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Literacy Becomes “Popular” for a Male Student

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Literacy Becomes "Popular" for a Male Student

by

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A capstone project submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The
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Abstract

Literacy Becomes “Popular” for a Male Student assesses the multitude of obstacles that a struggling male student faces in regard to literacy based instruction. Many of the struggles that this student faces are directly related to his intrapersonal viewpoint on reading and writing, based upon prior encounters throughout his educational experience. This study focuses on the impact that the inclusion of popular culture and text choice have upon the engagement and interest level of one fourth grade male student. The study utilizes interviews, structured observations and work samples as sources of data. The findings of this study indicate that the struggling male student’s literacy instruction benefits from the use of choice to promote accountability, the inclusion of popular culture within instruction to improve engagement, an emphasis on notable success to positively impact attitude, and the use of technology to promote engagement. The conclusions of this study indicate that strategic feedback and success promote a growth mindset and that the inclusion of elements from popular culture improve engagement.

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Literacy Becomes “Popular” for a Male Student

Introduction

As educators we all know that many of the open and honest conversations among teachers happen in the faculty room. This is a room where teachers share ideas, socialize, and in many unfortunate circumstances, gossip about students and interactions with their families. While student teaching I had the displeasure of overhearing the conversation between two teachers in a faculty room, which displayed such a high degree of obliviousness, and intolerance that it prompted many of the individuals to leave the room. The conversation was about the undesirable behavior choices and current performance levels of many boys in the classes of the conversing educators. Each of these teachers were middle aged females, without children of their own.

The conversation began as a result of a comment that one of the teachers made requesting that one boy be removed from her classroom. She stated that he was always talking, making excuses, and being rude when asked to read in class. According to this teacher, it was difficult to teach the rest of the class because she wanted him to do his part in learning, but he always seemed to put up a fight. The other teacher responded by saying that she had three boys in her class who displayed similar behaviors. After an extended bashing of the students, with comments indicating that they are going to cause problems all the way through school, and that they are never going to display the characteristics of a college ready student, these teachers eventually decided that they wanted to place the boys in a class of their own: a class where they could distract each other and stop bothering everyone else around them. These

boys had been shut out by their educators, and set up to fail as a result of someone simply not taking the time to understand who they are and what motivates them to learn.

Problem Statement

This study aims to address the overarching struggle that boys display in schools in relation to literacy development. Though our educational system is designed to provide equal opportunities to all students, regardless of any characteristics that profile the students into groups, it is still important to remember that every student presents multiple characteristics that distinguish them from their peers. Recognizing these characteristics is just one of the steps that teachers can take to apply their individual craft of teaching with great flexibility (Sarroub, & Pernicek, 2016). One of these characteristics is gender. Gender has been a distinguishing factor that has sparked movements for equality in the past, but now males and females are being taught exactly the same, and it just is not working. Male students are said to be biologically different from female students. Females typically are able to mature more quickly in their verbal capabilities. Whereas male students are much more physically active and less capable of engaging in a task that requires an extended period of attention (Okopny, 2008). Though, this is not the case for all students, it is still important to account for as a potential factor throughout their learning experience. This may be one of the many factors that require us as teachers to differentiate our instruction. As educators we have taken on the responsibility of modifying our instructional methods and materials to meet the specific needs and interests of all students, even if that means doubling the amount of planning.

When reflecting upon the instruction of males in relation to literacy, there are numerous subtopics that pose red flags regarding male performance. One area of concern that I have

focused on throughout this study was the observation of male engagement levels throughout literacy instruction. This observation provided many clear images of the trending behaviors which occur as a result of a male student being unengaged in instruction or independent exploration. Along with exploring the resulting behaviors, my study regarding male engagement focused on determined the precursors that cause students to become unengaged. The study also explored two different instructional methods that teachers could use to connect with male students so that literacy engagement is promoted. I have outlined the observed efforts that the participant's classroom teacher and I made to attempt to build a connection between the curriculum and the male student. It is important to recognize the fact that school teachers within the public school system are not designed to be individual entities, but rather a synchronized group working to make a literacy rich environment that is engaging, rather than creating static and boring school spaces (Sarroub, 2016).

Along with exploring engagement levels, this study also examined the impact that text choice and encompassing popular culture in the curriculum had upon male performance in relation to literacy. Choice within a lesson is a highly motivational feature that can validate the opinion of students. It gives them a sense of responsibility for shaping their own learning (Pettig, 2000). Strategically planning lessons and recognizing a student's interest in the text being used is important because male students are often provided with literature that does not interest them, which will eventually lead to them being unengaged in the instruction. Exploring the impacts of student choice provided a clear answer as to why a student may become unengaged in literacy instruction. The study of how popular culture impacts male engagement

levels and performance in school also provided clear evidence that supports the use of these types of literature.

As an educator it is highly important to recognize the individualized needs that each student presents. These requirements range anywhere from altering materials, to adjusting instructional approaches to meet the needs of the children. The area that is often overlooked is differentiating materials to meet the specific interest and learning styles of male and female students. It is important to remember, though, this is a generalization, and not necessarily true for all students. "Differentiating tasks for students requires students to work harder and become more responsible for their own learning" (Pettig, 2000, p. 4). As an educator with experiences in general and special education I have observed that a majority of the struggling students, in relation to literacy, seem to be male students. This problem with male literacy development is something that continues to be overlooked by many professionals in the field.

It is very important to think about the foundation of a student's academic experience. This foundation is created at a young age, specifically during or before their elementary school years. They become acquainted with books, reading, writing, speaking, and other forms of literacy. It is important to recognize that students rely heavily upon "experiential knowledge in order to construct arguments and synthesize their thinking" (Pennell, 2014, p. 259). This paper presents potential ideas that all teachers can use to best benefit their students. It educates teachers on one perspective about how to work with struggling male students. It has highlighted the different signs that may be displayed by a male student who is simply struggling to become engaged in the materials, not one who is unable to complete the assigned tasks.

Research Question

Throughout the duration of this study there was one question that guided the research and potential findings: How can the inclusion of elements from popular culture and text choice improve the engagement of a fourth grade male student?

Literature Review

There are, and always will be males who are highly successful in their educational experience regardless of the teachers that they encounter, or the specific materials that they use to meet the desired learning goals. This type of student is just one edge of the spectrum, but as educators we are constantly taught to teach to the edges. The other edge of this spectrum of successful students often reach their current level of achievement due to an outside contributing factor. These factors include, but are not limited to anything from supportive parents, to encouraging friends, to a motivational teacher, or in the case of this study curricular design that complements their current funds of knowledge. A curriculum that is designed and implemented based upon the interest of the students is more likely to lead children to conceptual learning (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011). This type of educational experience provides students with sufficient opportunities to be successful, because they have a greater probability of maintaining engagement on the educational tasks. This is specifically true for male students and their literacy learning. Along with the funds of knowledge, the incorporation of two other contributing factors, popular culture and text choice, are also shown to directly improve male performance and overall engagement. This review of relevant literature outlines three major areas: male engagement in learning in a broad sense, the inclusion of popular culture, and the incorporation of text choice within the classroom setting.

The literature throughout this section outlines the ways that these topics impact male engagement as literacy based learners.

Male Engagement. Well over 50% of male students consider themselves nonreaders in their early school years. There are multiple explanations for this figure, or even excuses that teachers would provide if asked to explain this statistic, but these explanations do not offer solutions to this severe problem within our school systems. By their high school years around 50% of male students now see themselves as readers, but there is still another 50% lingering on the horizon (Senn, 2012). These lower estimations or lack of personal self-confidence in relation to reading may also be a result of the longer period of time that it takes males to learn to read, the discrepancy in time spent reading between males and females, and the generalized lack of personal enthusiasm that males display in relation to literacy. Masculinity stereotypes are also said to have a direct impact on literacy related engagement in the school setting (Kessels, Heyder, Latsch, & Hannover, 2014).

It has also been said that the masculine stereotypes that guide male students toward an interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects may be a contributing factor for the lack of engagement in literacy based skills (Kessels, 2014). Though I place no ambition on minimizing the emphasis on STEM subjects, I do support breaking down this masculine stereotype.

These previously discussed statements and statistics can also be explained through better understanding the concept known as funds of knowledge. Funds of knowledge are the experiences that a particular student draws upon to make connections and become fully engaged with new concepts or materials. They are the cultural and socially positioned thoughts

about experiences and the world in which an individual lives. When educating a child it is important that teachers understand their family's culture or system of moral beliefs (Moll, Amanti, & Neff, 1992).

One way to better understand how to teach a child is to provide periodic short surveys. These surveys provide sporadic check-ins to learn more about hobbies, traditions, cultures, or even the type of music and movies that they enjoy outside of the school setting (Martinez, 2010). From this point it is the responsibility of the educator to incorporate these concepts or references within the instruction and curriculum to provide the most authentic materials, which will encourage the engagement of these struggling male students (Hedges, 2011). There should be a significant amount of emphasis on using social knowledge beyond the classroom walls to absorb new information, for student to become active learners, and to encourage the inquiry process as a whole (Moll, 1992). Despite this desire, a teacher cannot rely upon the idea that a student will begin the inquiry process once they are presented with an idea or concept of which they are familiar based upon prior experiences.

The thoughts and interests of male students evolve and continue to adapt to different life experiences as they age. This can be best explained through the work of Kessels (2014), which claims that the image of self begins to develop around a boy's second birthday. From this point on the image of self will continuously adjust to the everyday interactions that they share with others in the social realm or experience in their specific environment. Along with recognizing the funds of knowledge that a student possesses, it is also highly important to engage in such a way that a positive relationship is built between the student and their educator.

An educator must build positive relationships with his or her students. Building these relationships can change a classroom from a center of pure frustration for a struggling student to a place where these students are excited to learn and achieve high levels of academic success. All teachers must develop a personality to interact with the students. It is important that the students see an educator as not only a teacher, but also a person. An excellent time to create these relationships with students is during individual conference times (Martinez, 2010). Despite the rigorous mandates from the state curriculums, time designated to developing a relationship with students has a greater impact on their educational experience than presenting an abundance of "boy friendly" materials. (Kissau, & Salas, 2013).

Popular Culture. Popular culture continues to nourish the importance of recognizing a male student's funds of knowledge as a source for developing and implementing engaging curriculum. It is stated that popular culture actually maintains a grip over a small component of any particular student's funds of knowledge (Dickie, & Shuker, 2014). As previously discussed, implanting components from a student's funds of knowledge will engage the student and use their socially and culturally situated experiences as a source for continued educational progression. Based upon these statements it would be beneficial and serve as a tool for engagement if popular culture was in fact incorporated into the curriculum.

The use of popular culture serves as a resource for tapping into a student's prior experiences. This has multiple uses in the realm of language within books, as well. The retelling of a familiar story will enhance the language experience within books. The retelling will also provide ample opportunity to focus on the patterns and structure of language. Using a text

with popular culture related contents provides educators with an anchor for student interest (Marsh, 1999).

Along with the focus on patterns and structure of language within a text, students will also be able to draw upon personal experiences and thoughts to make meaning of text (Parry, 2014). Each of these studies remove the importance of learning to read, and center the attention on making sense of the text through personal connections. Reducing the importance of learning to read, provides students the opportunity to read for meaning and connections to their personal life. Educators who utilize popular culture are providing students with the opportunity to interlock their ideas into one synchronized thought process (Dunn, Niens, & McMillan, 2014).

Popular culture themes and ideas not only provide students with the opportunity to tap into their preexisting knowledge, but it also gives educators a platform to vocalize stereotypes through the use of engaging topics. It also sanctions discussions surrounding gender issues when age appropriate conversations are feasible. In the media that our children are being presented with in today's society, there are many different stereotypes being portrayed. One of these stereotypes is the increased emphasis on masculinity for males. This, along with the controversial emphasis on feminine traits causes great concern amongst many individuals. But, as suggested, popular culture's existence may actually be providing a powerful tool to test and explore the underlying frameworks for specific gender identities (Dunn, 2014).

It is also important that these gender issues within the media and other forms of popular culture be evaluated through a critical lens. In doing this a teacher is essentially educating students how to have a critical eye for risky propaganda that is being depicted

through media sources. Understanding this manipulation is just one of the essential strategies for a student to avoiding the negative results of educating through the use of popular culture (Martinez, 2010).

As an educator continues to dissect elements of popular culture with students, it is also important to recognize the different characters that are represented throughout the text. Understanding the different traits that characters have taken on, along with their importance within their specific arena provides teachers with the chance to better understand how to incorporate materials to enhance the students learning experiences (Zambo, 2009)

The diagnosis of character traits provides some of the most influential and engaging materials to students when connected to characters from popular culture. Students, specifically boys, become highly engaged through the use of these characters to learn about good versus evil, heroes, race, gender, and social structure amongst communities. Understanding these different elements of social culture is the direct result of the many materials from popular culture that are present at even the youngest of ages. Some of these examples from a young age include, but are not limited to: toys, games, television shows, movies, and comics (Dickie, 2014). This statement connects to the claims made by Dunn (2014), which assert that young people are born into an environment where visuals such as TVs, computers, DVDs, phones, and the internet are parts of everyday life. Recognizing the characters and the traits that they possess, is something that children with these environmental factors do naturally. Students are so familiar with the characters that are represented through the use of elements of popular culture that their motivation to complete writing or reading tasks improves when they feel as if they are involved in the storyline or character's life. For example, they may write a note to a

villain or create an informational writing piece about the different physical or personality traits of a specific character (Marsh, 1999).

Text Choice. The importance of text choice for male students goes much deeper than meets the eye. There is a high number of students who would rather fail in school than read certain text (Martinez, 2010). This statement should send up a red flag for teachers, which signals that they need to be adaptive and flexible in their instructional decision making. It would be important for them to recognize the fact that providing choice reading could in a sense save these male students from failing. In fact, when 600 intermediate male students were surveyed, 25% stated that their only advice for teachers would be to sponsor much more text choice within their classrooms (Senn, 2012). Though this number seems low, it is important to recognize the fact that this 25% of students stated this as their only suggestion. This number does not account for the numerous students who made this suggestion along with other recommendations as well. As teachers continue to interview or provide surveys for students, they may continue to come across findings similar to that of Senn (2012) and Martinez (2010). It is also claimed by Senn (2012) that males irregularly develop new interests based upon their reading materials. They often read to provide continued exposure to prior interests and the funds of knowledge that they already possess. Martinez (2010) also makes the claim that male and female students alike often enjoy reading books that are written in series. Examples of these books for male students include *Captain Underpants* (Pickley, 1997) or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007). They also enjoy *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 2007), but this is one of the very few books that the majority of male students enjoy reading that is quite longer. Along with the books that are written in series, male students often enjoy reading when the purpose is to

teach them something; a skill, statistic, or biography are prime examples of this type of text (Senn, 2012).

It can also be claimed that text choice promotes students to develop more complex and more detailed texts. Not only does choosing the text maintain a higher level of interest, but it also provides students with the opportunity to improve reading and writing. Within Parry's (2014) study, there was an activity planned which required the students to create screen shots that were handpicked by the film maker. The students were then asked to create screens shots that were picked by choice. The ones created by choice were done with a much more complex meaning. The students were able to extend their comprehension far beyond a basic retelling. This text choice allowed them to imagine the specific scenes that were being depicted by their illustrations. This example from the study also reinforced the importance of incorporating pictures as a form of text. This promotes continued vocabulary development, because the illustrations created by students display thoughts and ideas beyond what they are able to articulate through their current developmental level of written language. Students also benefit from experiencing literacy through the exposure of many topics and for specifically outlined purposes. This specific purpose provides students with a desired learning outcome, or the skill that becomes transferable to other tasks (Senn, 2012).

As teachers prepare to embrace the concept of text choice by students it is important to note one of the major rebuttals to this instructional technique. These books are very rarely Caldecott or Newbery Award selections. The books actually are frequent fliers on the banned book lists that circulate throughout school districts. These books, which attract the attention of the young male audience, are often filled with characters that are not scripted as perfect, rather

characters with believable flaws and multiple imperfections with which the students are able to connect. Not only is the inclusion of these text supported, but so is the use of slang, incorrect grammar, and drawing as parts of student independent writing. According to Patterson (2013), censoring books provides the opportunity to critically analyze written work and better understand connections between texts, contexts, and characters. This provides student with the opportunity to experiment with skills and which encourages growth and advancement. As stated, the inclusion of banned books within the classroom setting may provide the fuel for engagement for male students, whom are previously disengaged (Senn, 2012).

Throughout this literature review emphasis has been placed on three major factors which contribute to the need for this study. There is first exploration into overall male engagement in literacy based activities. This topic spoke to the reasons why male students require special attention, the importance of recognizing funds of knowledge for male students, and the importance of relationships within education. The topic of male engagement provides the need for this study, and exploration of the impact that popular culture and text choice have on a male's literacy education experience.

Methodology

This study explored the struggles that a male student presented related to literacy based activities. It also explored the potential impacts that the inclusion of popular culture and text choice have upon the overall engagement of a male student in literacy based education. The areas of literacy that are focused on throughout this study are reading and writing.

This study had one active participant throughout its entirety. This student participant was the solitary focus for all collected data throughout the duration of the study.

Participant. The participant, whom I call Thor, willingly agreed to participate in this study, in knowing that his identity and any other personal information will not be identified to anyone as a result of this willing participation. Thor was a 9 year old student in a fourth grade classroom. This student received consultant teacher services in English Language Arts for a duration of two hours per week. He also received discretionary reading support three days a week for 30 minutes on each day. This student had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder for which he took medication. Thor was typically a rule follower in the classroom setting and throughout all other settings of his education. He did however display resistant behaviors in relation to reading and writing. He struggled to write legibly at a rate that was fast enough to keep up with his peers. Thor often used the computer as a source for writing to record his thoughts legibly so that teachers and peers may read his writing. Thor was typically highly engaged and ambitious to learn in other subject areas in school; such as math, science, and specials.

Setting. The specific school that hosted this study was a kindergarten through fifth grade elementary level building. There were approximately 500 students in this elementary school. This particular school consistently had multiple literary resources readily available for student use, and consumption. There were four different fourth grade classrooms within this building. The teachers often collaborated and reorganized students to better engage students in activities or math lessons.

Thor's classroom contained 24 students. This class had an even distribution of male and female students, 12 males and 12 females. All students in this class were Caucasian. The classroom teacher was a female who had just begun her first year of full time employment

within Thor's district. She had previously taught in per diem and long term substitute roles throughout the district. The classroom environment was very welcoming to all students regardless of any distinguishing characteristics. This environment was consistently using the prior knowledge of students to build continued learning growth (Mohanty, 2013). The classroom also had a set of four computers that were infrequently used for instruction. However, the participant in this study did use one of these computers on a regular basis to supplement as a source for written manuscript. There was often push back from many individuals about the use of computers instead of handwriting, but its use is said to create a more bilingual writer who is able to use both forms (Petrescu, 2014)

This study took place in a suburban school district in Western New York. There are seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools within the district. This suburban district had been noted to have a fairly even split of male to female students throughout, 4,290 males and 4,095 females. Out of the nearly 8,400 students within the district, approximately 7,500 of them were white. Only 9% of the students within this district were classified with a disability, and 20% of the students came from economically disadvantaged households (2015 New York State, 2015).

Positionality. As a full time educator within the participant's learning environment, I was able to conduct this study through the rapport that pre-existed between myself and the student. Within the school setting I am a consultant special education teacher, who pushed into the participant's classroom for a mandated two hours per week based upon the services required by his individualized education plan. During these mandated time periods I provided

direct and indirect consultant teaching to better meet the specific needs of the participant within this study.

Aside from my role as the consultant teacher in the student's school setting, I also have other characteristics concerning my positionality which are applicable to the nature of this study. I first believe that it is highly important to portray my own personal experiences related to gender and literacy engagement. As a student, I was very similar to the participant in this study based upon my observations, regarding his lack of engagement with the types of text that are being presented in the classroom setting. I believe that the most engaging and beneficial text that a student can utilize are the ones that relate to their interests as a learner. With this belief known, I subsequently have faith in the idea that text choice not only improves engagement but also create a sense of accountability for any particular student, both male and female.

It is also important to note that I was 24 year old Caucasian male educator at the time of the study. I was not educated within this school district, but I was educated within a nearby district, which possessed highly comparable characteristics. This was my first year teaching within Thor's school district as a special education consultant teacher. Previously, I had taught for one year as a first grade teacher in a nearby district. This district was significantly smaller, as all levels were housed within one building.

Methods of Data Collection. Throughout this study there are many different methods of data collection that were used to create a deeper understanding of the student's viewpoint toward literacy, along with materials that have been created by the participant which display different levels of engagement through-out the study.

Data were collected from the school setting through using a case study method. This case study uses “a preordained theoretical framework” as a guide for collecting data and driving areas of potential exploration (Abma, & Stake, 2014, p. 1150). When specifically collecting data connected to the impact of the inclusion of popular culture and text choice on male engagement, a pre-interview provides a baseline for the student’s current viewpoints and self-image related to literacy. This interview is first audio recorded and then transcribed to maximize response accuracy. This interview asks the student to reflect and verbally compose his thoughts about reading and writing. It asks him to establish potential areas of self-determined weaknesses along with areas of potential strengths. It asks the student to provide insight into the potential areas that may change to improve his level of engagement.

Along with this interview, the inclusion of field notes depicting specific observations of the participant engaging in popular culture related curriculum and opportunities to encourage text choice, provides clear and concise evidence of his level of observed engagement. In order to create a situation that included areas of popular culture, I had placed books related to this participant amongst the independent reading books. Observing the book that is taken during this time period, and then conversing with the student provides clear data surrounding the inclusion of popular culture.

Current student work samples also prove to be useful in order to analyze the quality of the student’s work in comparison with previously developed samples. These samples include pieces that have been written about elements from popular culture, which focus on the same skills that are being taught in the classroom setting. Comparing the quality of the writing, the

length of the writing, the extent to which grade level vocabulary is used, and the revision process provides clear data connected to the student's level of engagement in the assignment.

Following the completion of the curriculum modifications, there was a post-interview, which was compared to the initial interview. The information presented by the student in this second interview displays the impact of the inclusion of popular culture and text choice on the student's level of engagement and self-image as a literacy learner. It is important to recognize the occasions where the student specifically mentions the use of popular culture or having the opportunity to choose text.

Procedures. Throughout the duration of this study I consistently focused on the impact that popular culture and text choice had on the engagement of a male student. In order to better assess his current level of engagement and interest, I first conducted a pre-interview, which reflected Thor's current viewpoints in relation to literacy. From this point I briefly introduced three different popular culture related books. Thor was asked to pick one of these pieces of text to read independently. He also engaged in narrative written responses on Google Docs. These responses were guided by Thor's text choice. From this point there was an emphasis on the writing component of literacy. Thor was asked to complete a free choice writing piece regarding any element or character from popular culture. This writing piece encouraged the use of text features and illustrations. This writing piece also required him to engage in the revision process to improve the overall quality and quantity of the piece. The next procedure occurred over five different occasions throughout the intervention. I had placed books that relate to popular culture in multiple areas of the room that were already well stocked with a variety of texts, and then carefully observed the text choices that Thor made

during his independent reading time, being sure to note the selection of these books. This information was kept through the use of an anecdotal note page. Finally, there was a post-interview that was very similar to the pre-interview to determine how his viewpoint toward literacy had changed or remained static as a result of the inclusion of these factors. Both the pre-interview and the post-interview were audio recorded and then transcribed onto hard copy at a later time.

Trustworthiness. The contents of this study have been supported by the use of multiple creditable resources and studies. This research has been peer reviewed indicating its' validity. The findings of this research will maintain a high level of transferability throughout most educational areas. The information studied pertaining to the inclusion of popular culture and text choice can easily be adapted and transferred for a greater use for all students. The materials would simply need to be adapted to meet the specific needs and interest of the child. The research that has been conducted around engagement can also be transferred to other subject areas, or to all students as a whole. Understanding their funds of knowledge and building relationships provides a great opportunity to encourage maximized growth for all students, not just males. Though my interest is the driving force behind the nature of this study, the findings are not altered or filtered based upon my bias or personal interest. All findings are authentic and presented based upon literal and factual findings throughout the duration of the study.

Analysis

Throughout data collection I used a coding process to promote an accurate and organized interpretation of my data. My initial step was to review all recorded notes and

observations from the duration of the study. These notes outlined specific behaviors, along with changes in Thor's point of view throughout the study. Throughout these observations, I was able to note themes and trending behaviors, which he had displayed. Next, I analyzed the results of the pre-intervention interview in comparison with the post-intervention interview. The purpose of each of these interviews was to provide explicit evidence regarding any change in the student's thoughts toward literacy after the completion of the study. The final pieces of data that I analyzed was the student created writing samples. Through constant comparison, the level of engagement and quality of work was then compared to previous instances when popular culture and text choice were not incorporated into the student's instruction (Clark & Creswell, 2010). The varied artifacts used throughout the data collection process display the use of triangulation of my collected data. There were interviews, observations, and work samples used throughout this process.

I was able to identify trending themes through the constant comparison of my observational notes and interviews. Throughout this process I identified similarities and differences between the observations and the responses stated by the student. I noticed that many of the stated opinions from the pre-interview were placed into action throughout the duration of the observations. I was also able to observe the student's transformation throughout the study.

Based upon the abundance of data collected throughout this study, I have identified a variety of findings regarding the student's overall engagement. The first finding made clear throughout my observations of the student's progression was that student choice promoted accountability for the quality of work that was being completed. The next finding that I

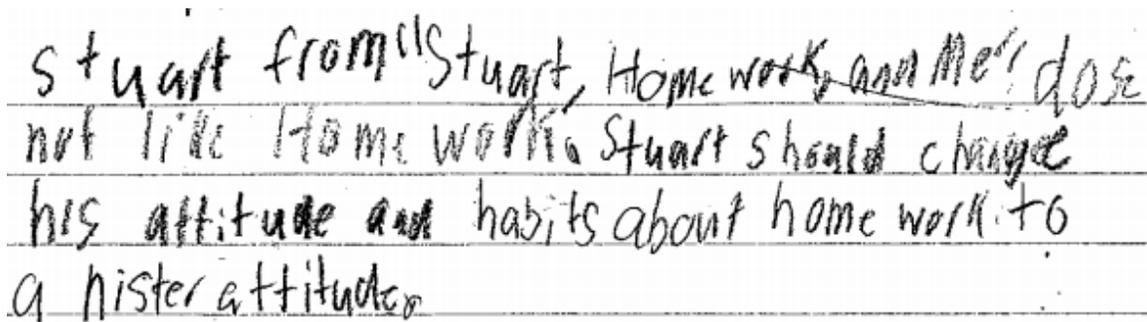
identified throughout this study was that the inclusion of popular culture improved the student's overall engagement. Along with this finding, I was also able to take note of Thor's change in attitude throughout the duration of the study. His attitude was positively impacted as a result of notable academic success. The final finding that I noticed was that the use of technology as a resource for writing improved the student's overall engagement in this area.

Finding One: Choice Promotes Accountability

Thor is a male student, who has demonstrated little interest in literacy based activities; specifically reading and writing. Throughout the pre-intervention interview, he was able to articulate specific responses as to why this displeasure for writing activities is present. Thor stated that, "I hate writing because it was hard. I hate revising and editing writing pieces because that is all my teachers are telling me to do. Hand writing is really hard for me too because it is so messy." He was clearly self-aware of this displeasure and became increasingly frustrated when asked to expand on his thought processes. Throughout this process he seemed to express little accountability for completing literacy based tasks, if he is unable to pick them.

The analysis of a student's accountability can easily become subjective to the opinion of the observer, though my observations reflect no evidence of conflicting arguments to my claims. Throughout the initial interview, Thor displayed his lack of desire to complete tasks, or even engage in any sort of writing piece. As previously stated, Thor claimed that he did not want to read or write, due to the amount of difficulty and frustration that each of these tasks provided him. When specifically asked about his difficulties in reading, Thor made the following claim, "I do not like to read because it is really hard and not very fun. I am always told what I have to read too." He had little desire to complete assignments in class due to this difficulty, and his

overall frustration. While observing Thor, I was able to note instances when he displayed little desire to complete a task, even though it was his responsibility as an active learner. He provided writing pieces, which expressed surface thinking or a minimal amount of writing. This deficiency of a deeper thought process indicates Thor's lack of responsibility for completing his work to the best of his ability. An example of one of these pre-intervention writing pieces has been included below.



Stuart from Stuart, Home work, and Me! dose
not like Home work. Stuart should change
his attitude and habits about home work to
a nister attitude.

Figure 1. Pre-intervention writing sample. This pre-intervention sample is a scanned screen shot from a practice state test extended response question.

As the study progressed, and different popular culture related learning tasks were being presented to him, Thor seemed to display a greatly improved sense of accountability for completing assignments to the best of his capability in a timely manner. This improved sense of accountability can be displayed through a different writing assignment. In this assignment he was asked to organize and write a five paragraph essay over a multiple day time span. I had placed very few restrictions on this writing assignment, as it was simply designed to teach the importance of recognizing the need to develop a multiple paragraph writing piece. Thor was not provided with a teacher developed graphic organizer or topic for the writing piece. I simply told him that he had the choice as to what he was going to write about. I also told him that he

had to use elements from popular culture at periodic points throughout this piece. While providing this direction, I explained that these elements may be used to support the overall enhancement of the details throughout this creative writing assignment.

At first, Thor struggled to initiate the task of developing a way to organize his thoughts in such a manner that five subtopics may be developed, and displayed throughout a coherent writing piece. Through my observations, his lack of exposure to choice writing seemed to contribute to his initial frustration with this process. This frustration was previously identified in the pre-interview, when asked to pinpoint the most difficult part of writing for him personally. He said that, "I find it really hard to create an idea about what to write. It is hard because there are a ton of ideas to write about, but you can only write about one at a time." Throughout the task he vocalized this frustration, but soon displayed signs of perseverance. Thor began to independently develop a graphic organizer. This organizer broke a specific day apart, into five different time segments in chronological order: waking up, at school, arriving home, after school, and bedtime. He began to use a sense of creativity to develop a writing piece that not only told a story, but also used elements from popular culture to enhance the overall quality and entertainment value of the writing piece. He was able to demonstrate the ability to break the paragraphs apart based upon the subtopics that existed. A small segment of the final piece is displayed below.

When I get to school I play Minecraft food mod. Then I run a marathon. Then I drive a tank! Next I fly my cloths. Next I watch YouTube. Then I play videogames. Then I ride my T-rex it is fun. Then I sleep. Then I count to 100. Then I throw snowballs. Then I build Legos. Then I do 6x8 witch=48. Then I play subway surfers. Then I play

nerf. Then I ride my humming bird. Then I play my phone. Then I go home.

Figure 2. Popular culture writing sample. This piece of writing has been taken from an online Google Doc. Thor used elements from popular culture to develop writing ideas.

As previously displayed through the pre-intervention writing piece, Thor would typically write one or two sentence paragraphs in response to multiple teacher prompted questions. These pieces displayed a surface thought process, which had little time and energy invested into their creation. In this writing piece that was created based upon choice, he wrote detailed and multiple sentence explanations. This clearly shows an improved level of accountability for completing his work.

The piece was also connected to popular culture in a multitude of ways. For example, Thor discussed Minecraft, Nerf guns, YouTube, and video games. These specific details were included based upon his ability to choose the contents of his writing, paired with his interest in popular culture. The many details that had been included in this piece were often absent from other pieces, where choice and popular culture were non-contributing factors in their development.

The information that had been included in the contents of Thor's writing pieces directly supports the claims made by Senn (2012), which state that males irregularly develop new interests based upon their reading materials. Though the data presented in this section had primarily focused on writing, it still showed that Thor did not extend his thoughts beyond areas of comfort to learn more. He even had the opportunity to explore new topics through the use

of the Google search engine, but felt compelled to focus on deepening his knowledge of known subjects.

Aside from the connection to Senn's study, this finding also draws upon hobbies and out of school experiences. This information is said to dramatically improve the engagement of male learners (Martinez, 2010). Providing the opportunity to incorporate these authentic experiences in writing provided Thor with the accountability to develop a quality piece, which served as a beneficial learning experience (Hedges, 2011).

Finding Two: The Inclusion of Popular Culture as a Choice or in the Curriculum Improves Engagement

Throughout the duration of this study, I found that the inclusion of topics and text that related to popular culture improved Thor's engagement in literacy based activities. Aside from Thor's struggles to overcome a fixed mindset across all areas of his education, he did display many positive changes throughout the duration of this intervention as a result of the inclusion of popular culture. These changes consisted of the following: improved quantity of writing, improved understanding and use of the revision and editing process, improved shared reading with peers, and an overall improved sense of attitude toward literacy as a whole.

Prior to the implementation of different text topics that related to popular culture, I had classified Thor as a student who showed very little interest in his literacy progression. During one period of observation in the beginning of January 2016, Thor was asked to read a text and develop a written response about the personality of the main character in the story. This was a historical text about an Iroquois man, named Hiawatha. Instead of reading the story, Thor began to draw small doodles on the page, go to the bathroom, or walk the halls on three

occasions over a 45 minute time span. These observed avoidance techniques were clear indicators of his lack of engagement with the educational text.

Overall, Thor had previously provided little evidence of engagement in many of the books within his classroom. He often skimmed through the books or refused to look at them in general. In regard to his self-perception, Thor was unable to view himself as literacy learner prior to the intervention. He felt as though these tasks are quite difficult or boring. Though students are taught to engage in challenging tasks, he seemed to present a fixed mindset, in the fact that he did not want to participate in something that presented a challenge. His hesitation to take risks limited the opportunities for personal growth and development.

During the pre-interview, I had asked Thor about his interest in books and writing pieces of choice. When asked about books he claimed, "I would pick 'Magnis Chase the Gods of Asgard. I think it is pretty interesting because all of the stuff that happens. It makes me feel like I am somewhere fake. It also talks about things that do not happen in real life.'" When I asked him about writing he claimed, "I would like writing about super heroes. It is easiest because I would have a bunch of different ideas that I could write about." Each of these responses were clear indicators that popular culture would serve as a beneficial literacy engagement tool for Thor.

Throughout the intervention, Thor began to display improvement in both areas of literacy. This was especially true, and more visibly noticeable through the improvement in his writing. As indicated by the screen shot of a writing piece below, Thor began to support claims with a deeper interpretation of his personal thought process. This improvement was one of the major areas of desired growth, as previously displayed in work samples that were unrelated to

popular culture. This following sample draws on Thor's funds of knowledge as it consequently connects to popular culture as well (Dickie, 2014).

Harry shows bravery in the book. Harry faces Voldemort and saves the stone. This is something that I can show in my life too like when i do not understand how to do something in school I can be brave and try something even if I am wrong

A lesson I learned from the book is stand up for what's right. In the book Harry stood up for what's right by trying to return the stone to Nicholas Flamel. In my life I have standed up for my friends when they need my help. They tell me thank you for helping them.

Figure 3. Harry Potter writing sample. This piece was created during the intervention and was used to illustrate the student's engagement in writing as a result of including popular culture.

As displayed through the use of this writing sample, Thor was heavily invested in the creation of this writing piece. This short excerpt clearly illustrated his ability to maintain a growth mindset toward writing as well (Dweck, 2015). Throughout the creation of the piece, Thor was able to accept many critiques and notes for revision through the use of the comment tool on Google docs. His ability to accept criticisms throughout his writing piece was also a clear indicator that he was becoming much more invested and engaged in the writing process as a whole. Thor was highly interested in making these corrections to improve the quality of his writing.

Finding Three: Thor's Attitude Is Positively Impacted by Notable Success

The next finding that I was able to note was that Thor's overall attitude toward learning was positively impacted as a result of notable success and visible improvement in the quality of his work.

Throughout the study Thor's attitude toward reading and writing tasks dramatically changed. When I asked for his opinion about reading during the pre-interview, Thor stated that he never wanted to read a book if someone asked him to do so. He claimed that this task was hard for him, along with stating that it was not fun. When I asked about the writing process he claimed, that this process was very hard for him as well. His claims drew on specific difficulties such as his hand writing troubles, along with his lack of desire to engage in the revision and editing process. Many examples of Thor's pre-intervention writing samples display a negative attitude as well. He wrote very simplistic pieces, which answer questions on the surface level. Little evidence of a deeper thought process was evident throughout these writing samples. This has been displayed below through the use of a pre-intervention writing sample.

A long time ago there was a turtle and a chipmunk and bird and dog,they were in the jusll and the bum into the cader and the cader said turtle do you want to have some if yes cader.

Figure 4. Pre-intervention writing sample. This pre-intervention sample used to demonstrate Thor's surface writing is from a December, 2015 assignment.

This assignment required Thor to develop a multiple paragraph legend, aligned with a unit about the Iroquois Confederacy. He wrote this piece independently, through the use of Microsoft word. Based upon the extensive amount of time that had been dedicated to this piece, it is clear that his overall attitude was quite negative and careless. During the creation of this piece Thor seemed to distract those around him, or play with items in his desk. I even heard him say that he wanted to go outside and play instead of being in class. This statement

displayed a potential masculine stereotype that hindered his literacy engagement (Kessels, 2014).

As Thor began to engage in shared writing through the use of Google docs, he began to display a notable change in his attitude, which resulted in an improvement in the quality of work that he began to produce. He became significantly less frustrated with the revision and editing process. This was done through strategic scaffolding. I made comments for improvement on these online writing pieces, so that they explicitly focused Thor's attention to the desired advancements. As he made these improvements, he attempted to find me throughout the building to remind me to look at his writing piece so that more comments could be made to promote continued improvement. For example, he went so far as to come into a second grade classroom and leave a note on my folder to remind me to check his writing online. Each time a new revision was made, he was proud of the piece as a whole. This level of excitement toward the revision and editing process is a clear indicator that his attitude had undergone an overhaul throughout the duration of the study. This was also partially due to the fact that he viewed this writing as a video game in which he and I were engaging. This need for consistent feedback, or check-ins, connects to Martinez's (2010) study, indicating the need to periodically survey students' learning. These periodic checks promoted the inclusion of Thor's interests, but also provided check-ins to be sure that he was maintaining a positive attitude.

Along with the improvement in his attitude toward writing, Thor also became increasingly more optimistic toward reading, as a result of the success that he felt. As previously stated, Thor disliked the reading process because he was unable to pick books that fit his interests. He cared to comprehend very little information from these books and also made

few connections to them. When Thor was provided with the opportunity to pick a book of interest to him, he picked a book about the Marvel superheroes. Even though this book was many levels above his current reading level, Thor was determined to read this text. As he practiced, he began to display a positive and ambitious attitude. For example, he began to engage in reading this book during indoor recess and when he was completed with morning work each day. He seemed to be doing all that he could to improve his fluency and understanding of the text, with minimal support or encouragement from adults. When he finally read a section of this book to friends he became very proud. Thor demonstrated this sense of pride through his delighted facial expressions. He also made it a point to tell me about how well this experience went with his peers.

Following this experience he maintained this positive attitude. He was interested in reading similar books, but also displayed a more positive attitude about the assigned readings in class. This was shown through one response on the post-interview, when he was asked to explain his thought process when someone asks him to read a book. Thor’s claim stated that “I will read the books that my teachers give me now, even though I may not like some of them. I used to think that they were only giving me boring books and forcing me to read for no reason, but they aren’t.” This open-mindedness was a clear indicator that Thor’s attitude had been drastically altered as a result of the success that he had felt in relation to the tasks throughout this study.

Finding Four: Technology Usage Promotes Engagement

Throughout this study the use of technology, specifically computers and Google Docs, served as a vital tool to promote Thor’s engagement. It was known from the pre-interview that

Thor felt strongly about the use of computers to engage in writing tasks. During this interview, I had asked for his opinion about what teachers could do to differently to make reading and writing more enjoyable. He immediately stated, "I wish we would write on the computers more. They really help me focus and spell things better too. My writing is really neat because I can type, and I can use pictures from the internet in my writing by hitting copy and paste." This statement is a clear indicator of the student's personal perception of the writing process with the inclusion of technology as a major component.

Throughout my observations, I was also able to note a clear connection between the use of technology and his overall engagement in the writing process. This can be most clearly identified through the comparison of observations when popular culture and technology were included and instances when they were not incorporated into a lesson. During one classroom observation, which lasted a total of 45 minutes, Thor left the classroom and went to the bathroom or for walks to release energy on three separate occasions. This high number of occurrences clearly indicates some lack of mental and physical engagement. When the technology component of the study was implemented into other areas of the student's writing process, he only took one of these physical breaks during the same period of time. He also needed significantly less reminders to attend to the task.

Aside from pure physical and mental attention to a task, the actual level of difficulty for Thor seemed to decrease as a result of using technology. During the post-interview, I had asked Thor to identify the most difficult and easiest part of the writing process at this point in his educational career. Instead of focusing on the negative components first, as he did previously, Thor decided to point his attention to the easiest part of this process. He immediately stated,

"Computers are the best part of doing writing. They help me slow down when I try to spell something, and they also help me write really neat so that teachers can read it without asking me a bunch of questions."

Thor also began to view the computers as a sort of video game. He loved engaging in the shared writing process because he could immediately see comments and revision notes that I was making on his own screen. He seemed to view this as a task, or gaming mission, to correct or include the contents of my comments. It is also important to note the significant impact that technology has on student engagement in an unstructured environment, since many of the situations from the study occurred in this type of environment (Boyce, Mishra, Halverson & Thomas, 2014).

Some of the sample comments for revision that I made on Google Docs included, "please be sure to start sentences with something different than the word then" and "use details from online research to support your writing." When I provided these comments he would often respond verbally with phrases such as "got it Mr. Miller" or "I can use Google to find stuff about them and while I am on there I can find pictures too." He often responded verbally due to his slower typing speed. Each of the interactions that I shared with Thor presented high levels of interest and enthusiasm. These interactions not only possessed enthusiasm, but they were acted on immediately. This immediate action displayed his high levels of engagement in the piece that he was working on at that particular moment. His reactions also displayed his viewpoint of me as a reader. It is said that users of new media, such as Google Docs, view their commenters as more thoughtful (Nobles & Paganucci, 2015).

Findings Summary

Throughout this study I was able to arrive at the previously discussed findings. These findings were: choice promotes accountability, the inclusion of popular culture as a choice or in the curriculum improves engagement, successes positively impacted the overall attitude of the student, and technology usage promoted student engagement.

Throughout the duration of the study, choice directly impacted Thor's accountability for completing his work. As stated by Martinez (2010), the quality of a student's work is often dependent upon their out of school experiences or hobbies. In this case, Thor's hobbies were clearly incorporated through the use of superheroes and other elements from popular culture. The inclusion of these elements led to my second finding which was, the inclusion of popular culture improved Thor's engagement. This finding was observed through my observations of Thor's attitude and through the analysis of his writing pieces. While analyzing these pieces I was able to connect the improvements that Thor had made to research conducted by Dweck (2015) and Dickie (2014). Each of these researchers emphasize the importance of connecting a student's funds of knowledge or experiences, to their learning. In this case, Thor's funds of knowledge consisted of many elements from popular culture. I was also able to find that Thor's success positively impacted his overall performance on the work that he had completed. As Thor recognized improvements from previous writing pieces and received positive comments on Google Docs, he was driven to aspire for higher quality writing. These aspirations for improved literacy skills contrast with the findings in the research by Kessels (2014), which states that males often view literacy as a non-masculine task. The final finding that I made in this study was that Thor's engagement improved as a result of including technology as a source for

writing. According to Nobels' (2015) study, students view the comments made on new media, in this case Google Docs, as more thoughtful. This was certainly the case for Thor throughout the duration of the study.

Conclusions

As I progressed with this study, I was able to arrive at two conclusions based upon the research and the findings. These conclusions are that strategic feedback and success promotes a growth mindset and that the inclusion of elements from popular culture improves engagement.

Strategic Feedback and Success Promotes a Growth Mindset. The first conclusion directly impacts the change in mindset that Thor underwent as a result of his experiences in this study. Throughout the study Thor's overall attitude toward literacy based tasks dramatically changed. He had typically been a student who viewed his world through the lens of can or cannot. There was never any sort of gray area, or room for improvement in his academic abilities in his perceptions. Based upon this description he seemed to possess, what Carol Dweck would call, a fixed mindset. This is the type of mindset that prevents people from growing from their mistakes, rather than viewing these mistakes as a source for learning and progression forward. This type of approach would be considered a growth mindset. People with a growth mindset often view the world as things that they have not accomplished yet, as opposed to things that they are unable to accomplish (Dweck, 2015). At the beginning of this study the student seemed quite fixed in his thinking and abilities. As the student began to notice and vocalize his visible successes, his mindset also began to shift. He began to respond to suggestions for improvement, only after he was provided with verbal or written feedback

through the use of Google Docs. This change in mindset, as a result of the scaffolding, will have profound impacts on the future of his overall academic success. The change in mindset specially focuses on his ability to accept feedback as a tool for growth.

Inclusion of Popular Culture Elements Improves Engagement. The second conclusion that I have drawn from this study was that the use of popular culture improved Thor’s overall engagement. According to Marsh (2006), many schools place elements from popular culture into an “other” category due to the high levels of interest from students. When something ends up in this category, it is sometimes hard to redirect it back to useful and acceptable content for the classroom setting. Being sure to utilize these different elements of popular culture, rather than “othering” them, is important for their acceptance within literacy activities. Thor’s use of popular culture has been shown to not only improve his writing, but his reading as well. I have found that he was highly interested in developing pieces that directly related to popular culture. This interest was not present prior to introducing popular culture into the overall learning process. I also noticed that Thor’s overall engagement in choice reading was drastically improved as a result of the inclusion of books about popular culture. Thor’s attention was immediately captivated by these texts when provided with the opportunity to engage in independent reading periods in the classroom setting.

Implications

While engaging in this study, I have developed two key implications for future guidance of my teaching and for those who work with students who possess similar characteristics to Thor. These implications are that student voice and interest should guide the process for instruction and that providing effective learning materials is essential for engagement. Each of

these implications hold validity with not only Thor, but with all students regardless of the grade level. These are important implications for teachers and parents to follow while working with students in all settings to maximize learning and growth opportunities.

Student Voice and Interest Should Guide the Process for Instruction. In classrooms there are many areas where teachers alter the methods in which instruction is delivered to the students. In many instances the differentiation occurs to guide students toward the desired learning outcome, but there are also other instances when teachers need to provide student choice. The students need to have the flexibility to self-regulate the manner in which they use literacy skills, such as reading or writing. Though the product and the overall message of the information may be the same, the methods used by a student to get to this goal may be entirely varied. This study uses the creation of multiple paragraph writing pieces as a prime example of this varied process. Many of the other students were engaging in an assigned writing piece to learn how to develop paragraphs, while Thor was writing about elements from popular culture to learn the skill of paragraph development. This was a direct result of his overall motivation to learn based upon his interest being included in the process of learning. It has been stated that “Motivation plays an important role in language learning in particular because of the long-term effort involved in gaining proficiency” (Chapula & Haseborg, 2014, p. 74). As an educator it is important to present varied opportunities for choice in my instruction, not only for Thor but for all other students as well.

Providing Effective Learning Materials is Essential for Engagement. The importance of using engaging materials stretches beyond the specific requirements of the educator. This also falls on the responsibility of the student to help determine impactful materials that may be used

to promote their engagement in learning tasks. This requires teachers to listen closely to the input that is provided by students. In this study, I was able to find that the inclusion of technology, specifically a laptop and Google Docs, provided the student with a highly effective tool for engagement. One-to-one technologies, such as laptops, are said to improve students' engagement in the revision process, the length of their writing, and the existence of a student centered learning environment (Zheng, Arada, Niiya, & Warschauer, 2014). Assisting students in realizing the different pieces of technology, or other differentiating materials that help them, will provide teachers with a more engaged student population. In this study, Thor's use of Google Docs proved to be the accessible material or object that dramatically impacted his overall engagement in writing. This coupled with the use of texts sourced from popular culture, dramatically changed his desire to learn literacy based skills such as reading and writing. Moving forward, it will be essential for students to learn to pick materials that are not only interesting, but beneficial to their learning process. It is very easy for them to pick distracting materials that hinder their learning process. It is the educator's responsibility to monitor these students, and to provide beneficial advice and ideas to improve engagement. Along with this responsibility in the school setting, it is also essential to convey this information to parents at home, as many of the same materials also exist there as well. Using these materials for enjoyable educational purposes not only provides students with more opportunities, but it also provides continuity between home and school.

Limitations

Throughout this study there were limitations that may impact ones viewpoint on the worth of the outcomes. First of all, this study was conducted in a case study format, meaning

that the participant, Thor, was the sole source of data. The limited number of participants restricts the amount of comparative analysis that can be done with other students who possessed similar learning characteristics. Another limitation from this study is the short duration of time in which it occurred. This study occurred over a six week time span, limiting my ability to note long term impacts of the intervention. Another limitation of this study was the existence of parental communication that had been impacting the student's growth and success in the academic setting. This information was not included in the data collection process.

Suggestions for Future Search

As I begin to think about suggestions for future research, I feel as though there are a few key areas that will complement the findings of this study. The first area of future exploration is examining the impact that these areas have on struggling female students. Though this study was primarily focused on a struggling male student, it will be important to take note of the impact that these variables have on a female student as well. It may also be beneficial to study the ways that these factors impact a successful student's literacy based educational experience. The final area of future research that would improve one's ability to utilize these findings in their classroom, would be the impact that these factors have on a student's desire to involve their parents in their education. These different areas of research may be more widely validated as a result of using more focus students as the participants in the study.

Significance of the Study

The findings throughout this research study explore the impact that popular culture and text choice have on one struggling male student. It is important that these variables were

studied in connection to this specific population because they provide insight into the causes and potential exploratory solutions that teachers can use to begin to reengage these students in literacy education. Though findings come from data collected on only one student, they can provide a pathway to support similar students and relative future research. This information can serve as informative research for all educational professionals with struggling or disengaged students in all learning environments.

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