

The Reader as an Individual

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Abstract: The research on student choice in independent reading states that students read more when given ample chances to choose personally meaningful and engaging books. Opportunities to read these books more often in school help all students, including struggling and reluctant adolescent readers. Advocates for student choice suggest eliminating the disconnect between what students are reading outside of school and creating an environment for students to talk about what they're reading with peers and teachers. Various research studies were analyzed and the implications synthesized for this piece.

Note: Names have been changed to protect identities.

“Mrs. C, I don’t read,” he said to me. “All books are boring.”

I held back a pained, tired sigh and sat down next to him. “You just haven’t found the right book yet,” I said. “There’s one out there. Let me help you.” He shrugged.

The conversation above is not a rarity when working with struggling adolescent readers. The students enrolled in English Strategies classes at my school are reading at least two grade levels below proficiency in seventh, eighth, or ninth grade. The goal of the class is to provide students with the tools and skills necessary to read on grade level and become lifelong readers and critical thinkers. But, working towards those goals can feel like an uphill battle when the students are entirely resistant to making improvements or really understanding why such improvements are necessary.

Outside of class, these interactions play on continuous loop in my mind. I search blogs, professional texts, and colleagues' experiences for any new idea that could hook the next half-hearted, unmotivated kid. While there's no one book that will hook all reluctant readers or one magic fix, there are ideas that we can apply in the right situations and hope to engage our reluctant readers, starting them on the path to becoming lifelong learners.

In light of my attempts to engage adolescent struggling readers, I sought out the experts. What do they say in regards to engagement and reading? In this discussion, I define engagement as Guthrie, MacRae, and Klauda (2007) do, "to represent reading in which motivational processes (such as interest) and cognitive strategies (such as self-monitoring) are simultaneously occurring" (p. 238). They add to this definition, "the engaged reader is behaviorally active as displayed in task participation, effort, persistence in the face of difficulty, and reading frequently for pleasure and learning" (p. 238). The present work is based on this premise and the presumption that increased time spent reading, along with giving students a wide and varied choice of reading materials, will eventually develop stronger, more strategic readers.

What the Research Says

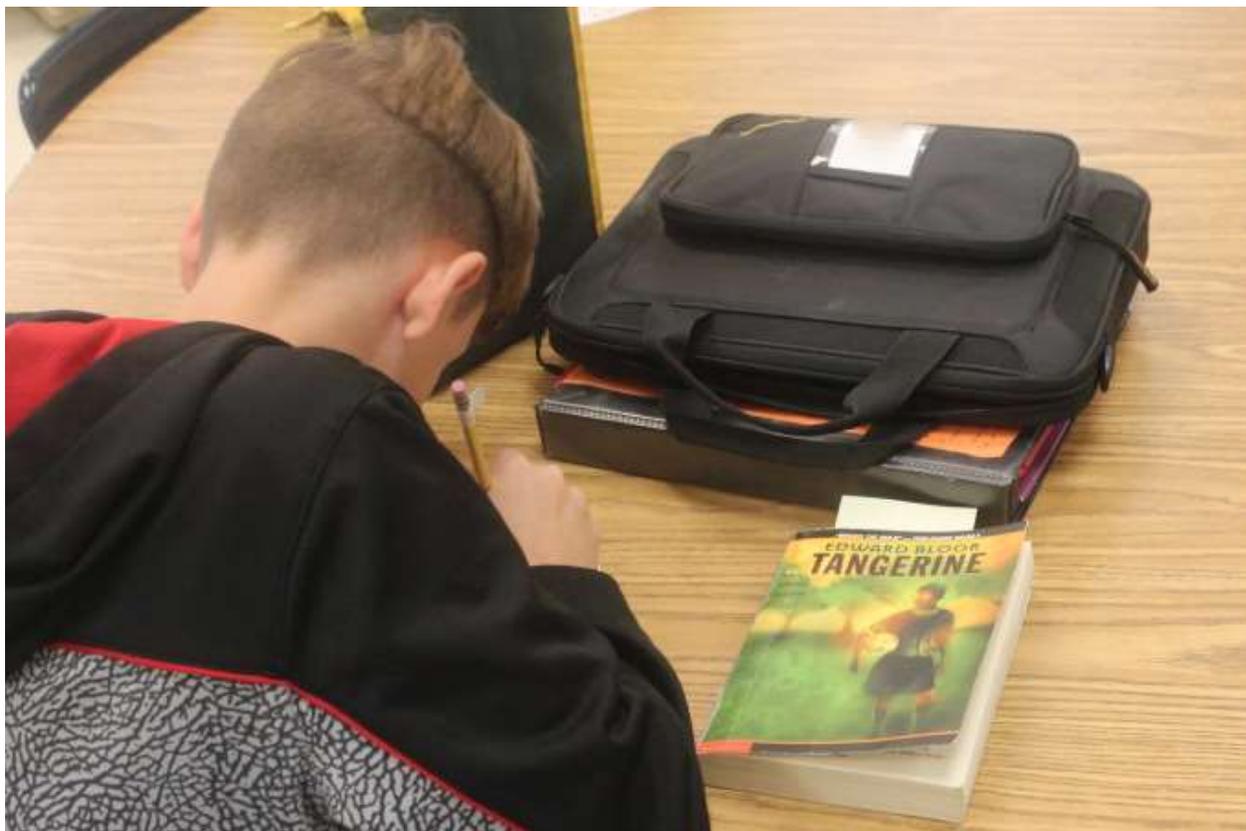
In this section, I synthesize researchers' findings on the effect of choice, engagement, and independent reading as they relate to adolescent readers as well as struggling adolescent readers.

Engagement. Engagement graces the keyboards of researchers and practitioners alike. The push for creating proficient readers has created a need for investigation and inquiry into the characteristics of engaged readers. Ivey and Johnston's (2013) study of students' perceptions towards reading found that "engagement was evident not just in the time students spent reading but also in how they talked about their involvement with text, which they juxtaposed with passive compliant reading of the past" (p. 261).

Engaged students are excited and talking about books. Reading becomes an energized task, not something forced or dreaded. Casey's (2008) case study of learning clubs in a seventh grade language arts classroom draws a similar conclusion:

These struggling students are engaged because their ideas about literature and literacy matter to [their teacher], and in turn, to their peers around them. This engagement motivates these students to actively pursue literacy events because they want to become readers and writers. (p. 291)

Engagement ignites students' intrinsic motivation. One can only assume this leads to greater success as lifelong readers and learners. This should be what drives us as teachers to determine the best way to light the pilot inside each of our students. Often, starting the pilot light is the hardest. Once curiosity is alight it's more easily stoked into a roaring fire.



Choice. Choice can manifest itself in numerous ways in English Language Arts (ELA) and content classrooms. According to Guthrie (2015), “the most widespread recommendation for motivation is providing choices” (p. 71). What we need to implement in regards to struggling adolescent readers is choice in individual reading. When students are interested in the material, motivation and learning increase. Worthy, Moorman, & Turner (1999) describe research showing that “when students both are interested in what is being taught and have access to materials that interest them, learning, motivation, effort, and attitudes improve” (p. 12). Too often we forget that students need to get their hands on books that interest them. Students need access to materials in which they are interested, especially books that grab their attention making them want to keep reading.

Related to the accessibility of materials, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) state that “typical reading demands in middle schools rarely take into consideration the developmental and personal differences between students” (p. 353). There is a definite push for and greater attention to the variance of students’ needs within a single classroom. However, the question still remains: Are teachers providing students with books and other reading materials that consider their personal differences? In recognizing the difference in students’ instructional needs, teachers also need to consider the differences in students’ backgrounds and the related challenges that result in providing a wide array of books. Likewise, Ivey and Johnston (2013) suggest that “opportunities to select young adult literature, typically situated in the social networks with which adolescents identify, would foster engaged reading” (p. 257). If having engaged readers that lead to critical thinkers, lifelong readers, and ultimately lifelong learners, then classrooms need to provide the type of young adult literature that encourages engaged reading. According to Casey (2008), “As research predicts, students are engaged because they have the opportunity to make choices about their reading and their participation while sharing responsibility for learning with their peers and teachers” (p. 286). It’s important to keep in mind that the end goal should be creating lifelong readers and learners. With this in the forefront of our minds and research at our back, it shouldn’t matter what kids read as long as they’re reading, thinking, and questioning.

Independent Reading. Creating lifelong readers requires one very crucial step: time to read independently. Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz (1999) refer to independent reading as “the personal dimension” of their Academic Literacy course. They explain their approach as a reading apprenticeship during which “Classroom activities support individual students in developing an increased awareness of themselves as readers” (p. 27). These experts concur at the same time that students need time to read, just read. In fact, research conducted by Ivey (2014) shows dramatic results among eighth graders given free choice and time to read: “By the end of the year, students were reading like never before, quite literally. Many students told us that they had never read a book in its entirety before eighth grade” (p. 166).

The importance of this finding is two-fold: 1) providing students with time to just read had a positive dramatic and powerful effect on these students; and 2) we need to rethink reading instruction if students aren’t reading an entire book before eighth grade. For Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz (1999), “Having the time and encouragement to read is just as important, especially for students not in the habit of reading” (p. 65). Research has shown numerous times the importance of giving students time to read books they enjoy. Authenticity of tasks breeds stronger engagement, which includes reading. Adolescents know that adults who read for pleasure read what they choose. Providing the time and environment for this real-world type of reading is crucial to the academic and life successes of struggling adolescent readers. Morgan and Wagner (2013) report on the three-week choice reading unit implemented by Chris, a high school teacher who used the reader’s workshop method for students to act as their own librarians: “They would talk about the TV shows, movies, video games, and books they loved and hated, and from there they would recommend book titles to one another that they thought would fit those interests” (p. 662). By initiating and facilitating these types of conversations, students learn to value their knowledge of books and personal interests to find and recommend titles to their classmates.



How This Applies to Classroom Practice

In this section, I hope to provide insights into how the research can be applied to instruction and share some of my experiences implementing choice in individual reading with struggling adolescent readers. Thinking about how to implement choice in independent reading can be overwhelming. There's a lot to consider, including the types of books to acquire, school and classroom libraries, and how this method impacts instruction.

Many books can be considered a window or a mirror for the reader, wherein mirrors reflect back one's self and windows provide insight into someone else's life. It's important to make sure that students have access to books that are mirrors (Bishop, 1982). This can be done by talking to students about what books they find engaging. Ivey and Johnston (2015) describe the instructional change made by the eighth grade

teachers in their study and its impact on the types of books housed in their classrooms: “Their ongoing analyses resulted in additional access and attention to diverse books, particularly multicultural books and books with male protagonists” (p. 303). The eighth grade teachers recognized the need for a certain type of books for their students and responded in kind.

Central to the discussion of providing choice in reading is the availability of materials. Lauren was a seventh grader in my English Strategies class who had abandoned books every few days, claiming they weren’t interesting. After attending a conference on engaging readers, I looked at the books available through her eyes and told her that “I heard this author, her name is Coe Booth, describe her frustration as a reader, that she couldn’t see herself in the characters because they were all white girls. Is that something you struggle with, too?” Meeting my eyes, she nodded. Together, we looked for books in my classroom library and in the school library with which she could connect personally. Soon she was engaged in reading without much, if any, prompting from me.

Like Lauren, Oliver struggled to become engaged with books because he couldn’t find any that provided a mirror for him. His English Strategies teacher, Mrs. O’Connor, worked hard to connect him with titles that might do just that. It took a while, but Oliver got sucked into books by Mexican American author Matt de la Pena. Before long he read every book he’d published and shared how much he liked them with his friends. De la Pena’s titles became very popular among the young Mexican-American males at our school and eventually among the entire student body. Oliver contacted de la Pena, and Mrs. O’Connor raised money to bring him to speak to the whole school. This transformative experience for Oliver became an avenue to engage countless more readers.

It stands to reason that a wide selection of materials would best serve all students. When considering the myriad of backgrounds and experiences students bring to the classroom, a vast range of titles need to be available. Students need to be able to see themselves in the books and connect with the characters and their experiences. Ivey and Johnston (2013) report the impact of providing engaging titles, stating that “students specifically

pointed to the qualities of the books, particularly that they were edgy and personally meaningful” (p. 267). In this context, “personally meaningful” is a fairly broad descriptor when considering that books speaking to one student will not necessarily speak to another. Another broad descriptor, “edgy” books can be described as those that tackle tough issues and raise moral and ethical questions. Student participants in Ivey and Johnson’s studies (2013, 2015) engaged in books that helped them grapple with dilemmas present in current society, such as identity, equality, family pressures, drugs, and gender identity. In the past few years I have worked to acquire “edgy” titles that engage students’ interests for my own classroom library. Titles like Ellen Hopkins’ *Crank*, Gayle Forman’s *If I Stay*, Coe Booth’s *Tyrell*, and Matt de la Pena’s *We Were Here* tackle tough issues and are popular among developing adolescent readers. Frequently, students come to me from the school library or another teacher and ask to borrow a book they can’t find. Unfortunately, I send away disappointed students because all my copies are checked out. It’s an exceptionally wonderful problem to have. Collaborating with the school librarian and other classroom teachers creates a larger bookshelf for students.

Building a Classroom Library

Providing books that students can connect to is a key piece of implementing student choice in independent reading, particularly for struggling adolescent readers. This type of reader has become frustrated with reading for a long time and can be very resistant to any kind of reading. The traditional texts may not appeal to these students and it’s the teacher’s job to have a wide selection of titles available to engage each unique, individual child. Especially when considering the urgency of engaging reluctant and struggling adolescent readers, it is imperative that meaningful, thought-provoking titles are available. Books off the beaten path may finally provide the window or mirror that that student has subconsciously been craving.

Teachers have found success using a rotating selection of edgy titles. This way a fresh selection of titles enters the classroom every few months (Ivey & Johnston, 2015).

Sharing titles among teachers and classrooms creates an expansive supply of titles. Classroom libraries are expensive to maintain, but funding for books can be found in a myriad of places. Members of the local community are often willing to help purchase books. In addition, many good, used titles can be found at rummage sales, secondhand stores, and online at a reduced price.

Having titles at your students' fingertips is wonderful, but don't forget to utilize the public and school libraries. Our school librarian, Mrs. Mills, likes to know what the kids like to read and makes sure she has lots of those books on hand. In anticipation of de la Pena's visit, his books became very popular with all students. Once the visit was scheduled, Mrs. Mills immediately ordered multiple copies of all his titles, which are hard to keep on the shelf. A partnership with the school librarian will benefit students in all classrooms. It's also important to help students become connected with the local public library so they can take advantage of the plethora of resources, both hard copy and electronic books.

Familiarizing oneself with popular young adult titles can be a daunting task, but that's when a community of readers becomes instrumental. Connect with other teachers and adolescent readers and share thoughts and impressions of the young adult titles you've read. The teacher participants in Ivey and Johnston's (2015) found this to be a very effective strategy.

As teachers confronted the contradiction between their previous teaching activity--that the teacher had to know all the books to teach, and the impossibility of doing so--teaching transformed from an individual to a collective activity, to a system with more fluid boundaries as students and teachers came to view multiple teachers as resources and teaching as not individualistic but collaborative. (p. 309)

Letting go of the desire to know exactly what each student is reading can be a challenge. Without the support and book sharing of the community of readers at our school, I would not be able to connect my readers with as many engaging, edgy titles as I do.

Accountability

I've always liked the idea of allowing students to read books of their choice, but I struggled with how to hold them accountable. How do I know that they're actually reading? Impressed by the results of Ivey and Johnston's (2013) study, I wondered how the teachers made this happen and how students were held accountable. Ivey (2014) describes how teachers with whom she's worked and observed took a different approach to accountability:

They [the teachers] shifted to students all decisions about what to read (or not to read) and what to do (if anything) with their reading They did not require students to create projects on the books they read, answer questions to prove their comprehension, or even write about their books in response journals. (p. 165)

Ivey recognizes that this approach could be considered radical in some circles, but when one considers the impact this agentic learning has on students, it can't be ignored, for "Students who read independently become better readers, score higher on achievement tests in all subject areas, and have greater content knowledge than those who do not" (Cullinan, 2000, p. 3). While this research may be considered dated, the idea can't be contended. Teachers have long observed the deeper comprehension, thoughtful responses, and at times more complex reading from students who engage even light reading outside of school. The 2007 report from the National Endowment of the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read*, summarized the impact of a society that reads less: "With lower levels of reading and writing ability, people do less well in the job market. Poor reading skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement" (p. 5). A society of nonreaders impacts more than just test scores and academic achievement. And while I may be preaching to the choir, it still needs to be said that standardized tests continue to be used as a means of determining the number of students who can read, as well as the effectiveness of instruction and teachers themselves. Kittle, teacher and author of *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers* (2013), says it best: "None of our local or national tests

measure the joy students take in reading or their stamina for it. None measure our ability to create lifelong readers in thirteen years of schooling” (p. 137). Concern for passing standardized assessments has moments of relevance, and research supports the role of independent, voluminous reading in creating both lifelong readers and “proficient” students in the eyes of such assessments.

Let’s Talk About Talk

Encouraging students to talk to one another and to the teacher about their reactions to books, including the parts with which they’re struggling, will help them become active members of the reading community (Ivey, 2014). Reading needs to be relevant and authentic for our young people, just like any other task we would ask them to do, and when we reflect on our behaviors as readers, we realize how much we talk to our friends and families about what we’re reading. Our students need the same opportunity.

In a classroom study led by Ivey and Johnston (2013), it was discovered that silent reading doesn’t always need to be silent. In fact, it shouldn’t be silent. Students need to be talking to each other and us about their reading. Sometimes the students used this time to read. Sometimes they talked to their peers about difficult parts of the book. Sometimes they recommended books to each other. Allowing all this talk gave students an opportunity to become reflective, strategic readers. We need to expect and encourage talk. Here are some sentence starters and questions Ivey recommended to get them talking:

- I want to get your thinking on why this character is doing this...
- Is one of your characters bugging you?
- Does anyone have a character in their story who needs our help?
- Is that your advice to the character?

- Who should read that next? Go talk to him.
- Remember what [Joey] said? (Use this question to draw each other's attention to what their peers have said, which shows the students that they've been heard.)
- Help us by telling us how you figured that out.

In addition to these observations and the research on the positive effects of talk, Hattie (2009) determined through synthesis of numerous meta-analyses that classroom discussion has the effect of two years' worth of learning during one school year. This research proves the effectiveness and strength of facilitating all kinds of talk in the classroom, including talk about books alongside small group learning, teaching study skills, repeated readings, and collective teacher efficacy. Knowing the potential impact of talk and discussion on student achievement, we would be negligent to not provide more opportunities for students to talk and learn through books.

Some Final Thoughts

Research on student choice in independent reading clearly states the benefits: Students given the opportunity to read engaging books that hold personal meaning read more. They become active members of the reading community. They talk about books with peers, teachers, and family members. Engaged, lifelong readers experience greater academic achievement, leading to employment, promotions, and informed, active citizenship. The National Endowment for the Arts titled their 2007 report *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*. Facilitating more readers is a matter of national consequence, a need that cannot be ignored.

Furthermore, for secondary teachers, this research is especially pertinent because of the urgency in creating lifelong readers and learners. Struggling adolescent students need this opportunity to realize their inner reader. Through choice reading, young men and women will discover themselves and learn more about others, thereby cultivating their

empathy and compassion, critical as their brains continue to develop through the age of 25. Adolescents need to be college and career ready, but, to prevent an assembly line education, we must recognize that each student has a unique interior.

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