged in a text before losing focus; and the aforementioned reading responses. All students were encouraged to

construct at least one reading response per week. Established by me based on previous students' work, each response must do the following:

- Identify the title and author of the book
- Response to the *Sentence Starters* used that week
- Be at least ten sentences long
- Convey comprehension of the reading
- Have proper grammar and spelling
- Be well organized writing in complete sentences and paragraphs
- Include direct references to the reading wherever possible

These requirements were taped inside the reading notebook. Additionally, reading response sentence starters were modeled and provided for student-participants. An example of a sentence starter is: "I experienced what the character ____ did once when I was...". Beyond required entries, the reading notebook was limited only by each reader's imagination.

The reading notebook is a tool based on best practices in reading instruction. Atwell (1998) experienced the positive results from her reading notebooks, which she called dialogue journals: "The correspondences go far beyond plot synopses and traditional teachers'-manual issues. We write accounts of or processes as readers, speculations on authors' processes as writers, and suggestions for revisions in what we've read" (p. 41). I find this procedure to be in line with engagement theory because it truly helps me to develop relationship with each student-participant as readers. Additionally, Gallagher (2009), offered sage advice for not killing reading in our schools. Among many ideas, he suggested what he has dubbed the "50/50 Approach" (p. 117), in which

teachers must balance teaching and reading – to avoid *overteaching* a text to the point of causing disinterest. Allowing students choice in independent reading, time to read, and choice in responses / dialogue about reading are ways to avoid overteaching (Gallagher, 2009). The reading notebooks do just that and more: they help guide adolescent readers toward taking more ownership of their own learning, aligning with best practices and engagement theory.

With the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, the reading notebook became one of many assignments for students to work through during their at-home days of the hybrid schedule. The WMS English language arts department felt that the limited instructional time within the building should be focused on standardized content and that the reading responses were an aspect of the curriculum that students could do independently from home. Unfortunately, navigating a new and scary situation, students found it difficult to write on their own without the guidance of a teacher within the classroom—a fact that drove several of my lessons with the participants during the intervention. This impacted the depth and breadth of responses and limited the student voices, but still provided useful indicators of each student’s needs and interests.

Additional classroom documents, such as student work provided further data. During the intervention cycle, new ideas for writing prompts or mini-lessons related to the texts arose. Providing students many choices in the way they respond to texts allowed the samples to paint a more detailed picture of their reading engagement. Creative methods of response, student choice in assignments, and collaborative projects gleaned information that the reading notebooks did not.

Lastly, reading engagement inventories were conducted throughout the intervention cycle to provide a more holistic impact of the study. During a reading engagement inventory, I maintained a specific and coded log of student behaviors during independent reading. This log helped collect information of how many students are actively engaged in their texts, and for how long. Often, sharing a student's reading engagement records with them can provide eye-opening insights for the reader and an ice breaker for having tougher conference conversations about reading. One such Engagement Inventory, provided by Serravallo (2014), is provided in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began as soon as the first DRAs were conducted and the first week's reading conferences had begun. The DRA engagement data was collected in the form of a student reading interest survey. Reading through these began the process of open coding and annotating for use in reading conferences, mini-lessons, and read-alouds. Each week, category construction with codes assigned for quick annotation guided subsequent actions of the independent reading time. For example, if what the reader said indicated the text was too difficult for him, a quick annotation of "diff" in the margin provided an emerging pattern regarding why readers disengage. This same process was utilized to analyze the reading notebooks, conference notes, and other documents. Actively analyzing the data on a weekly basis also allowed me to construct new questions for the male striving readers according to the categories and patterns that emerged, thus making each conference more effective.

The reading engagement inventory, also analyzed throughout the cycle, employed a tally/counting system of analysis. Observed off-task behaviors (looking around, zoning

out, sharpening pencil, etc.) were noted and tallied. This total of off-task behaviors was compared to the amount of time spent in reading to discern how much reading time is spent off-task for each student-participant.

Data analysis organization was maintained in a file folder system based on category names or codes. This physical case student record system was the most efficient manner due to the quick on-going nature of the conferences and the lack of reliable computer technology within the research setting. The combination of analysis methods converged to provide deeper understanding of male adolescent struggling readers helped guide all ELA teachers through providing reading conferences within their own classrooms. Overall, this data will guide the school toward meeting individual readers' needs more consistently.

Research Procedure

Based on district procedures, conducting the DRA on each reader is a necessary step for discerning a more accurate picture of the reader's strengths, weaknesses, and reading level in order to inform instruction as a whole. Upon completion of DRA administration, five student-participants were selected based upon the aforementioned criteria. Starting with all students within the class and then narrowing down provided a means for ensuring that the student-participants ultimately selected for the study represented an accurate depiction of the problem of practice, thus beginning to ensure validity of the study.

Prioritized independent reading was conducted for the first 20 minutes of class and began with individual reading conferences with every student the first week of the intervention cycle, in order to further narrow down the student-participants. Upon

completion of the initial conferences, coding the logs and transcripts in search of patterns occurred immediately, with the overarching research question in mind. Based on past experiences, I anticipated patterns to include concepts like reading difficulties, likes and dislikes, and initial struggles to identify what a reader wants or needs. After this initial conference, I looked at student's reading surveys more closely: it helped to have met with them and spoken with them to better hear the voices of their responses in the survey.

To further the prioritized independent reading intervention, students continued by diving into independent reading books and beginning their reading notebooks. At the start of that process, I acted as an active model of independent reading: reading while they read, constructing my own reading notebook responses, and encouraging them to do so. This engagement in the reading process further aligns with engagement theory. Providing more time, modeling, and motivation at the start of this paid off in the long run with more active readers and writers. Once the database of information has been established and organized, comparing the multiple sources of data that were coming in began the process of triangulation. One powerful part of credibility within this process is that of understanding the student-participants. Upon analysis of one student's conference and their individual reading notebook, I generated new questions for that student to ensure understanding of their perceptions on reading.

Analyzing the impact of prioritized independent reading on male striving readers was an active, ongoing, and complex process that included so much more than reading. Weekly and, often, daily consideration of students' needs as readers was key to being effective. Gender-relevant strategies were researched, adapted, and applied to help the readers meet greater success, which required ongoing work on my part as the active

internal participant-researcher. This methodological rigor was maintained throughout the intervention cycle to create strong effectiveness of the conferences for these student-participants. Ongoing review of the data generated new tasks for the research all focused on making the intervention and, more importantly, reading more gender-relevant and engaging for adolescent male striving readers.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Overview of Study

Gender equity in education is an ever-growing concern and closing the gender gap is an ever-present battle. “It is clear that schools are failing to meet the literacy needs of the majority of boys in the United States” (Taylor, 2004, p. 282). Indeed, boys are falling behind as readers and as learners at every grade level. As a literacy leader within my building and school district, I discovered that the WMS student population was no exception to the gender gap. Low-tracked English languages arts class rosters exhibited uneven gender distribution, with the majority of each roster being males. Likewise, reading intervention groups are almost always all-or-mostly male. Generalizing the population with whom I work, these students read well below grade level.

Working to remedy this problem of practice, prioritizing independent reading, and focusing on adolescent male readers is significant not only to the local context, but to state and national contexts as well. While much research has been done in elementary reading problems, including gender differences in learning to read, very little academic research is available for middle and high school literacy. Literacy coaches and reading teachers of middle and high school will benefit from the knowledge gained within this study as they endeavor to meet the unique challenges of adolescent learners in the future.

Intervention

As former principal Peter DeWitt (2015) summed it up, teaching is a battle of “So many standards, so little time” (p. 1). The focus on content standards, combined with the limited instructional time, first brought the idea of prioritizing independent reading to light. Many of the twenty English teachers with whom I work closely in two buildings reported that they often do not provide time for students to read books of choice, because of more pressing content and skills that need to be taught. However, literacy experts like Serravallo (2015, 2018) and Robb (2008) suggest that independent reading should replace other classroom activities and whole-class novels. Unfortunately, my colleagues are not going to change their ways – not with the ever-growing demands and duties of educators – unless they see that it will work and be effective within their classrooms and with their students. That is why I decided to prioritize independent reading as an intervention: so I could show my colleagues what I know to be true about reading, how I helped our students, and how I can help other teachers do the same.

As an intervention, prioritizing independent reading within a reading workshop model means that at least 20 minutes of every single ELA class was devoted to reading and its many experiences, no matter what. No shortening the time, no eliminating the reading, no cancelling a conference. The goal was to make independent reading, with its conferences and responses, read alouds and discussions, an absolute **MUST** of the classroom; and that is just what I did. In a low-tracked ELA class, five male adolescents were selected to participate in the intervention. These five boys reported to my room every day that they were in the building. All five boys were on the A Day Schedule of

our COVID-19 pandemic hybrid schedule, so they reported to school every Monday, Wednesday, and every other Friday.

The hybrid schedule was not the only change that the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted on this action research case study. Attendance issues due to sickness or quarantine, missing work, technological difficulties, and constant adjustment of plans all impacted the ways in which this intervention proceeded. Participants had to remain six feet apart whenever possible, wear masks at all times, and refrain from collaborative work. Plexiglas shields were added to the learning environment to further protect my students and me.

Due to the hybrid schedule's limited instructional time, the five student participants reported to my room every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday that they were in school from October through December for the first twenty minutes of their English language arts class. They brought with them their Reader's Notebooks and their newly assigned school device: a Chromebook. During this intervention time, I conferred with students, conducted mini-lessons, read aloud, and lead discussions. Sometimes, I had the boys read silently the entire twenty minutes so that I could record their independent reading behaviors (see Appendix A).

Two final elements that impacted this study due to the COVID-19 pandemic were Chromebooks and library access. Chromebooks were assigned to every student at the start of the year, as an unexpected development of the pandemic and in preparation for potential virtual learning days. Working within one of the few remaining school districts in the state that was purposefully *not* one-to-one with technology, this distribution happened quickly and without teacher preparation time. Therefore, teachers and I

worked to adjust plans to more technology-driven content. This meant that, during the time of instruction for my participants, their teacher slowly began to allow them to type reading responses on their devices, instead of writing them in the reader's notebooks. This impacted the work I did because it was hard to access their previous writings to drive conversations during reading conferences.

Finally, with the uncertainties of how COVID-19 spread, our middle school library was closed—preventing students from getting their hands on books. Instead, they had to request the book they wanted online, through the digital card catalog. This experience proved difficult – students like to pick up books, peruse the pages, and read the backs. Finding appropriate and interesting books is a key factor in growing readers, so this change impacted how I recommended books to students.

To summarize the pandemic-altered intervention time, Appendix F was created. Also, in journal-like style, I maintained notes of certain intervention sessions to recall what went well, what I observed, and what needed changed. Here is an example of my week one notes:

This hybrid schedule is proving difficult. Week one of the action research is complete and having only 20 - 30 minutes to work with five students is limiting. Additionally, they are not completing their at-home reading, which puts us behind when I do see them. On Monday, I gave them reading in Epic (the online digital library platform), which they really enjoy. I provided three choices and instructed them to simply read the one that interested them. 5/5 did not read on Tuesday at home. Wednesday, for independent reading time, I let them make their choice and read it in

class. I also finished initial conferences and provided their at-home work for Thursday. I wanted to try a different approach, so I gave them a copy of a short story. On a sticky note, I provided a differentiated “think about” for each student. (For example, think about the characters as you read...or, focus on plot summary -- what are the main events?) They were supposed to come in today having read the story. Additionally, I provided a video of myself reading the story aloud to them. They could have watched this at home and read along -- it was posted to our google classroom. 1/5 completed the reading. Therefore, today’s independent reading time included me reading aloud the start of the story.

These qualitative notes allowed me to reflect, monitor, and fine-tune as needed. In the weeks that followed, I met with their ELA teacher to brainstorm, noted their reading behaviors, and even began to see an increase in their participation outside of my intervention time. By week five, students needed help with their reading responses. I had written the following notes in my reflection:

I finally got to work with the boys on their independent reading responses today. I went over the requirements, rubric, and sentence starters. Then, I actively modeled a full writing response on the document camera and had the boys help me write it. They each copied it down. They were very responsive. Many good questions were asked. Student A said, “Yeah I’ve definitely been doing this all wrong! I thought we had to answer one from every sentence starter!” Student D said, “I didn’t know this was all we had to do.” Student C said, “So we are basically just talking about what

we read?” I affirmed their concerns and questions with encouragement.

All five students were actively engaged in talking about our story from last week and writing the reading response in their notebooks.

With all five boys, there were challenges and successes.

General Findings

A case study design was used to converge the boys’ experiences with qualitative artifacts and quantitative assessment results. Each participant will be discussed separately, with a focus on the primary constructs in this study: independent reading, reading behaviors, and reading engagement. Additionally, the variables of prioritized independent reading time, reading choices, and reading mini-lessons will be discussed within the confines of each participant’s interests and needs.

Student A

At our initial reading conference, Student A was a 13-year-old gaming dog-lover who lived with his parents, twin sister, and two younger siblings. He described himself as cool, smart, happy, fun, and funny. Student A was pretty open and honest with me during the initial reading conference because he had worked with me in both sixth and seventh grades; we already had developed a positive rapport. He admitted to frequently fake reading in school, hating to read, and choosing the easiest books he could find, like *Mighty Jack* and other graphic novels. He also shared a love for football. His reading survey indicated that he does not read very often, but sometimes does enjoy it. Also, it conveyed that he enjoys a challenge and hopes to read longer books.

Quantitative data collected at the start of this case study show that Student A was weaker with informational texts, vocabulary, and struggles in comprehension. In fact, his

Measures of Adequate Progress (MAP) Growth assessment taken at the start of the year identified his area of instructional focus as vocabulary. Administering the Development Reading Assessment (DRA) gleaned similar results. He scored low in reading engagement, oral reading fluency, and comprehension. Some specific strategies identified from his scores included building stamina, modeling fluency, practicing reading with meaningful expression, slowing down rushed reading, discussing elements of plot, and modeling connections to text. When establishing a goal for himself, Student A's only goal as a reader was to read a book that was over two hundred pages.

On our first intervention session at the start of this action research, I conducted a reading engagement inventory to record each student's initial reading behaviors and engagement. During 20 minutes of prioritized independent reading time, Student A exhibited distracted behaviors: switching books and looking out the window; he was engaged in reading for less than five minutes total. Within the first several weeks of the intervention, Student A's engagement with a book during independent reading increased. As we all acclimated to having a device at our fingertips, I introduced the participants to online books through Epic – a product currently free to educators. Student A took to this form of reading with enthusiasm. In fact, by the end of the intervention, he had read 20 books on Epic, reading for more than fourteen hours. During a reading conference toward the end of the intervention cycle, I asked him why he thought Epic was more enjoyable than a regular book. "I can read a bunch of different books –they're all right there on the screen and it doesn't matter if they are long or short, big or whatever. I just read what I want". With clarification, I discerned what he meant: to his peers, he was on his Chromebook. He did not feel judged by holding a childish book with too many

pictures or a graphic novel too easy for him. This was motivating to him. He also enjoyed earning the stars allotted after completing a book on the website. Student A’s love of EPIC was truly powerful for his reading achievement (see Figure 4.1). His consistent increase in engagement, fluency, and comprehension were evident of his increased independent reading.

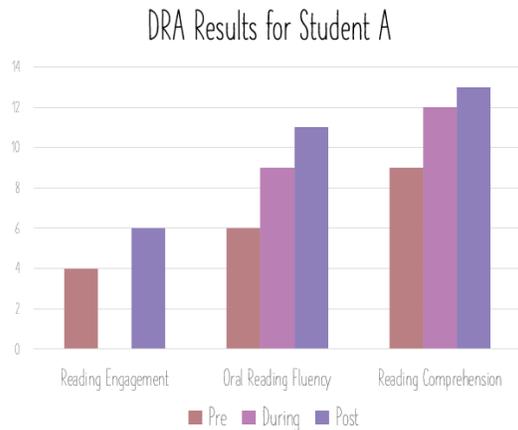


Figure 4.1 *Developmental Reading Assessment results for Student A*

Throughout the rest of the intervention cycle, Student A continued to remain engaged during prioritized independent reading. Additionally, I provided mini-lessons on the following topics/skills: how to pick out a good book, analyzing characters in a story, summarizing, utilizing context clues, and building fluency. I conducted several book talks/read alouds to all the participants, including excerpts from *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and *Dunk* by David Lubar, a short story from the Guys Reads series, and a few EPIC digital books. Student A enjoyed listening to me read aloud and his interests in graphic novels and digital texts continued to grow.

At the outset, last year’s Spring MAP data informed initial text level choices and Student A’s potential selection as a participant. As an 8th grader, reading at a 5th grade level is concerning – even if he was scoring higher than many of his peers in class. The Fall MAP occurred right before the intervention cycle began and it indicated the

significant loss of instructional time due to the pandemic COVID-19. Students were sent home from school for three months of the school year without devices or adequate instructional materials.

Despite this, Student A increased in the areas of reading engagement, oral reading fluency, and comprehension on the DRA and grew on the MAP from Fall to Winter. His ability to write about what he read increased, as well. The reader's notebooks were, at first, a point of struggle for all five participants. We utilized several sessions together for me to model the construction of a good quality reading response, for us to co-write one together, and for them to write independently with my immediate encouragement and feedback. This helped Student A think about what he is reading and write about it more coherently.

Student B

Student B started his eighth-grade year as a thirteen-year-old boy with an Individualized Education Plan with identification as learning disabled. He lives with his grandparents, who pay for a tutor to help him succeed in all classes. The weakest reader in the group, Student B read at roughly a first-grade level. I wanted to include Student B because of my positive rapport with him and because of the expectancy-value framework. His teachers conveyed to me that he often called himself stupid in class and was not trying to be disruptive or comedic – he was saying such things in frustration at himself. His ELA teacher and I thought that some individualized time with me may help build up his confidence and ability to read by making him believe in what he can do.

Student B's initial reading conference revealed that he did not like to read at all. He did share interests in fishing, hunting, family, YouTubing, swimming, billiards, and

high fives. While he conveyed a lack of reading life, Student B did mention that he enjoyed books by Jake Maddox. His ability to name an author was the only aspect of our initial conference that gleaned a reading engagement score. His reading goal, he said, was “to read really good” and he believed he was good at “reading to my self”. Furthermore, to reach his reading goals, Student B planned to “practis and ged Beter at Reading”. The first reading engagement inventory suggested that Student B lacked the ability to remain engaged in a text for more than five minutes. Instead, he played with his mask (a new and required COVID-19 personal protective equipment) and switched books several times.

Unlike Student A, Student B did not welcome technology with enthusiasm. Epic was not exciting to him, nor was typing his independent reading responses. He did, however, express that he enjoyed my read-alouds and book talks, more so even than reading to himself. Initial MAP data was a testament to his low reading ability; he exhibited weaknesses in both literary and informational texts. His Development Reading Assessment results indicated a need for work in phrasing, expression, heeding punctuation, summarizing texts, description of plot elements, use of text features, and questioning about a text. Main idea and theme were additional skill focus points for Student B.

Student B’s attendance became a limitation of the intervention cycle. Living with his grandparents was a concern for him – he did not want to bring the Coronavirus home to high-risk, elderly family members. Absences were more frequent than usual. With this in mind, I provided a video of myself reading aloud one of our stories so he could participate from home. Additionally, I gave him reading choices on Epic – with

discussion questions to complete within a Google Classroom with his fellow participants. When at home, Student B failed to do any of his schoolwork. This pattern was common of all the participants. Working on a hybrid schedule was difficult, and we often spent the in-school attendance day completing what I had asked them to do the previous day while at home.

When Student B was present, he interacted with his fellow participants and me with growing comfortability. I decided to build basic skills with him, and we worked several sessions on summarizing a text. I felt that this was a strategy that would help him in comprehension, remembering what he reads, main idea, and theme. Additionally, it would help guide him to write his reader's responses for his ELA teacher. He exhibited with animation an interest in our read aloud *The Trial* by Jen Bryant. He grew fascinated by the Lindbergh kidnapping – a historical topic of interested that I used to my advantage. I worked with him looking at passages from websites regarding the kidnapping and the trial that ensued. He grew more confident, engaged, and motivated to read. By the end of the intervention cycle, Student B showed growth in MAP and in reading fluency, comprehension, and (most notably) engagement. He was able to name several texts by title and author that he read and enjoyed.

Student B's growth was also evident in his reading responses for ELA. In his first reading response, titled "Fair ball", he discusses the book and the movie in the form of a review, rather than following the requirements for a reading response. Additionally, that response did not truly convey any understanding of text. However, the later response titled "Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck" showed significant increases both in understanding the text and connecting with it (see Figure 4.2). His description of the

main character is personal and relates to events in the plot. He also connects to a classmate, showing his thinking about the reading and beyond.

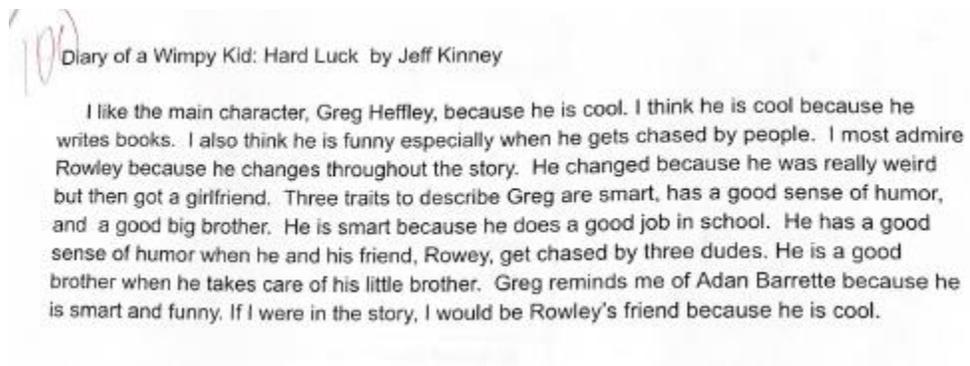


Figure 4.2 *Student B Reading Response*

Student C

Student C was a teddy bear of a student: large and in charge, but also an amazingly sweet 13-year-old. He lives with his parents and two older brothers. I had previously worked with Student C in his 6th and 7th grade years, so we already had a great rapport. He was happy and silly, candid and easy-going. He described himself as loving family, friends, life, video games, clothes, and sports. Student C was unique to the group because he was the only one who outwardly considered himself a reader – naming favorite authors, like Kwame Alexander and favorite genres: science, historical fiction, and poetry. Because of its historical significance and poetic style, Student C loved *The Trial* by Jen Bryant as we worked through that text during the intervention. He had a strong background knowledge of American Presidents and American history, which he contributed to any group discussions we had about the Lindbergh kidnapping.

From the beginning, it was clear that Student C would need to be stretched in more difficult aspects of reading: comprehension and metacognition. While his peers focused much of our efforts on fluency and basic reading skills, I worked with Student C

on inferencing, predicting, interpretations, connections, and vocabulary. I found that he loved to read and loved to discuss but did not really want to do written work or assessments – this is where his motivation declined. As a result, I do not believe his early assessments truly reflected his strong abilities – but this may have been an issue of motivation and expectancy-value, as well.

Student C exhibited growth on Measures of Academic Progress Reading (see Figure 4.3), oral reading fluency, and reading engagement. He maintained a high level of comprehension, as exhibited within his Developmental Reading Assessment scores. He also grew more confident in himself and with his peers. It was of note that early in the intervention cycle, Student C always went to the back of the room, away from his classmates. By the end, all five were sitting together near the front and chatting before we would begin.



Figure 4.3 *Student C MAP Reading Growth*

Student C grew as a writer about reading as well. He often rushed to get assignments done, without much thought, until we slowed down and worked together to discuss the text before he wrote. It helped to show him that reading responses were a form of discussion – an idea that he enjoyed. In a final survey, when asked “What

motivated you to participate?” Student C wrote “the small group environment”. On that same survey, when asked what he enjoyed most about our intervention time, he responded that our discussions were fun, and he wanted to have more discussions.

Student D

Student D described himself as “fun, funny, active, sometimes smart” and one who loves his family. He lives with his brother, sisters, and mom. Student D loves sports and gaming, hates clowns and dogs, and wants to be a professional basketball player when he grows up.

As a student, he was quiet, withdrawn, and independent. From the get-go, Student D was a stronger learner. He preferred to work alone, unnoticed, but always got his work done. He limited our conferences by only providing one word answers whenever possible and not really opening up as our time together progressed. He did, however, share in the final survey that his favorite aspect of the intervention was “Mrs. Wagner working with me on reading responses”. This feedback surprised me, because he did not say much in our intervention time together and because Student D’s reading responses had been strong even before our intervention mini-lessons. Equally surprising from the survey was that he added a comment to the other category “I liked your class”. He was motivated by coming to my room, and he truly enjoyed the read-alouds (see Figure 4.4).

What motivated you to participate? Choose all that apply.

- Going into a different classroom.
- Candy, stickers, donuts (bribes!)
- The small group environment
- Other: makes me better at reading

Add individual feedback

What else would you like to tell Mrs. Wagner after this time together?

i like your class

Add individual feedback

Figure 4.4 *Student D End of Cycle Survey Excerpt*

If I thought any of the student participants had not grown much from the intervention, it would have been Student D because his comprehension and MAP scores indicated maintenance, rather than growth. However, Student D did make substantial growth both in reading fluency and reading engagement. Student D steadily grew in oral reading fluency (see Figure 4.5). He was one that begin the intervention by reading too quickly and mumbling monotonously without expression. Through mini-lessons, modeling, and practice, he became a much stronger reader of texts out loud.

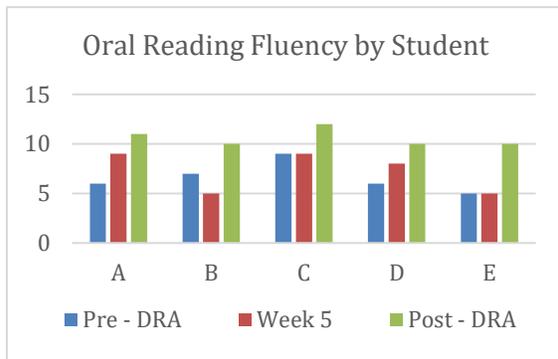


Figure 4.5 *Oral Reading Fluency by Student*

Student E

Student E began the intervention cycle as a 14-year-old boy from a large family that included his mother, father, and four brothers. He described himself as a lover of comics, dogs, and ice cream. He loved the outdoors, helping the homeless, swimming,

and art. He dreamed of seeing a UFO some day and meeting alien species. While Student E was not an English language learner, Spanish was spoken in the home and he was fluent in Spanish. He struggled with writing because grammar and spelling confused him. Student E was playful and easy-going. He admitted to fake reading at school and never reading by choice.

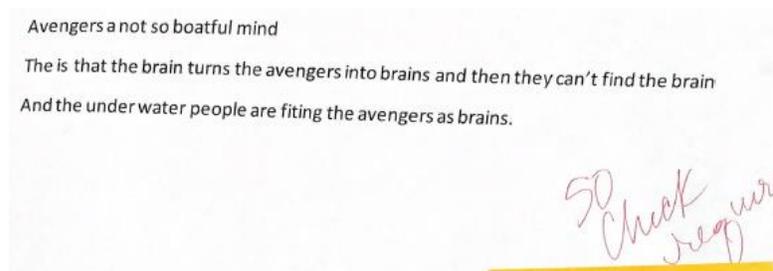


Figure 4.6 Student E Reading Response 1

Figure 4.6 shows Student E's struggles in grammar and spelling, but also failed to convey any reading comprehension. In fact, comprehension was a large focus for me while working with Student E during the intervention. He really blossomed during our discussions of *The Trial* – asking questions and conveying surprised understanding. During individual mini-lessons, I worked with him to better visualize what he is reading. While Student E did not show much growth on MAP, DRA results indicated a steady increase in reading comprehension for him. Lastly, Student E reading responses improved significantly throughout the cycle. He was earning As and Bs on the responses by the end of December. In Figure 4.7, below, he exhibited comprehension of a text through sequential summary.

1 this week, I read "The Double Eagle
 2 Has Landed" by Anthony Horowitz
 3 this is one story in the Chris Read
 4 Miller collection
 5 the text is mainly about Nick and
 6 Tim Diamond, two brothers living in
 7 LMDM. Tim is older and a really
 8 not bright private detective
 9 one day Tim gets a new case: to
 10 protect a coin from being
 11 stolen. Nick the little brother
 12 thinks it is so, they go to
 13 protect the coin and off an
 14 alarm it turns out
 15 they had been paid. they were
 16 the distraction so the men
 17 could sneak in and steal
 18 the coin. Nick had been
 19 paid to Tim five times.

Figure 4.7 Student E Reading Response 2

Analysis of Data

The research questions that guided this study focused on achievement, engagement, and motivation for the boys: What is the impact of prioritizing independent reading on male adolescent reading achievement? How does integration of personal interests impact reading engagement in male adolescents? What is the impact of individualized reading strategies and texts on male adolescent motivation?

Reading achievement, as measured in this study, is indicated by several components and measurements. First, reading achievement was measured by growth on MAP. As Figure 4.8 indicates, growth in reading achievement occurred for two participants. One participant maintained, and two decreased in reading achievement on MAP. However, individual components of reading achievement suggest another story. For example, by the end of the intervention cycle, all five students had improved vastly in oral reading fluency – one aspect of reading achievement. “By reading at an appropriate

pace, with proper phrasing and with intonation, expression, and emphasis on the correct words, a reader both communicates that the text is making sense and makes sense of the reading” (Serravallo, 2015, p. 104).

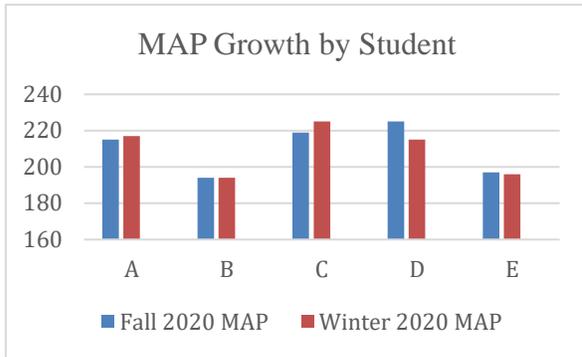


Figure 4.8 *MAP Growth by Student*

Reading engagement increased greatly during the intervention cycle. The book talks, read-alouds, and discussions were aspects that engaged the boys the most. For Developmental Reading Assessment, reading engagement is measured by wide reading (a student’s ability to name titles, authors, genres, they read), self-assessment, and goal-setting as readers. Prior to the intervention cycle, most of the boys could not name specific titles, authors, or genres because they were unsure what they preferred. However, by the end, they all had grown to enjoy certain authors and genres. All five participants exhibited growth in reading engagement.

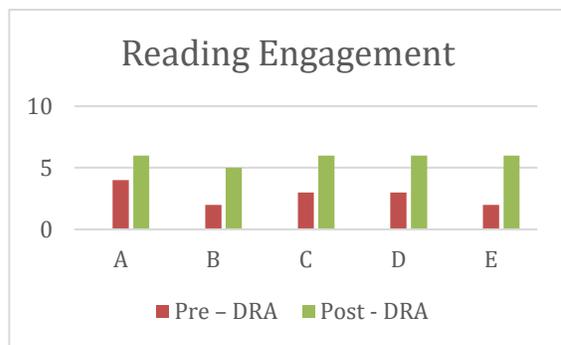


Figure 4.9 *Quantitative Reading Engagement*

The reading engagement inventory defines reading engagement as the time spent actively reading the text. At the beginning of the intervention cycle, the boys struggled to remain engaged in a book for more than five minutes at a time. By the end of the cycle, the boys were reading the entire twenty minutes without exhibiting any distracted behaviors.

Motivation was the most qualitative component of the study and was measured by the students' comments in conferencing, on reading responses, and in class discussions. During initial conferences, each participant was asked "What motivates you to read?" to which I received responses that included "nothing" and "I don't know". As the intervention cycle progressed, several motivations became apparent for the boys: discussions, "getting out of class", having individualized help, and the small group environment. In fact, the boys often asked if they could come work in my room during other classes throughout their day. One larger theme was the sense of belonging these boys felt as participants in the group. They were motivated to be in the small group environment where we could discuss, work together, and find successes.

Summary

Despite many unexpected hurdles amid a global pandemic, much was learned and gained from this action research. Even though students were only in face-to-face attendance two or three days a week, prioritizing independent reading still occurred for at least 20 minutes during each attendance day. During this time, an ongoing flow of book talks, read-alouds, conferences, discussions, and mini-lessons brought the boys higher achievement, engagement, and motivation in reading. Student A grew to be an avid reader of digital texts. Student B found a growing interest of historical texts and

nonfiction, while growing as a reader. Student C experienced enrichment and grew in confidence as a reader. Student D's fluency, confidence, and expression grew. Student E became a more serious student, improving greatly in his ability to think about and write about his reading. The convergent mixed data of qualitative and quantitative measures truly paint the larger picture for these boys: that achievement, engagement, and motivation can all be increased with the prioritization of independent reading within the English language arts classroom.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Study

In the constantly changing landscape of education, one thing has remained the same: boys are falling behind. Crisis and epidemic are just a few of the words used to describe the gender gap in education, and those same terms label the growing problems in adolescent literacy. “In the United States, there are *eight million* students in grades 4 through 12 who struggle to read at grade level” (Flanigan et al, 2011, p. 1). As an educator of English language arts and a literacy coach, I have observed firsthand the increasing reading struggles within adolescence – and I have noticed a majority of struggling readers to be males. This is why my action research intervention focused on adolescent male struggling readers. Specifically, my intervention entailed prioritizing at least 20 minutes of the ELA block to independent reading and its many components, because independent reading is not a current priority within my school, and I wanted to show other teachers what independent reading can do for students. Three research questions guided this study: What is the impact of prioritizing independent reading on male adolescent reading achievement? How does integration of personal interests impact reading engagement in male adolescents? What is the impact of individualized reading strategies and texts on male adolescent motivation?

In summary, the action research intervention occurred for twelve weeks with five adolescent male participants described within this mixed methods, convergent case study.

The results of the action research included growth from the boys in reading achievement, reading engagement, and motivation. This final chapter focuses on discussing the results of the study and sharing my potential implementation plan. After a reflection on action research, discussion of the new limitations of the study is followed by recommendations for future research. Finally, a summary of the dissertation is provided.

Results

The three constructs of reading achievement, engagement, and motivation are hot topics in adolescent literacy, especially when it comes to independent reading. However, as the research indicates, independent reading is not just allowing students to sit and read silently (Gallagher, 2009; Kittle, 2013; Serravallo, 2018). Without assessments, conferences, logs, or other routines, independent reading time becomes wasted time. Perhaps this is why so many classrooms, including many within my building, have given this time to other pedagogy. However, “Powerful instruction can and should happen as students read independently (Serravallo, 2018, p. 203). My intervention, the prioritization of independent reading, provided the routines, assessments, and instruction that gleaned powerful and positive results, which was consistent with current research on independent reading. For example, considering reading achievement, the results show the students’ increased comprehension scores on the Developmental Reading Assessments before, during, and after the intervention cycle.

From beginning to end, every student maintained or grew in comprehension – a success because their DRA passages increased in difficulty each time. Therefore, while Student C began and ended with a comprehension score of 14, he grew as a reader because his pre-DRA reading passage was at an easier level than that of the passage on

his post DRA. To answer the first research question, what is the impact of prioritizing independent reading on male adolescent reading achievement? It is evident that the impact is positive, growing each reader in unique ways according to their needs.

Engagement was a key element to the success of this study. All but one of the participants considered themselves nonreaders and admitted to fake reading instead of being engaged in books during independent reading time. Two quantitative measures exemplified the boys' growth in engagement during the intervention cycle: the reading engagement inventory and the DRA Engagement Survey. First, engagement inventory shows that, as the time and days progressed, each boy got better at maintaining engagement by actively reading a book. Figure 5.1 shows a snapshot of the first week to illustrate the quick changes in engagement. By the third week (the bottom five recordings), the boys were settling in within five minutes to engage in reading.

Engagement Inventory
NOTE TO TEACHER: Kid-watch and record student behaviors during 5-10 minute increments

Names	Time/Environment	Time/Environment	Time/Environment	Time/Environment	T
10/5 A	SW	E	W	E	
B	E	SB	Z. playing w/ math	E	
C	SB 7:55 AM	SB	E	E	
D	T 7:55 AM	E	8:02	E	
E	E	E	E	E	
10/11 A	SB	W	E		
B	S 7:58	E	SB		
C	C	T 8:07	E	8:15	
D	W	SB	W		
E	SB	E	TY		
A	T	E	E		
B	talk	E	E	8:19	
C	sb	E	E		
D	T	E	E		
E	W	E	E		

Handwritten notes on table:
 - Next to C (10/5): "got nervous" and "very distracted"
 - Next to D (10/5): "Read aloud w/ SB"
 - Next to E (10/5): "They begged to stay and read it!"
 - Next to C (10/11): "8:05"
 - Next to E (10/11): "8:05"

Handwritten notes on pink sticky notes:
 - Top right: "10/5 EPIC EPIC EPIC EPIC EPIC BIG NATE (EPIC) BONE (only added)"
 - Middle right: "EPIC is still new to them. Most were browsing when off tasks."

Figure 5.1 Week 1 Engagement Inventory

Our first engagement inventory was conducted on our very first day together, 5 October. While the students already knew what to expect, they were in a new

environment (my classroom) and the ability to engage in books was lacking. Take, for example, at 7:55 AM: student A and C were switching books, student D was looking directly at me. While student B and E were engaged, only Student E remained reading the entire time period. Student B quickly got distracted, switching books and then later playing with his mask. As my sticky note indicates, “Epic is still new to them. Most were browsing when off task”. This, coupled with the new environment, may have impacted their ability to engage in reading. Two inventories later showed a changing story: while the students struggled to get started because of distracting news, they finally got to where every one of them wanted to continue reading once our time was up.

Equally significant is the results from the reading engagement survey within the DRA. Figure 4.5 showed that every boy really increased in reading engagement in the time of the intervention cycle. Qualitative measures, like my one-on-one conferences with the boys, confirmed the increase in engagement. Student E told me “the pressure is off so I just read what I want to, instead of having to do a bunch of questions or whatever”. Student A proudly stated that “Books are getting easier to read and I’m reading more than I used to”.

The results on reading engagement confirm existing literature on gender relevant pedagogy, engagement theory, and shared reading experiences. First, gender relevant pedagogy guided my investment in time to get to know each boy as a reader in order to meet their unique interests. I made sure to focus on each boy’s everyday interests and bridge that to the books we read or the books I suggested for them.

Our group read aloud of *The Trial* by Jen Bryant affirmed boys’ interests in historical topics – and their enthusiasm over the trial documents affirmed their love on

nonfiction. Additionally, the boys showed great interest and engagement with every book talk, read aloud, and one-on-one conferences.

As we saw with Student C's background knowledge, allowing students to share the reading experience through discussion also increased engagement greatly. "It is crucial that we consider interest and what the student brings to the text" (Serravallo, 2018, p. 201). These shared reading experiences impacted their overall engagement growth. To answer the second research question, how does integration of personal interests impact reading engagement in male adolescents? These action research results are consistent with current research: boys need choice and boys have a higher likelihood of growing as readers if personal interests and gender relevancy are incorporated into the learning. Lastly, involving the participants through lively discussions and building relationships with them through conferencing confirmed engagement theory's main posit that involving the students is likely to generate learning.

Boys, on average, are less motivated to read than girls, as Applegate and Applegate (2010) suggested. Understanding what boys like, including active learning, informational texts, historical fiction, and graphic novels—helps to create gender relevant pedagogy, provide student choice, and create interesting reading experiences for students. Like engagement, providing student choice highly impacts motivation for boys – and the intervention cycle confirmed this. The boys' commentary in conferences and group discussions provided qualitative evidence of these motivations. Expectancy value theory also impacted the boys' motivations. For example, as I provided lessons on writing reading responses, their confidence in writing about reading increased. As they expected to do better, they began making more effort on those responses. Their ELA teacher said

“They are more willing to participate in class discussions about our readings, are making quicker connections between events happening in the novel and are not afraid to defend their positions on an answer or idea. They are more confident”. What is the impact of prioritizing independent reading strategies and texts on male adolescent motivation? The results suggest that using texts that interest boys, choosing strategies based on individual needs, incorporating discussions, and overall making independent reading processes a priority all positively impact male adolescent motivation. My boys wanted to continue the action research cycle upon returning from winter break.

Practice Recommendations

One of the unexpected developments of this work was the positive impact of the small group discussions. When one thinks of independent reading, images of individual and different book titles usually come to mind. However, as this case study group developed a strong rapport, their unanimous request to read a novel of historical fiction in narrative poetry won over, allowing for the shared reading experience of literary discussions. As previously stated, these discussions helped the boys understand and comprehend, remain engaged, and the discussions motivated the boys. This unintended result of the research is supported by Fountas and Pinnell (2017), as they discussed many key principles to their literacy continuum: “students learn by talking...the ability to read and comprehend texts is expanded through talking and writing” (p. 2). Indeed, I have seen firsthand the power of a Socratic Seminar discussion while teaching Honors English to gifted students. However, my own practice has lacked in providing the framework for allowing discussion in lower-level classes or with small groups of struggling readers.

While I recommend that every ELA teacher prioritizes independent reading as seen through my action research, I further recommend that time, routine, and activities be planned to incorporate discussions into the low tracked ELA classes with which I most closely work. This should include strategies to build relationships and confidence, as engagement theory and expectancy value theory both posit. This should also include incorporating students' background knowledge, diverse backgrounds, and unique interests – thus giving each student a particular lens through which to see a common text and about which to discuss.

Implementation Plan

As literacy coach and interventionist at WMS, one of my many roles is to research best practices and share implementation strategies with the English language arts department. It is my duty to ensure such practices work within the context of our rural and diverse student population. Therefore, my plan of implementation involves three major steps that all work well within the parameters of my normal role: presentation of my research, professional development mini-sessions, and follow-up classroom visits.

The beginning of every school year kicks off with a teacher work week that usually includes one or two literacy-based presentations from me to the entire faculty or specific departments. With administration's approval, I will seek to present my findings in two different ways: to the non-ELA faculty in a summary that will focus on key highlights applicable to other content areas and to the English language arts department with specific takeaways regarding reading. Next, I will provide professional development mini-sessions to my English language arts department. Each mini-session will focus on one aspect of my prioritized independent reading plan and will include

application and brainstorming time during which each teacher can prepare for their own students. For example, one mini-session would be on how to discern readers interests, during which I will provide several example reading surveys and interest inventories, plus reading conference questions. Additional mini-sessions would cover how to help students choose texts appropriate for their levels and interests, how to manage the differentiation, how to choose mini-strategies based on readers' needs, what read alouds to conduct, and so many more.

Lastly, implementation will entail follow-up classroom visits, since I am already involved in most of the English language arts classrooms. These visits will take on many forms, including modeling a one-on-one conference or a small group mini-lesson, providing a book talk, or observing a teacher practicing a lesson learned in the mini-sessions. Through the presentation of my findings, professional development mini-sessions, and follow-up visits, I will have the opportunity to further my learning and help our students grow as readers.

Reflection on Action Research

According to Albert Szent Gyorgyi, "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought" (Shiref & Sahai, 2020, p. 1). This is exactly how the action research process and journey felt to me. The process of working with the student participants, armed with the research and best practices of others, felt like seeing information in a new light and discovering its implications within my own school and classroom. The life-altering experience of research during a global pandemic and new learning about fluency both warrant thorough reflection.

The outbreak of a coronavirus, later named COVID-19 first impacted my action research indirectly because it brought an abrupt end to the previous school year by quarantining. Our school provided at-home learning packets every two weeks because we were not one-to-one with technology. Students' last day of true instruction was March 13, 2020 and they did not receive formal instruction again until the following August. This exacerbated what would have been a normal summer slide for all learners. Not only were students returning after an extended time away from normal instruction, but they also returned to school in August to a hybrid schedule. A few weeks into the school year, all students received Chromebooks and were thrust into a technological environment for which none of us had adequately prepared. E-learning days were inconsistent and confusing for students – they rarely did their at-home work, with reasons varying from no internet to confusion to forgetfulness. This, coupled with the swinging door of students getting exposed, quarantined, returning created new problems in the ability to provide quality instruction during their present in school days. My participants struggled some with technology, some with attendance, and all with responsibility on E-learning days. The Chromebook added an element that distracted some students and frustrated others. COVID-19 impacted how this study proceeded and continues to impact day-to-day operations within our school.

One significant discovery through the action research intervention cycle was that of the importance of fluency. When I used to think about fluency, I considered it one of the elementary components of learning to read – like phonics or decoding. My background in secondary English language arts and my experience with middle and high schoolers had me inaccurately thinking that most struggling readers really needed

comprehension help over anything else. However, the DRA made suggestions for several of the participants that fluency would be a key focus point. In the words of Serravallo (2015), “there is a chicken-and-egg relationship between fluency and comprehension” (p. 104). However, my work with struggling readers demonstrated that one cannot gain comprehension without first honing their skills in fluency. Fluency is so much more than reading a certain number of words per minute. It includes phrasing, expression, intonation, emphasis, automaticity, pace, and decoding multisyllabic words accurately.

What surprised me, during this process, was how quickly I observed growth from the boys when we focused on fluency. It first became a possibility for me when they were all asking for read alouds – admitting it really helped them comprehend what we were reading or what they were reading alone. When we took turns reading aloud, I noticed every one of them rushing – as if reading were a race. Before they finished a paragraph, I knew they would not remember what they had read. I began by doing a small group mini-lesson called “slow the zoom” so that all five boys heard me say “reading fast is NOT good – reading slow is better”. This mini-lesson helped all of them. We practiced short passages independently and together until they were reading slowly but with automaticity and some expression. The fluency focus grew from there. Upon reflection, fluency helped the boys succeed because it was something they could immediately fix – it was a straightforward skill to practice. This gave them confidence, which increased their expectancy value. They were practicing with their individual texts and texts that I had already read to them, which helped them feel comfortable about it as well. This greatly informs my practice with small groups. I have always focused mostly

on reading skills like comprehension or summarizing but will definitely increase fluency modeling and mini-lessons.

Limitations of the Study

As a lifelong learner, my intent with this research is to improve my practice. So the small group focus within my one small school was relevant for me, but may also prove to be a limitation of the study. The small sample size limits the ability to generalize my learning to the entire male gender. Additionally, the rostering process for the participants was limiting in several ways, especially with the onset of COVID-19 pandemic. The low tracked ELA rosters are created using an imprecise process – and pulling from this low group does not equally represent all male readers. The hybrid schedule limited the roster from which participants were chosen – all A day students or all B day students created simplicity in scheduling but did not guarantee the best five participants were chosen. To improve the sample of participants, a focus on reading ability and growth mindset would be helpful criteria when selecting the students.

Several improvements could result in better findings for a similar study. First, a consistent daily prioritization of at least thirty minutes would be even better. Since so much of our independent reading time consisted of read alouds, discussion, or mini-lessons, it became very instructional in purpose and was not “just reading”. However, more time for reading and reflecting would improve their engagement and achievement. Similarly, establishing a framework in reading and writing workshop for the majority of an English language arts block would be a means to apply this learning to a larger population.

Another improvement to the study would be to expand the sample size to a full class, grade level, or building. The ability to study gender relevant pedagogy on both males and females would be fascinating and very telling. While the small group environment of all boys helped aid in their comfortability and confidence, it also created a limitation in that it did not yield a broader scope of results.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because some of the participants enjoyed digital books and some did not, one suggestion for future research would be to mimic the study but have one small group use strictly digital books and the other group to use strictly hardback or paperback texts. Epic as a reading platform includes reading logs, total minutes read, and a list of genres the student explores. These quantitative measures could be maintained for the paperback group as well and the ability to compare and contrast would provide great learning for all.

Based on the unexpected success of fluency lessons, more research is needed on the impact of fluency lessons for adolescent readers. So much of the existing research is geared toward upper elementary students or younger. Additionally, strategies and activities for improving fluency for adolescents would be worthwhile research.

Since the benefit of student discussion was another unexpected discovery of my small group, I need to focus more research on the impact of discussion time on components of literacy, like comprehension and metacognition, but also on motivation and engagement. Likewise, strategies for building confidence in struggling readers-- so they will actively participate in discussions- is needed. Overall, more research in applying literacy principles to older adolescents will expand our understanding of effective pedagogies and our ability to build reading skills for students.

Summary of the Dissertation

Boys are falling behind. Every low-tracked ELA class, every small group roster of struggling readers has more boys than girls with lower and lower reading levels. This research aimed to study the impact of prioritizing independent reading time within the ELA class, which provided student choice, individualized reading mini-lessons, conferences, and more. As a case study, this research focused on the reading achievement, engagement, and motivation of five male participants who were eighth graders in a low tracked ELA class. Findings suggest that prioritization of independent reading is beneficial for readers' achievement, engagement, and motivation. The individualized mini-lessons, read alouds, surveys, conferences, and student work all aid in understanding how to create gender relevant reading opportunities for struggling readers.

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APPENDIX B

Table A.2: Summary of Prioritized Independent Reading Sessions

	Monday	Wednesday	Friday	Notes
1	Intro to Epic R.E.I. Intro Google Classroom	REI on EPIC DRA Survey Conference with individuals	Short story task Finish initial conferences	T – Students didn't post in G.C. Th – students didn't read in Epic Teacher is allowing reading responses in Chromebooks*
2	Book talk: Guys Read Collections	Students finish Guys Read story		T – students didn't read the assigned Guys Read story/video
3	REI Strategy mini-lessons	Students finish practicing their individual strategies Conference check-ins	Teacher requested help with reading responses – assigned them related to strategy practice	A: Character focus B: Summarizing SWBST C: Inferring about characters D: fluency practice E: fluency practice
4	Book Talk: The Trial BOOKMATCH mini-lesson	Whole group lesson: questioning the text (background info to The Trial)		Students loved the book talk and asked if we could read The Trial together
5	Read aloud: The Trial Context clues mini-lesson	Whole group modeling: writing a reading response	Review: annotated model paragraph Assigned individuals follow up responses and provided one-on-one help Book Talk: Dunk	A: Characterization B: Summarizing / Elements of plot C: Inferring D: Predictions E: Visualizing the text
6	DRA PM REI	DRA PM REI (other half of group)		Students read <i>the Trial</i> for REI

7	Citation mini-lesson for reading responses (quotes versus paraphrasing and how to cite)	Reading <i>The Trial</i> and making predictions discussion Book Talk: Refugee	Read aloud: The Trial Fluency review and modeling	Students are exhibiting a need to RUSH when reading aloud. Focus on fluency and expression needed.
8	Fluency mini-lesson “slow the zoom”	Fluency mini-lesson “Heeding punctuation for expression”		Students read one-on-one with me parts of <i>The Trial</i> to practice the strategies.
9	Book talk: Game Changer REI	Finish the Trial	Individual conferences / The Trial responses	Students want to read the Trial instead of their choice books
10	Book Talk: All American Boys	REI		
11	REI	WINTER MAP Assessment	WINTER MAP Assessment	
12	DRA PM Final surveys	DRA PM Final surveys		Students were multitasking while I PMed individuals

*REI stands for Reading Engagement Inventory: students read their choice books unless otherwise noted