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# Cultivating Reading Motivation in a Middle School Classroom Using Independent Reading

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Cultivating Reading Motivation in a Middle School Classroom Using Independent  
Reading

by

Nicole L. Tavolino

Fall 2012

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As a teacher of English Language Arts, I have always been interested in reading and getting children to become skilled readers. Furthermore, although it is very important to improve students' reading skills, it is more crucial to first create a desire and appreciation of reading and literature. Once this has been cultivated, it is much easier to help students reach higher levels of decoding, fluency and reading comprehension. Therefore, I wanted to explore ways to correct this in my own classroom, so I decided to conduct an action research study. In this qualitative research study, I piloted a five-week independent reading program that I was hoping would show significant gains in reading interest for a class section of my seventh grade English Language Arts students.

### *RESEARCH PROBLEM*

The research problem that this study was based on is actually two-fold. One piece of the problem is that students do not enjoy reading and really have no motivation to do any more reading than what is required of them in their classes at school. This is especially true in regards to middle school students. Something happens between elementary school and middle school that makes children spend less time on reading books, therefore putting them at a disadvantage academically. As stated in a study conducted by Kasten and Wilfong, "Encouraging reading in school becomes especially critical in middle grades and above because reports show students in these age groups read less on their own than their elementary peers" (657). That quote is one of many that I found urging middle level teachers to take charge and try to reverse this problem. Since

it is so clear that middle school students do not read nearly enough independently, teachers need to find more ways to build time into the school day to do so. The second piece is to find out if there are ways that we as teachers can effectively get them to become more avid readers, and be more motivated towards literacy. Part of this is determining how motivated and engaged in independent reading each student is prior to beginning the program. Observations and conversations with students need to take place beforehand so that the appropriate instructional supports are available to aid the more reluctant readers to fully engage in the five week independent reading program. Doing this is something new for teachers, because it may take a lot of work and observation which can be hard to manage. This is truly an issue for practicing teachers, because although we would like to devote more time to leisure reading with students, curriculum constraints make it very difficult to do this. There have been several studies conducted and articles written about this very problem. They suggest many ways to begin encouraging more reading for pleasure, the most widely used and easily implemented are structured independent reading programs. It is clear that when a structured independent reading program is implemented, the majority of students will begin to develop a stronger love of reading and become more engaged in this habit.

### *PURPOSE*

In reading the literature on this topic, I was able to take my research problem and create a purpose for my study. The purpose of the study was to measure reading interest in middle school students before a structured independent reading program is implemented, and then after they have spent five weeks in the program. The reason that I decided to stick with motivation and interest, as opposed to actual reading skill and level,

is because there is already an overwhelming amount of data to support the latter. That is, many researchers have already explored and tested the effects of independent reading on students' reading abilities. As one may surmise, there is a favorable result achieved when students spend more time reading independently or otherwise. Research shows clearly that when a student reads more often, they show a higher comprehension level and lexile score. These things are already proven in the world of education. On the other hand, there is a lack of research to support the idea that independent reading actually improves reading interest and motivation as well. Once this is proven, teachers may be more dedicated to devising ways to cultivate interest in students and helping them engage in texts that are appropriate for their interests and their skill level.

### *RESEARCH QUESTIONS*

There were two major questions used to guide the research in this study. 1. Did students' reading interest improve after participating in the five week independent reading program? 2. Is independent reading the best way to achieve higher reading interest in middle school students? By the end of the study, both of these questions needed to be answered in order to provide ideas for further research, as well as to determine the way reading instruction should be delivered in the classroom. The questions were answered through extensive pre and post teacher observation of students, as well as interviews of students' views on the program as well as their growth through participating in the program.

### *THEORY*

Based upon literature that I have studied in the area of reading, as well as my observations for four years in middle-school English Language Arts classrooms, I have

developed a theory on which this study was based upon. It may seem like a very simple idea, but the more a child reads, the better they become at it, and hopefully the more they will come to appreciate it and enjoy it. According to Wanda Hedrick:

Unfortunately, though, many young adolescents who lack critical reading strategies struggle with the reading demands required in academic courses in middle school. Others may have acquired these literacy strategies but choose not to engage in personal reading. Both situations result in students who do not pick up a book to read for pleasure. During any free or "down" time, these students do not think about reading a few pages in a book or current magazine. Would reading for a few minutes really matter anyway? The answer may be yes (77).

As this quote so clearly illustrates, it is crucial as instructors of reading to always encourage students to read for pleasure. The reasons why are very obvious. Number one, if students continue to read more and more, they will become better at it. More importantly though, they will begin to form an appreciation of literature. This is the type of intrinsic motivation that is necessary in creating strong readers. It has been proven that extrinsic or outside rewards are not nearly as successful in moving students from non-readers to avid readers. Avid readers are the ones who are able to develop reading skills that will not only help them read fiction texts in English class, but also be able to gain content knowledge and meaning from texts of other specialty areas. "Reading books you want to read motivates you to read more. Sharing those books once a week with someone who "oohs and aahs" about your reading choices is also a surefire motivator" (Cunningham 89). This encompasses the data I expected to achieve through my pilot study. I was hoping that by doing what Cunningham discussed not only in that quote, but throughout her whole article, I would be able to create and implement a solid independent reading program from which to gain some rich and detailed data. The data I was expecting was that students would in fact make great gains in reading interest as a result

of the increase of structured independent reading. This, then, became my theory for research.

### *DEFINITION OF TERMS*

There is one term that is used throughout the chapters of this study that needs to be defined. That term is independent reading. Although it seems as if everyone may know exactly what that is, the definition used for the purposes of this study is a little different. In this case independent reading encompasses a variety of different activities and strategies which are much more than just sitting in a desk for a length of time, reading alone. Independent reading included partner reading, discussion groups, direct instruction on reading techniques from the teacher, and various written, oral and project-based activities. The reading is called independent because it is self-selected by the student based on their areas of interest. Furthermore, although all of the above-mentioned strategies and activities were used throughout the program, the majority of the work was done on an individual basis by each student. It is also important to note that in independent reading, the teacher also has a vital role. The teacher must monitor, intervene and ask questions of students on a regular basis. They should also hold individual conferences with students to get their ideas, insights and questions on both the program itself, as well as the literature that they are reading. In reading the literature in the area of independent reading, the more commonly used term is SSR or silent sustained reading. Authors like Sharon Taberski, Dr. Jack Humphrey and Leslie Preddy use SSR in place of independent reading, but they are mostly the same strategy. Also, authors like Gay Ivey and Karen Broaddus refer to independent reading as DEAR or drop everything and read time. All of these terms are used synonymously throughout the literature used to

inform this study, however, for this pilot study independent reading was the only term used. Another term that was used in this study was socio-economic status. For purposes of this study, socio-economic status was determined by whether or not students received free or reduced lunch at school. Therefore, any student who did receive the service of free or reduced school lunch was classified as low socio-economic status for the purposes of this study.

### *SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH*

The benefits of conducting this research were very clear. Conducting action research in the area of reading interest can help a teacher assess their strategies for encouraging reading success in a classroom. My hope in completing this study was to see if my theory that reading books of interest and completing various activities based on that reading is the way to get students to like reading more and ultimately better at it. Most teachers do not implement a structured independent reading program in their classroom, and it has always been my belief that this is the best way to cultivate strong and successful readers. However, before putting all of the time and effort into implementing this in the classroom, it was necessary to explore whether or not it would be as useful as I anticipated. Furthermore, I feel like my research provides other teachers with the reinforcement that it is crucial to get students to read more, to like reading and to become overall better readers. There would be grave consequences for not researching this problem. The main one is that teachers would be less equipped to teach reading to students because they wouldn't know what they need. Also, teachers would continue to teach the way that they currently are without allowing time for students to read literature of their choice. There are many connections to pedagogy in this research area. First and

foremost, the research that was done in this study has enriched research that has already been conducted in the vast realm of reading skill and motivation. The data collected in this study would be quite useful for any teacher. This is mostly because there is little information out there for teachers to refer to regarding how much students enjoy reading, and whether more independent reading creates students who read more. Throughout each of the articles that I read in preparation for my study, I found mostly data that was related to reading achievement and ability level. For example, “Students who read at home averaged 25 points higher on the 1992 and 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests of reading achievement than those who did not”(Kasten and Wilfong 657). This is quite encouraging data, however, as stated in previous sections of this study, there needs to be more work done in the area of motivation. Similarly written by Kasten and Wilfong, “Consistent opportunities for independent reading help build fluency in readers and help develop reader confidence toward increasingly sophisticated books” (657). Again, this is one huge part of the reading process for children, but it doesn’t mention any consideration given towards motivation as a means to increase life-long, skilled readers. That is exactly why I decided to follow through in researching the effects of independent reading on student reading motivation.

### *LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH*

There are a few major limitations of this research study. The first and most significant is that there was a limited amount of time in which to implement the independent reading program, as well as to collect data and analyze the results. The data would have been more meaningful if it was based on a longer period of participation in

the independent reading program.

Another obvious limitation of this study is the method of sampling. The participants were chosen by convenience in that it was an action research study. The researcher used a class of students that were already a part of her teaching schedule. The fact that it is a convenience sample could jeopardize the chances that the results will be generalizable to other similar populations.

Finally, this study researches the idea of reading motivation from a purely qualitative angle. That is, it focuses more on narrative quotes of students and teacher observations to glean data, rather than statistical and numerical data. For further research, it may be necessary to look at a mixed methods approach to gather more informative data.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *INDEPENDENT READING PROGRAM*

Throughout the research process, it was crucial to find relevant articles that could be referenced in order to create a structured independent reading program on which to base the five week program on. There were several models outlined within the body of articles referenced for this study. Each of the programs had some similar qualities that must be present in order for it to be successful. Many of them were very strictly planned out, while others gave guidelines that the teacher could tailor to their particular group of students. There were a few that were extremely exciting prospects, but for the purposes of this study could not be planned and implemented in sufficient time to gather the necessary data.

The Cunningham (2005) article proved to be very helpful in creating my five week independent reading program. The researcher, a practicing teacher, wrote this article to help other teachers reevaluate their independent reading practices in their classrooms. The ideas presented in this article could easily be transferred into any classroom setting with little legwork required by the instructor. The participants in Cunningham's study were first and second grade students, primarily male struggling readers. Although the participants in this study were quite a bit older, the structure described in this article was extremely useful to this study as well. Rather than giving a complete blueprint for an independent reading program, this article gave many solid examples of strategies that teachers could use in their own classrooms to increase reading motivation. Some

activities that she tried with her students were reading aloud daily to students, incorporating both fiction and non-fiction texts in the classroom, providing at least 15 minutes of unstructured reading time in the classroom per day, and doing partner reads with younger children to boost reading confidence. Cunningham also suggested ways to add to your existing classroom library to make reading more accessible to students and to accommodate for different reading interests.

Gambrell's (2007) research article also provided quite a bit of information regarding implementing an independent reading program in the classroom. This article did, however, provide some suggestions for teachers on how to actually implement the type of independent reading program that includes the elements necessary for student success. Some of these elements include holding conferences with students, allowing students to discuss their books with each other, and allowing students to pick out level appropriate texts. Overall, this article provided information that was important in creating the independent reading program that was implemented to measure students' reading motivation. It was necessary that the motivation of students was measured after they have had a large amount of structured recreational reading.

Garan and DeVogd's (2008) article also provided evidence on what components a successful independent reading program should include. The main characteristics that they said must be present in order to have positive effects on students' reading motivation and achievements were clearly stated. Teachers who were able to show significant growth in their students after implementing a similar study to this one encouraged students, monitored the number of books and the genres of those books, modeled healthy reading habits, and asked questions that force students to think about and reflect on what they've

read. These suggestions were also very similar to the ones suggested by Cunningham, as well as Gambrell.

Reutzel, Fawson and Smith (2008) also outlined some great strategies to incorporate into a successful and rich independent reading program. In that study, students were required to read a book of a different genre out of a list of twelve every nine weeks. Students were also more prepared to describe what a good reader is, and how good of a reader they are after an extended period of time in this program.

There was yet another study done in which Kasten and Wilfong (2007) created an alternate type of independent reading program that incorporated not only the characteristics mentioned in the other articles, but several other aspects meant to further student engagement and buy-in. This article was written by two practicing teachers during an action research project in which they implement the idea of a “book bistro”. This is a variation of independent reading in which students are organized in groups and allowed to discuss and write about literature in a café-like setting. This idea came to the teachers as they were trying to come up with strategies to motivate their students to read more, and get them to actually enjoy reading. The student participants used in this action research project were sixty-two ninth and eleventh grade students. The first portion of the article was dedicated to laying out the parameters of the book bistro. The teachers took time to come up with activities for students to complete in order to ensure accountability, discussion questions for students to answer as they read their selection, and directions for sharing excerpts of books with classmates. The teachers also discussed how they ensured that each of the student’s individual reading needs and challenges were met. For example, for some struggling readers they provided books on tape to allow them to get through

enough material to discuss and analyze for each bistro session. The second portion of the article was dedicated to gathering data and measuring differences in student interest in reading after the book bistro session was completed. What the teachers found in their observations and student surveys was that the majority of the students had a more positive attitude towards reading once they had participated in the book bistro event. This idea was the most innovative and interesting of all of the suggested programs. However, it was not able to be implemented for this study due to lack of time, monetary resources and after-school transportation. In the future, it would be interesting to explore this study using the book bistro idea in place of the traditional in class independent reading program. The results using this model would likely be more significant.

According to Kelley and Claussen-Grace, differentiation is required in order to implement a successful independent reading program. This article offered a perspective not often considered by English teachers. While it is evident that engagement is a critical factor in a successful independent reading program, oftentimes educators think that as long as they appear to be reading, the reading is taking place. This is not always the case. On the contrary, there is a vast spectrum of different types of readers who need to be aided in creating an independent reading routine that works for them. This article provided tools to use that are helpful in gauging where each individual student lies on that spectrum. This is a step in building a successful independent reading program that must be implemented. For example, “if we want to support readers during independent reading and help them with engagement, it is critical for the teacher to identify the various types of readers in the classroom” (Kelly & Claussen-Grace, 2009). This will support this study by providing differentiation for independent reading. Each reader will

be assessed and given a plan to follow and supports to ensure that they will be engaged in the book that they have chosen. Furthermore, these observations will help scaffold the program, and measure the amounts of growth that each reader makes in engagement from the beginning of the program to the end. It is not realistic to expect all students to become “bookworms” at the close of the program, rather it is more likely that a higher level of engagement is detected after implementing the program. It is best said by Kelly and Claussen-Grace in the article when they state, “Engaged readers actively interact with text, seeking to understand what they have read. They avoid distractions and socially interact with others regarding text”. This will be the goal of the preliminary observations of this study. Each student will gain many more benefits from independent reading if they are engaged in the text. The end result will be a much more accurate measure as well.

The most helpful of the articles regarding creating independent reading programs was Little and Hines (2006). It focuses not only on independent reading as a means for academic growth, but more specifically outlines an after-school reading program as an option. The participants in this study were one hundred and fifty-five students in grades three through six from three demographically diverse districts. The primary method used to gather data in this study was a fluency test that was given prior to beginning the twelve-week program, and after the program had ended. There were also some survey questions asked of students through journaling, and student/teacher observation. These are items that directly related to the study, and were used as a template for the five-week independent reading program in this pilot study. More importantly, this article broke down the reading program that they used in very distinct phases. The reason that they felt

that the program was so successful was that students are able to see that reading is an activity that can be done outside of school time, and not for homework or classroom purposes. The teachers made sure to drive home the importance of reading for more than learning classroom content. The other component of this study that was unique compared to similar studies in the field was that students were expected to complete this after-school program in phases. The first phase was designed merely to expose students to literature. The second phase made up the bulk of the program. During phase two, students were given challenging texts to read independently, but with the close interaction and observation of an adult. The adult helps the student gain meaning from the literature and in turn helps the student gain confidence in reading. The final phase helps students learn how to choose literature that is comfortable for them to read on their own.

Although this program was a bit too detailed and time consuming for this particular study, the concepts helped to guide the formation of the program ultimately used for this study. Furthermore, the well defined phases outlined by Little and Hines will be a valuable resource when continuing work in the area of reading motivation through independent reading, and for conducting a more thorough research study.

### *READING MOTIVATION*

Although creating the appropriate independent reading program for this study was a large goal in reviewing the literature, the more important goal was to gain the insight on reading motivation from professionals in the field. There is a plethora of information available to convince one that the true way to increase reading skills in children is through instituting independent reading into the classroom. Unfortunately, there is much less information out there to back up the idea that independent reading actually aids in

motivating students as well. It is clear to teachers that motivation is one of the crucial factors in getting students to learn. It is equally clear that it is much harder to measure motivation than it is to measure gains in achievement in reading. However, there are some key scholars who have provided evidence that motivation really does increase when students are exposed to independent reading programs. These articles are the driving force of this study.

Giving students the chance to read materials of their choice, have meaningful discussions about literature that means something to them, and just having the time to relax and devote to a novel are the keys to creating avid readers. Von Rembow (2006) supports the idea fully that students not only need to read on their own, but need to be able to construct meaning and value through conversation. She states:

Encourage students to discuss and share their favourite books with each other! Create a place near your classroom where students can talk about books they have read independently and create a group 'best reads' list. Offer the opportunity, at intervals while reading together, for reflective thinking and sharing. Provide mini-lessons to assure that students are choosing books at their level to boost comprehension during independent reading (14).

These are strategies that most teachers think about, but in the day to day bustle, never follow through on. This reinforces the idea that we must consider best practices when dealing with reading instruction and student motivation.

Similarly, according to Ivey and Broaddus, "Personal choice was closely aligned with positive experiences in reading. When students reported an experience in which they were motivated to read, they usually discussed the content of the book and described features they found interesting" (Ivey, et al. 363). This is once again directly illustrating the importance of student choice on motivation. The best way to ensure that this personal

choice is allowed to students is through independent reading.

An angle that is presented in the Johnsson-Smaragdi and Johnsson article is reading motivation based on gender. Although that is not a topic discussed in this particular study, it will be something considered as an extension of this study. As in the Wilfong and Kasten article that is discussed later in this review, the results of this article pointed out that boys tend to be significantly less interested in reading for leisure, and tend to prefer more non-fiction texts when and if they decide to read. The data suggests that boys in both age groups, regardless of socioeconomic status, lacked the desire and motivation that their female counterparts possess regarding reading. The most surprising statement in this whole article to me was, “gender has a stronger impact on book reading than social background in all eight of the time periods” (Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jonsson 527). This is a staggering result to me. If we’ve known for so long that boys’ reading motivation and ultimately reading skills are lacking, then why haven’t we tried harder to combat this problem. The other results in this study were pretty predictable, such as that families of lower socioeconomic status tend to put less emphasis on reading at home, and that society tends to breed girls to read more and boys to focus more on physical activity.

Finally, the article that outlined both motivation interests and independent reading. This article was written by practicing teachers who wanted to explore why students hate reading so much, why they have poor attitudes towards reading, and how confident they are in their reading abilities. The article outlined a research study where two surveys were conducted to get at the root of some of the above mentioned research questions. One thousand and six students in two Ohio school districts in grades three through twelve were given questions to answer regarding their thoughts and feelings on

reading. The first survey allowed students to rate activities associated with reading, and how effective they are to students' learning. The second survey asked questions about reading preferences, who their reading role models are, and how much they enjoy reading on their own.

The results of the survey were very interesting. The researcher separated the results into categories such as reading enjoyment level, strategies students learn best from, and overall opinions about themselves as readers. The results of questions measuring which reading strategies work best for students were pretty predictable. The students said that they learned best from reading activities that allow them to write freely in journals, create art projects, and book talks. These things are fairly popular in English Language Arts classrooms across the board. The next set of data was a bit more surprising. It turns out that there is a considerable difference between the amount of reading preferences listed for boys and girls. This is something I may want to further explore in my own case study. The last set of results was also somewhat surprising to me. Students tended to list that they indeed like independent reading, but considerably less of them felt as if they are good readers. This brings about another facet to be considered in my case study, which is students' reading confidence. They also stated that they mostly looked to other peers to model successful reading strategies, which is actually quite a startling thing.

Overall, each of the articles have in some way informed the study that was conducted. There was valuable information offered by professionals that contributed to the rationale, predictions and ideas behind the study. Also, the independent reading program would not have been created without the input from each of the scholars' experiences with similar programs.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### *PARTICIPANTS*

The participants used in this study were members of a seventh grade classroom in a large, urban district in Western New York. The classroom selected for this study was a diverse sampling of children, who came from a variety of different academic abilities, ethnic backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses. There were twenty-two students in this class, eight of which were special education classified students, and fourteen general education students. The gender breakdown in this class was thirteen boys, nine girls. All students in this class came from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The ethnic breakdown of the class was one Caucasian student, one Arabic student, five Hispanic students, and fifteen African-American students. There were mixed reading ability levels present within this classroom. That is, there are several students who were reading at and above grade level, but the majority of the students in this class were reading below seventh grade level. Similarly, there was a variety of different interest and motivation levels. There were students who were reluctant to read independently, as well as students who enjoy reading but find it difficult and thus were intimidated to participate. There were also students who enjoyed reading already, and finally those who would pretend to engage in the activity of independent reading in order to avoid any consequence for lack of participation. All of the students were assessed prior to beginning this program, and the amount of growth in motivation and engagement was determined accordingly. Furthermore, behaviorally, this class included many students who have previously illustrated little to no interest in reading literature, and have not made much of an effort to

engage in leisure reading. The teacher of this classroom is in her sixth year of teaching, and her certification is in Secondary (Seventh through Twelfth grade) English Language Arts. Since this is an action research study, the teacher is also the researcher, and will be referred to as such throughout the remainder of the pilot study write-up.

### *GOALS*

The main goal of this study is to determine whether or not students become more interested and engaged in independent reading when participating in a structured independent reading program in the classroom. The researcher seeks to determine whether it is obvious through discussion with students and observations that growth has taken place in the area of reading engagement and appreciation. This will be measured before, during and after the program is implemented.

Another goal of the study is to determine whether supports for independent reading and differentiated activities tailored to readers falling into each level of engagement are helpful in promoting engagement. That is, do the provided supports for each of the levels of engagement aid students to move up on the spectrum and become more engaged as the program progresses.

### *MATERIALS*

This pilot study was based on data gained on student reading motivation before and after implementing a structured five week independent reading program in a seventh grade classroom. Some of the materials used to collect this data included the engagement observation chart, and interviews conducted with each student participant before

beginning the problem. The independent reading program was planned out before it was implemented in the classroom. This program was made up of several activities and procedures. Before students began to actually read though, some preliminary work was done. The teacher gave some brief mini-lessons about reading strategies that are essential for successful independent reading. Some things that the students were taught were strategies such as chunking the text, stopping to respond, writing questions as you read, and making predictions, among many others. The other thing that needed to be determined before beginning the program was an appropriate book for each student. There were not many strict guidelines at all for selection of a text. Students were given time within the classroom library, as well as the school library to choose the book of their choice. The book was then shown to the teacher, who either approved the selection or asked the student to try again. Once every student had a book, the program began.

The basic premise of independent reading for purposes of this five week study was that students would read for thirty minutes each day of the week during their eighty-four minute English Language Arts block. After their thirty minutes of reading, students were given an activity to complete for that day's reading. One example of an activity that students were asked to complete was a reader response journal entry. In this entry, students were asked to write about their opinions on the book, ideas about the characters, connections to what they have read, predictions and even questions that they had about what they were reading. Another activity that students were asked to complete was a character sketch about one character from their independent reading book. In their sketch, they were to write down words to describe how the character looked, felt, acted and what they said. They were then asked to write a short paragraph comparing and

contrasting themselves to the character. One other activity that was one that students completed was a pair share. In this activity, students were asked to partner up with another student in the class, and give each other a book talk about the book that they were reading. They had a chance to ask one another questions, point out things that they liked or disliked about the book based on the book talk, and just have a chance to discuss any aspect of the book that they wished. This not only gave the person giving the talk a chance to verbally respond to their text, but also gave other students an idea of other books that they would like to read in the future. Finally, on Fridays, after that day's reading session, the teacher had a conference with each student to ask them questions about their book and the independent reading process. This was the time that the researcher was able to really observe the true feelings and ideas of the students throughout the program's duration.

There were no previously used instruments used for this study. There were no surveys administered, or rubrics. Observations were made in an observation journal, but there were a few interview questions used to collect data. The observation journal was used as place to write down any ideas, questions or developments that seemed relevant to the study. Lengthy descriptions of what was seen by the observer (researcher) throughout the course of the program were given. These descriptions were written about individuals as well as the whole group. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that were aimed at getting a candid response from each student regarding their opinions and views on reading. There were two sets of interview questions used. The first set was used before students began the program, and included questions such as "do you like to read for pleasure?", "how often do you read non-required material?", and "what types of

books do you like to read best?” The other set of interview questions were used both during the program and at the close of the program to gauge the growth made by each student. Some questions that were included in this set were “do you feel that you enjoy reading more since you’ve begun this independent reading program?”, “has your attitude towards reading changed since beginning this program? Why or why not?”, “have the activities you’ve completed during this program helped build your confidence and motivation as a reader? Why or why not?”, and “what do you think would be the most effective way to get you to enjoy reading?” Students were also given the freedom to just discuss any feelings or concerns beyond these questions. The questions focused on in the results section of this study were the ones directly related to how much the participants enjoyed reading before and after the program. Copies of the interview questions instruments have been included in the appendix of this study.

### *DATA COLLECTION*

The length of this study, as stated above, was five weeks long. There were twenty-five sessions included in the program. Thirty minutes of each session were devoted for students to independently read the novel that they had selected. Another block of thirty minutes was provided for students to complete the required activity for the day. On Fridays, activity time was extended to one full hour. This length of time was meant to give students a time to catch up with their activities, engage in discussion groups, or continue to read their novel. More importantly, this time was used for selected students to meet with the teacher researcher, and conference about their experience both with their novel and the program as a whole.

The data was collected using both the observation sheet, as well as the interview

question sheet. The observations were conducted during reading time, during discussion with peers and while students were completing their required task for the day. The interviews were conducted before the program began, during the program at Friday conference sessions, and at the conclusion of the program. Since there were twenty-two participants in the program and only one individual collecting data, the students being observed and interviewed were rotated. That is, not every individual was observed or interviewed each session.

The nature in which the data was collected was both reliable and valid, because it was authentic observation and candid one-on-one interviews. The data gathered was all quite similar, and fell within the general area I expected it to, making it reliable. It also answered the research questions that I sought to answer, therefore making it valid. The instruments were original and had never been used before or put through formal validity and reliability analyses, however, I have faith in the results that I collected. I did gain some insight from colleagues on the quotes that I pulled from my research to analyze. The teacher that I asked to analyze a few of the quotes came up with a similar idea on what the significance of the quotes were. This teacher was also a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher in the same building. The fact that another professional in my subject area gleaned the same themes from my quotes as I did further strengthens the results I found. Furthermore, I believe that these results were sufficient in making a generalizable statement regarding the area of reading motivation.

#### *DATA ANALYSIS*

After collecting all of the data, I had to come up with a sensible and efficient way to organize the data. It was crucial for me to be able to create themes from my data that

would relate to my research questions. I decided to separate my data into observations, and interview results. After that, I further separated my results into before independent reading program, and after independent reading program. Although I did have some results that I collected during the program, I decided to stick with the data that would answer my research questions best. I then went through and developed themes, and chose quotes that best illustrated those themes to use in the results section of my study.

#### *JUSTIFICATION OF METHODS*

The methods that I chose were the best for this short of a pilot study. I believe that the independent reading program that the students went through was developed as completely as possible for the time constraints I was working with. Ideally, the students would have had an entire semester to participate in the program, making the gains that the students made more significant.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

There was a wide variety of observations and quotes collected to create themes that would answer the research questions that the study was based upon. The data was collected in stages. There were interviews conducted prior to beginning the five week independent reading program which were meant to give the researcher a feel for where students were coming from in regards to attitudes towards reading. Throughout the five weeks, students are observed by the teacher researcher, as well as interviewed once a week as to their progress. Finally, at the close of the program, students are asked a series of questions regarding whether or not their attitudes towards reading had changed as a result of their participation in the program. The results have been organized by research question, and within each themes have been developed based on the results analyzed for that particular question.

### **1. . Did students' reading interest improve after participating in the five week independent reading program?**

Before being able to answer this question, it was important to gauge where students' attitudes fell before beginning the program. Many students were interviewed, and common themes emerged. The first question that was asked of students was "Do you like to read?" Responses at this point were similar. For example, James said:

I really don't. I mean it's boring. I would rather just play ball or go on the computer. There's never any good books to read except stuff for school anyways.

This was a predictable answer. There are few students who would choose reading as a preferred activity over television, games or socializing with friends. It was quite clear by this quote that James associated reading with school, and felt as if reading is something

that is only done during the school day. Furthermore, he felt as if he had not had an engaging experience with literature thus far, and therefore did not desire to pick up a book and read by his own choosing. Similarly, when asked the same question, Keisha said:

NO! I hate reading. The words are hard, and I do enough reading in English class. Every book is boring, no good characters or anything. I wish I could read more interesting things. If I have a choice, I will not choose to read except for maybe a magazine or poems my friend wrote.

Like James, Keisha only thinks reading is good for school, and participates in little to no leisure reading. It is clear that both James and Keisha have little motivation to read independently for pleasure, meaning that it will eventually translate to their academic achievement. When interviewed child after child, the results were much the same. Boys and girls, regardless of ethnic background or academic level had very similar responses to this question. Below are just a few more examples of unmotivated, uninterested students whose relationships with reading have either turned sour at some point, or never fully developed.

Reading is for girls. I don't need to read. I play sports. That's what I do!  
-Devin

Why would anyone choose to read? Maybe if there was anything worth it, maybe. But definitely not right now. I'm young and have lots of other stuff to do. -Jada

I sometimes like to read, but I don't like to tell my friends. Reading is for losers. I don't want to be that. What good does reading get me? I only let people see me reading in class, and I don't even really do that either.  
Reading is not cool. -Amanda

Each of these quotes creates the same theme. Reading is not highly valued, and students just don't want to do it. Amanda even goes so far as to say that she does sometimes like reading, but because her peers find it "uncool", she rarely spends her free time with a

book. Although none of these quotes were surprising, it made for a long way to go to get to a place of true intrinsic motivation for reading in this group of students.

The next step in following these students' growth as motivated readers was observation in the initial stages of the independent reading program. The researcher took careful notes on the general atmosphere of the class, as well as individual students. After the students were one week into their reading program, the researcher had this to say about the status of the students:

This group of young adults were highly argumentative and reluctant prior to beginning their participation in the program. Most students asked what they would get out of the program, or if they really had to participate at all. After finally matching each student up with a book of their choice, and giving them some time to read and discuss what they were reading with a friend, there were some noticeable changes. Overall, during reading time it was quiet, and the majority of the class seemed genuinely focused on their book. When students paired up with someone to discuss aspects of their book so far, there were some lively conversations taking place. Although not all students were engaged in meaningful discussion, most of them were excited to talk about what they were reading, and wanted to hear from their partners as well. Even though there were not concrete findings at this point that showed that students had become a bit more motivated towards reading, it was clear by their behavior and level of cooperation that some progress in this area had been made.

According to this observation, it seemed as if students were becoming more invested in the process of reading. There are many reasons that this was happening. The first and most important factor was that for once, they had a choice about what they read. They could take their interests and personalities into consideration when choosing the right book to work with for the duration of this program. The second factor that was crucial in this first week of work was that they were allowed to collaborate. Whenever middle school students are given the opportunity to socialize with others, they are more engaged and willing to participate. Although this was somewhat of an extrinsic reward for them,

they ultimately made the decision to participate.

In addition to the observations during the first week, there were additional interviews conducted at the end of the first week. Although students' attitudes did not change drastically, there were some noticeable improvements in the level of motivation for students. James, one of the students interviewed prior to the kickoff of the program was interviewed at the end of the first week. When asked if his feelings about reading had changed at all since starting the program, he had this to say:

I still don't really like reading. I do like the book I'm reading though. I forgot the name, but it's about basketball, my favorite sport. I liked talking to my partner about the book too. It took a lot of time, and then the class went by fast. I still would rather play basketball or something, but reading is okay.

There were not major strides made, however, it is clear by James' response that he is more engaged by the reading experience than he once was. Unfortunately, when Jada, another student interviewed previously was interviewed, her feelings had not changed much. Jada says:

I still don't like it. It makes me want to sleep. Why do we have to do it? In school 52 we only had to read short books, and when we were done we got a prize. I didn't get no prize for this one! I would rather just read with the class or something. I don't like talking to the partner either.

It is evident that Jada did not experience the same growth that her classmate James had experienced. Jada was expecting a tangible reward for her efforts, and when she did not receive that, she felt as if she was lied to. This was a classic case of the type of motivation that does not reap benefits of higher achievement and desire for reading. Jada, like many of her counterparts, had a long way to go before becoming motivated to read.

The program continued, and similar observations and interviews were collected. There was a mixed response to the questions asked of students. Some of them seemed to be more motivated to read than they previously were. Others, on the other hand, hadn't seemed to improve much in the area of reading motivation. Since these results are not representative of the data as a whole, nor do they answer the research question, they will not be described in full during this portion of the study.

The next round of interviews took place at the conclusion of the five week program. All students were interviewed again, and asked the same set of questions that they were asked prior to beginning work in the program. For the purpose of displaying results in this portion of the research study, interview responses of previously described students will be displayed. That is, only responses from students whose interviews were analyzed above will appear in this section. One student, Keisha, has shown a change of heart regarding independent reading. When asked how she felt about reading now that she had participated in the independent reading program, she said:

I like it better. My favorite part was telling the teacher what I read. I knew more about the book than I thought. I really want to do independent reading more. I like picking my own book.

This quote confirms the theory that independent reading does in fact aid in motivating students to read. Although reading achievement was not measured as a part of this study, it can be assumed that in time, if Keisha does continue to read independently, and continues enjoying literature, she will become a better reader. The fact that she felt confident in discussing what she had read with her teacher was also a strong sign that when given the proper circumstances, students can thrive as readers and analyzers of text.

Another student who showed growth after completing the five week independent

reading program is Devin. When asked the same question as Keisha his reply was:

I liked that we didn't have to answer questions about the book. I could pick what I wanted and read it. It was quiet and I didn't have to go quick or anything. I could stop and think. I don't like when I have to read fast because it is hard. This time, I could read whatever I wanted, and write in my journal whatever.

According to this quote from Devin, like Keisha, he liked having some control over what he chose to read, and the freedom that allowed him as a student. Usually students get frustrated by the demands of reading, and the constraints of having to read something that they either do not understand, or are not interested in. This is a problem for students who are not yet developed enough as readers. If they shut down because of a bad experience, they will never be able to reach their full potential as readers. By allowing freedom and flexibility, as well as choice, this program truly led students to see that reading does not have to be looked at as a chore.

Amanda, a student who liked reading before but was afraid to show it, really made strides in becoming a more avid and motivated reader. When asked if she liked reading better after participating in the program, she was excited to reply:

I always liked reading. I wasn't sure if I should. My friends hated it and I didn't want to be a loser or something. Now I can read whatever I want and my friends do too. We talk and everything about it. My teacher even talks to me about what I am reading now. This never happened. I hope we always do reading this way.

It is quite clear from this quote that Amanda has flourished in the area of reading. Again, the freedom she was given through the program really helped her become motivated. Furthermore, the acceptance of peers was a huge motivator for Amanda to continue to read in the future.

James and Jada had similar responses to the question of whether or not they like reading better after participating in the five week program:

It's better. I picked a book I wanted to read, and nobody else had it. I could relate to it because the characters were like me and my friends. I told my best friend to read it next. Her book sounds good too. I want to read more of these books. –Jada

I liked it more because I read a basketball book. It was real and not stupid. I didn't like the journals or the talking, but I want to read more sports books. -James

These results, while not overwhelming, do show an increase in motivation with independent reading.

There were some common themes that emerged from the data during this pilot study. The most clear and consistent of those themes is that all students mentioned in their post-program interviews that they enjoyed being able to pick their own books to read. This goes to show that the power of choice is key when getting young students to read. Although it is not always possible to allow students to choose reading material, starting out this way in middle school gives a base to build upon in regards to reading skill and motivation. If students start out reading a book that is comfortable and interesting for them to read, they will likely be more confident when trying to read more challenging and often less engaging texts. Each of the students, even the ones who didn't necessarily gain motivation in reading, mentioned that they liked being able to pick their own books to read independently. They were able to take ownership over their own learning, and when this takes place students are more likely to be motivated.

Another theme that emerged across the board, was that structured independent reading did in fact increase motivation towards reading in general. Many of the students,

such as Amanda and Devin, showed great improvements in this area. Even students like James, who were not overly affected by the program, made some improvement in the area of motivation. It can be determined based on the responses of these students that even the most reluctant readers can gain something when enrolled in a structured independent reading program.

Overall, this data proves that students are indeed more motivated and interested in reading after working in this five week program. It can be decided then, that independent reading, when structured properly, can in fact have a positive effect on student motivation and learning.

## **2. Is independent reading the best way to achieve higher reading interest in middle school students?**

The answer to this question was easily answered. The students were asked this research question directly during their final interviews. They were given other examples of reading strategies that they use in the classroom to base their answers on. For example, students were told that if they did not think independent reading was the most effective way to practice reading, they could choose things such as read aloud, partner reads, literature circles, and whole class reads. Below is each of the students' responses:

I think so. Yeah because we pick what we want to read, and we talk about it. If we just read the regular books it's boring. –Devin

Yes! I love independent reading now, and if we don't do it, we won't want to read the other stuff. I like the quiet time to read and I always look forward to it. I hope we keep doing it in class, but now I read on my own more too because I liked the book. –Amanda

It is because we have choices. When we don't get choices we get mad and don't want to do anything, and usually reading is boring but now it's fun. I don't want to read the regular textbooks and stuff, but I guess I have to and I will still get time to read my independent reading books too. –Jada

Yes. It is the best way because we have freedom. I don't like reading the same book all the time as everyone else. This way I pick one that I want and it's more fun. I will read more. –Keisha

Sort of. Some kids like me really don't like to read, but I would rather read one I choose than anything else. –James

The consensus is clear. Although the five students displayed here are not the whole group, they are representative of the themes that were present among all of the data. For middle school students, independent reading is among the best strategies to get students to enjoy reading more, and to be more motivated to read on their own. The degrees to which each of the students is motivated vary, but it is evident that each of them would rather partake in independent reading and related activities than any other reading activity. This does not mean that independent reading is the only acceptable form of reading instruction. However, since this model included group and partner work, individual work, collaboration with teachers, and writing it is a pretty well-rounded way to deliver reading instruction that both strengthens students as readers and makes them want to read more.

### *SUMMARY*

The results gathered in this section prove that both questions were answered favorably. Independent reading does have a significant effect on the motivation of students, and does make students more willing to read. Not only does the format get students to want to read more, but the activities completed, especially discussion, really

encourage students to read more on their own. Also, independent reading is the most favorable mode of reading instruction according to the students interviewed. This group was a very representative class and a diverse mix so it can be foreseen that similar results will be achieved in other areas. There were individuals in the group that spanned across the spectrum of readers. There were students who began as “fake readers” and others who were capable but uninterested readers and all in between. Each of them showed some sort of growth in engagement by the end of the program as well.

The results in this section can be considered both reliable and valid. There were no analyses done to prove that the data or the instruments were reliable and valid, but each of the instruments was run by colleagues in the area of middle school education. Samples of quotes taken from students were also shown to professionals in the field, and similar analyses were provided. Furthermore, the interview questions were previewed by a panel of secondary English educators at similar urban schools in the area.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The data methods used for this action research study proved to answer the questions properly. The information that was sought was easily obtained using the interview questions and observation methods created for this study. The data was sufficient in providing narrative proof that students did indeed gain reading motivation when participating in this five week program. The quotes given in interviews conducted were powerful, and meaningful in convincing teachers that independent reading is in fact a very effective way to get students engaged in reading. It is most helpful to evaluate an instructional practice when students are able to reflect and provide feedback to the instructor. However, it would be even more useful to further analyze this idea and add another type of data to the study. This study would have been more significant if there had been quantitative data included as well. For example, it would have been interesting to run a descriptive statistics analysis or t-test on the results of the interview questions. It would have also been helpful to have students complete before and after surveys in order to give even more proof that indeed independent reading was a success in boosting reading motivation. Charts, tables and graphs of this information would have further enhanced this pilot study.

Another change that might need to be made if this study was to be conducted again in the future is the organization of the data. At times it was difficult to handle all of the paperwork created by the interviews and observations. In the future, I might consider using videotaped or audiotaped interviews, which would cut down on the amount of paperwork to file through. Similarly, student files would have been a great way to keep organized, and the researcher could simply pick a number of students at random to

analyze and only look at those students' data. Overall, however, the data and the methods used to collect and analyze it were fairly successful.

### *PRACTICAL APPLICATION*

An overwhelming amount of time and effort went into each of the stages of the research process as it relates to this particular study. It is clear though, that the information and ideas related in this study are quite useful to teachers, especially in the discipline of English Language Arts. English teachers can pick up the contents of this report and create a working independent reading program for their own classroom. This is a particularly useful tool for teachers to use. Many educators know that independent reading is necessary, but are not sure how to structure it in the classroom. Independent reading is something that is so hard to monitor, and is also very difficult to maintain. Also, the specific suggestions, activities and strategies provided in the literature review and methods sections of this study are quite useful in any reading classroom.

I would like to put together a comprehensive guide that teachers can use to develop a structured independent reading program within their middle school English classrooms.

More importantly than the teachers benefitting from this study, the students will benefit. Because teachers are better equipped to cultivate motivation in students where reading is concerned, those students will ultimately enjoy reading more, and become better at it. The families and parents of these students will also be able to create a reading routine at home based on the informed suggestions of the reading teacher.

### *LIMITATIONS OF STUDY*

This study was successful overall, but as in any research study there are some

limitations as well as changes that need to be made to improve it. One major limitation of this study is that it does not include any data on reading achievement. This study would be richer if it discussed both reading motivation and achievement. The results compiled from a mixed methods study including both quantitative and qualitative data would shed more light on the idea of the issue of reading with middle school students.

Another improvement or change that I would like to institute, is to implement the program with a larger number of students than one class section. By doing this, the results would be much more generalizable to similar populations, and therefore more useful to teachers. It might even be interesting to use this program with other grade levels in middle schools or high schools to see if results were similar.

In conclusion, this is a topic that I would like to further explore in my classroom. As an English teacher, I am always looking for ways to make my students enjoy reading and become better at it. When I do extend this study into my classroom on a regular basis, I will try to implement more on reading achievement as well. It is my belief that if I can get a population of students to enjoy reading more, and become more engaged in the practice of leisure reading, they will show higher reading achievement as well. I would like to extend this study to begin measuring fluency, comprehension and decoding after an extended period of time with the students being immersed in this activity.

## APPENDIX

## Interview Questions

Prior to beginning program:

1. Do you like to read for pleasure
2. How often do you read non-required material?
3. What types of books do you like to read best?

After completing the program:

1. Do you feel that you enjoy reading more since you've completed this independent reading program?
2. Has your attitude towards reading changed since beginning this program? Why or why not?
3. Have the activities you've completed during this program helped build your confidence and motivation as a reader? Why or why not?
4. What do you think would be the most effective way to get you to enjoy reading?"

\*Students were also given the freedom to just discuss any feelings or concerns beyond these questions.

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