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# Literacy Strategies to Challenge Advanced Readers

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Running Head: CHALLENGING ADVANCED READERS

Literacy Strategies to Challenge Advanced Readers

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

### Abstract

This qualitative self-study explores teaching practices that have been proven to assist teachers in making the general education curriculum challenging for advanced readers in their classrooms. It discusses who advanced readers are, evidence-based practices to teach gifted/advanced readers, and a reflective dialogue on one teacher's utilization of multiple strategies.

*Keywords:* advanced readers, challenge, literacy, strategies

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## **Introduction**

As a young girl, I LOVED school. I loved reading, writing, math, organizing my materials, taking tests; you name it, I loved it. I loved school and I did well because school assignments came easy to me. So easy in fact, that it would not be out of the ordinary for me to complete assignments in half the time, if not even quicker, than my classmates. After I completed assignments and any extra worksheets my teacher had lying around for me to do, the tasks I was given varied from grade to grade. In first grade, I was tasked to help classmates with the work at the back table. In second grade, I graded spelling tests and math homework. In third grade, I cleaned out my soon-to-be retired teacher's cabinets... the list goes on. I wonder, where would I be now if instead of giving me, an advanced reader, meaningless tasks, my teachers took the time to give me appropriate and challenging instruction? This has inspired me to do justice by my own advanced readers in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade class by using evidence-based practices to meet advanced readers' needs.

## **Topic & Research Problem**

My study will address the problem of meeting the needs of and challenging advanced readers in literacy instruction in a general education classroom. In every classroom, there is a broad spectrum of students with varied reading levels and abilities. The focus in most classrooms seems to be supporting below level readers and the curriculum usually caters to both below level and on level students (Weber, 2010; Moore, 2005). In the district that I teach in, I am given a curriculum tied to the Common Core Learning Standards with a huge teacher's manual. For each lesson or activity in the manual, there is a small blurb about making each activity accessible for English Language Learners and another blurb about supporting struggling readers with the activity. I have yet to see a way to extend activities for advanced readers in my teacher's manual.

Weber (2010) states that because advanced and gifted readers have met or exceeded district and state benchmarks, teachers and curriculums focus on them less and they often get left behind.

Teachers feel pressure to differentiate in order to get below-level students reading and writing on grade level and oftentimes thus neglect their advanced readers, since they are already performing above level. According to Reis, Burns & Renzulli (1992), research has shown that up to 50% of current grade-level curriculum could be eliminated for advanced readers as it does not challenge or extend their learning. I believe that this is a staggering statistic. Through my research, I hope to gather strategies that can easily be incorporated into my general education classroom that will enrich or challenge my advanced readers.

### **Rationale**

This study is important because it analyzes different teaching practices and how they affect advanced readers in the literacy classroom. This paper explains effective ways to modify or differentiate material to challenge advanced readers. This study does not discuss entire programs designed for gifted students, but instead delves into simple techniques and strategies that can be incorporated into or differentiated to fit any curriculum.

Differentiating instruction is the act of changing school experiences and tasks to meet the needs of individual students (Tomlinson, 1999, Cunningham & Allington, 2003, Rutherford, 2010). According to Rutherford (2010), differentiating is when teachers “design learning experiences based on task analysis that includes an analysis of the skills and knowledge embedded in the task, plus an analysis of student readiness, background knowledge levels, interests, and information processing styles” (p. 18). Differentiating reading instruction has become an expectation of all elementary literacy teachers and it is a time-intensive task. Tomlinson (1999) poses the question of “How do I divide time, resources, and myself so that I

am an effective catalyst for maximizing talent in all my students?” (p. 1). Tomlinson goes further by comparing teachers to artists “who use the tools of their craft to address students’ needs” (p.2). The task of differentiating for advanced readers often gets neglected because they are already reading at an acceptable level (Weber, 2010).

This study will assist in informing my own teaching in my classroom. By taking a deeper look at my “high-flyers”, a term I use for my advanced readers, and activities to engage them, I will get a better idea of them as learners and what I can do as a teacher to support them. My research will be beneficial because teachers who need help challenging their high flyers can look at my paper for simple ideas to utilize in their classrooms.

### **Purpose of the Study**

My aim for this self-study is to create an analytical review of research surrounding literacy instruction for advanced readers and conduct a self-study of my literacy practices with advanced readers. This was accomplished by researching different practices and strategies, and including strategies that have been proven to be effective. I have created a comprehensive narrative of evidence-based teaching practices and strategies proven to challenge advanced readers. Not only have I gathered these strategies and created a narrative; I have used each strategy in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade ELA classroom. I have recorded reflective notes about how the strategy went over with my advanced readers and if I feel like it was effective in challenging the advanced readers in my class.

### **Research Questions**

The first research question that I explored through my research is, “What are teaching practices that have been proven to be effective in instructing advanced readers in a general education classroom?” To answer this question, I have researched evidence-based teaching



practices from scholarly articles. Using the teaching practices that I have found throughout my research, I have utilized them in my own 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. After I used a teaching practice in my own classroom, I asked myself “Was this successful? Why or why not?” to prompt reflective thinking about my teaching practices.

### **Literature Review**

Limited research exists on specific strategies to engage and challenge advanced readers in a general education classroom. However, existing research shows that there are some teaching strategies and classroom activities that can be effective in instructing advanced readers.

### **Characteristics of Young Gifted Readers**

Before discussing strategies to challenge young gifted readers, it is integral that we understand who these children are in our classrooms. Vosslander (2002) defines a young gifted reader as a child who has 3 specific human traits that Renzulli (1994) lists: above average ability, task commitment, and creativity. Above average ability: Renzulli makes it clear that high IQ is not the only factor in above average ability, rather it means “a wide field of general and specific ability” (Vosslander, 2002, p. 14). Children with above average reading ability are able to comprehend texts well and make connections to and among texts. Task commitment: According to Moore (2005) task commitment “included self-confidence, hard work, and an ability to recognize one’s own special talents and skills and the practical use of those skills” (p. 40). Task commitment makes advanced readers more prone to becoming interested in further developing their reading skills, as they are aware that they exist. Creativity: Simply put, creativity is originality in thinking. Vosslander (2002) states that creativity is a necessary component of gifted readers. VanTassel-Baska (2003) agrees, stating that “gifted readers are often creative thinkers and should be given various options to display their learning” (p. 3).

According to Vosslamber (2002) and Renzulli (1994) research has shown that there are specific skills that advanced readers possess. Advanced readers are able to anticipate meaning while reading based on visual clues. For example, advanced readers are often able to use context clues to determine or infer the meaning of unknown words. Advanced readers are also more apt to use “prior knowledge and experience, personal identification, and reader purpose” to make connections to texts that they are reading, thus making meaning (Weber & Cavanaugh, 2006, p. 57). In their research, Weber & Cavanaugh (2006) also discuss how advanced readers also make connections among texts to develop deeper understandings of concepts.

Although there are common characteristics among gifted readers, it is important to note that all students are unique and these characteristics are not exclusive to gifted readers, nor is this an exhaustive list. Gifted readers come from a variety of backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and have different reading levels as well as varied interests (Kenney, 2013).

### **Needs of Gifted Readers**

Just like struggling readers, advanced readers need differentiated curriculum that meets their learning needs. According to Wood (2008), gifted readers benefit from homogeneous grouping during reading instruction. While there is research surrounding the benefits of mixed-ability groupings and though it may be advantageous for advanced readers from time to time, grouping advanced readers homogeneously makes it easier for teachers to differentiate. Furthermore, as Wood (2008) states, “gifted readers prefer and should be grouped with peers who work at similar ability levels” (p. 21). Wood argues that gifted readers, like struggling readers, still require explicit instruction on specific skills and strategies, but with appropriate leveled texts.

Another need of advanced readers is appropriate pacing. Appropriate pacing is important for gifted readers, regardless of the content being taught (VanTassel-Baska, 2003). Sometimes, this means a more rapid pace than their below-level or on-level peers, although gifted readers still do require explicit instruction on higher-level thinking skills.

Advanced readers also need to be exposed to challenging text (Wood, 2008; Kenney, 2013). Kenney (2013) states that “gifted readers have reached a point where they are reading to learn rather than learning to read” and “because gifted readers have already acquired the necessary skills to read text, most typical basal readers and reading textbooks will not meet their needs” (p.30). Advanced readers will not flourish if only given texts that are easy for them to read and comprehend. With easy texts, advanced readers will not put into use the skills they need to practice in order to read and comprehend challenging texts. According to Moore (2005), research has shown that only utilizing grade-level curriculum to instruct advanced readers, typical of most basal readers, can have a negative impact on the student’s continued above-average reading development. It is important to note that adequate differentiation for advanced readers does not include giving them a challenging text to read independently while the teacher explicitly instructs the rest of the class. Advanced readers still require challenging learning activities to accompany challenging texts (Moore, 2005).

### **Research-Based Practices to Enrich Advanced Readers.**

There are a myriad of research-based skills and teaching strategies regarding literacy instruction. There are strategies for all learners as well as strategies specific to advanced readers. Cunningham & Allington (2003) state that “the goal of having all children read at grade level is not a reasonable goal . . . What is reasonable is the expectation that all children grow in their reading ability” (p. 134). This quotations shows the shared notion that we as teachers should help

all children to learn and grow, even if they are already exceeding grade level expectations. Tomlinson (2009), Rohl (2005), and Cunningham & Allington (2003) all agree that differentiation is a necessary component of literacy instruction as it helps teachers to instruct all learners. Advanced readers require differentiated instruction to meet their needs in a general education classroom.

### **Critical Thinking.**

Kenney (2013), Moore (2005), and Paul & Elder (2008) agree that critical thinking is a necessary skill for advanced readers. Paul & Elder (2008) explain critical thinking as “the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it” (p. 665). Critical thinking is a metacognitive process that helps advanced readers to monitor and clarify their reading, thus going beyond surface-level comprehension. Critical thinking is a skill that should be explicitly taught to advanced readers. Some critical thinking skills that Moore (2005) lists are: utilizing text features (such as text size and images), accessing and connecting to background knowledge, summarizing the main idea, making connections to and among texts, and personally responding to texts.

Rutherford (2010) agrees that critical thinking skills as well as flexibility are necessary skills for advanced readers to develop and gives ideas to inspire this in advanced readers. Rutherford (2010) suggests using Habits of Mind by Costa and Kallick to teach students “how to act intelligently when you don’t know the answer” (p. 96). Rutherford continues, saying, “the focus is on performance under challenging conditions that demand strategic reasoning, insightfulness, perseverance, and craftsmanship” (p. 96). Rutherford (2010) also offers Williams’ Taxonomy of Creative Thinking as a framework designed to help students work through challenging learning experiences.

**Independent Projects.**

Bain, Bourgeois, & Papas (2003), Moore (2005), Kenney (2013) and Rutherford (2010) are all in agreement that extended or independent projects of choice are a way for advanced readers' needs to be met in the classroom. Inquiry reading is a strategy that Moore (2005) argues is appropriate for advanced readers. Because advanced readers are not learning to read and are rather reading to learn, basal readers are of no consequence to them. If advanced readers are given an opportunity to utilize challenging texts for information or inquiry, they benefit.

***Renzulli's Triad Enrichment Model.***

Rutherford (2010), Garcia-Cepero (2008) and Baum (1988) all encourage teachers to use Renzulli's Triad Enrichment Model with advanced readers. This model includes three different types of learning experiences. The first being exploratory opportunities, which are opportunities for students to first investigate, then select a topic of study. Renzulli (1994) adds that stage one can also include other "general exploratory experiences such as guest speakers, field trips, demonstrations, interest centers, and the use of audiovisual materials designed to expose students to new and exciting topics, ideas, and fields of knowledge not ordinarily covered in the regular curriculum" (p. 8). The second is experiences in which students develop skills and thinking processes that will be necessary when they begin to investigate the topic that they selected (Rutherford, 2010). Renzulli (1994) explains these experiences as including "the development of (a) creative thinking and problem solving, critical thinking, and affective processes; (b) a wide variety of specific learning-how-to-learn skills; (c) skills in the appropriate use of advanced-level reference materials; and (d) written, oral, and visual communication skills" (p. 8). The third type of experience is investigative activities, in which students explore and research their topic. Moore (2005), Rutherford (2010) and Kenney (2013) agree that giving advanced readers a

choice in what they read or research topics that they pursue can also benefit them. Giving them choice will help to inspire a sense of purpose and ownership within each student.

### **Common Themes.**

Overall, there is a myriad of skills and strategies that researchers have proven to be effective in instructing advanced readers, but there are two common themes that I have found. The first is that advanced readers benefit from explicit instruction of skills, whatever skills they may be. It is integral that teachers still give advanced readers meaningful instruction, rather than give them busy work. Another theme that has emerged is the idea of providing advanced readers with challenging texts. It is important that they are reading more than just the stories in basal readers, which are at a lower reading level than they are able to read. The last theme that emerged is that advanced readers benefit from choice. Giving them a choice in texts that they are reading or a research topic that they are pursuing give them a sense of ownership and purpose in what they are engaging in.

### **Methods**

In this self-study, I researched evidence-based teaching practices for instructing advanced readers and applied them to my teaching. Overall, my method for doing this was to develop a unit based on research, teach it to my advanced readers, and utilize observational notes and reflections to determine themes.

### **Context**

I am currently a 5th grade ELA teacher in a suburban district in upstate New York. The school that I teach at is a 4-6 grade middle school with students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. According to the New York State Report Card for my school district, 74% of students are Caucasian, 10% are Hispanic, 9% are African American and 6% of students are

labeled as multiracial or other. Also, the New York State Report Card shows that 2% of our students are English-language learners, 10% are students with disabilities and 27% of students are economically disadvantaged. My school is very much a “neighborhood school” with the majority of students walking or riding their bikes to and from school daily.

Generally, my school district is a high-achieving district, but this year the district has made efforts to become even more differentiated in instruction during ELA for 4-6<sup>th</sup> graders at my school. In years past, students were pulled out of ELA class who needed Academic Intervention Services. These students needed extra support, but they were also missing valuable instruction in the classroom. This year, my district decided to carve out a 45 minute block, 4 times a week where students who need Academic Intervention Services receive their services, and the other students do something different for ELA. The other students have been grouped homogeneously and switch classes during this time. I have a group of 19 advanced readers in my classroom during this time and I have had little experience with teaching a room of gifted/advanced students, thus sparking my interest in this topic.

### **Participants/My Positionality as a Teacher-Researcher**

As I am doing a self-study, I am the only participant in my research study. I am a young, Caucasian female in my early twenties. I do not have any children of my own and this is my first year teaching my own classroom. As a child, I was an advanced reader in my elementary classes. I remember being frustrated with the busy work I received and feel like I can relate to the advanced readers in my classroom this year. I realize that my positionality and who I am affects my ideas and opinions.

**Data Collection**

To answer my first research question, “What are teaching practices that have been proven to be effective in instructing advanced readers in a general education classroom?” I researched scholarly sources to find strategies to try out in my 5th grade classroom. I found peer reviewed sources and strategies that are appropriate for my 5th graders. I used systematic data collection in this study. Once weekly over the course of four weeks, I implemented one of the new strategies that I learned about through my research with my advanced readers. As I implemented each strategy, I took observational notes of my classroom. After trying out a teaching practice or strategy in my classroom, I asked myself, “Was this successful?” which was my second research question. I answered this question by reflecting on my teaching, student response to the teaching, and observations of my classroom. To answer my last question, “Which of these teaching practices were most effective in my 5th grade classroom?” I reflected on all of the teaching practices that I tried out and looked at the observations I made to determine which I felt were most successful for my students.

**Data Analysis**

Dinkelman (2003) defines a self-study as “intentional and systematic inquiry into one’s own practice” (p. 2). Dinkelman argues that self-studies are important for educators because they help teachers to become more self-aware and that awareness can help educators “understand problems of practice more deeply” (p. 2). Because this is a self-study, the data analyzed is only my own observations and reflective thoughts about my teaching. I analyzed the data through my own reflection of the teaching strategies and through analysis of my classroom observations. To analyze, I used an open-coding method. I utilized colored highlighters to highlight things that



were similar between my different observations and reflections. With these together, I determined if a strategy was successful in challenging advanced readers in my classroom.

### **Procedures**

I used systematic data collection in this study. Once weekly over the course of four weeks, I implemented one of the new strategies that I learned about through my research with my advanced readers. The strategies that I implemented in my instruction of my advanced readers were student choice, use of engaging topics and challenging texts, as well as explicit instruction of skills and exploratory/investigative activities. My procedure for each teaching strategy was to first implement the strategy as a part of one of my lessons. As students are participating in the lesson, I took observational notes. After the lesson (during my daily after school planning time) I reflected on how it went and made reflective notes. Figure 1 is an example of the template I used for observational notes and reflections each day.

Date:
Strategy:
Observational Notes:
Reflection:
Figure 1. Template for observational notes and reflections.

**The Unit.**

In order to use these strategies with my advanced readers, I developed a research-based unit that included each of the skills and strategies I researched to challenge advanced readers. In ELA class at the time of my study, we were working on a unit about inventors and artists. My unit for my advanced readers tied to this unit. To develop the unit, I used Renzulli's Triad of Enrichment Model as a basis and peppered in other evidence-based strategies as well. This model includes three different types of learning experiences. The first being exploratory opportunities, which are opportunities for students to first investigate, then select a topic of study. The second is experiences in which students develop skills and thinking processes that will be necessary when they begin to investigate the topic that they selected (Rutherford, 2010). The third type of experience is investigative activities, in which students explore and research their topic. I incorporated all of these aspects into my unit for advanced readers in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade class.

In ELA, we were currently in the middle of a unit on artists and inventors as a result the extension unit that I designed for my advanced readers centered around them choosing an inventor or artist to do research on and write a research paper about. My advanced readers were thrilled to be able to research a person of their choice. My unit began with students choosing an inventor or artist that they would like to research and writing down some things they were interested in finding out about their chosen topic. Students then immersed themselves in inquiry reading about their chosen artist or inventor utilizing print and digital sources. Using what they discovered through their research, students decided on their research question and the product they would like to create to share the information they learned. Throughout this part of the unit, I directly instructed research skills such as keyword searches, coding and analyzing data as well as

critical thinking skills such as making inferences. Students drafted their products and created final products after revising and editing their drafts. I designed this unit to not only challenge my advanced readers, but to tie into the curriculum that I am required to teach all students.

### **Trustworthiness**

My self-study is trustworthy because I am citing the work of others to inform my study. Also, triangulation of data makes my study trustworthy. I used a myriad of sources to get a complete overview of advanced readers and strategies that have been proven to be effective in teaching them. Another way my self-study is trustworthy is that I have utilized peer auditing in my work.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited by its size. I am the sole participant in this study and I focused on one group of students. This study contains only my observations and reflections of what happened in my classroom.

### **Analysis**

In order to interpret and analyze my data, I have used an open coding process. This means that I continually looked at and compared my data as I was analyzing it to find emerging themes (Clark & Creswell, 2010). My data consists solely of observational notes and reflections so I looked at each separately. First, I looked at all of my observational notes and organized them by strategies. I read through the notes that I took on each strategy and found similar themes. Next, I looked through all of my reflections and organized them by strategies. I read through each reflection and found similar themes. Overall, the themes that emerged from my research relate to my thoughts about myself and my teaching as well as student learning.

The purpose of my study was to find evidence-based practices to utilize with advanced readers in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade general education class and to reflect on how different strategies worked in my classroom. My findings relate to my interpretations of how different strategies worked in my classroom and for my specific students.

### **Finding One: Student Choice Affects Engagement of Advanced Readers**

My first finding is that student choice affected the engagement of my advanced readers. On the first day of the extension unit, students were asked to brainstorm 3 different inventors or artists they might be interested in researching and what they would like to learn. Figure 2 is an example of the worksheet.

Name: _____		
Artist/Inventor Research Brainstorm		
Today I want you to think of 3 inventors or artists that you are interested in learning more about. Brainstorm questions that you are interested in research relating to each inventor/artist.		
Questions you might ask: Where were they born? What was their childhood like? What inspired them to become an artist (or inventor)? What is their greatest work of art? What is their greatest invention?		
Inventor/Artist:	Inventor/Artist	Inventor/Artist
Questions I'd like to Research:	Questions I'd like to Research:	Questions I'd like to Research:

Figure 2. Artist/Inventor Brainstorm Worksheet.

On the first day of the unit, students were extremely engaged. I knew they were engaged because in my observational notes from that day, I wrote that students were working diligently,

talked excitedly with each other about their choices when given the chance, and that the room felt like it was “buzzing.” Students had complete freedom in what inventor or artist they could choose as well as research questions they would be interested in answering through their research. Students picked inventors and artists such as Michaelangelo, Walt Disney, Albert Einstein, and Edgar Degas.

Another instance when choice was involved in the unit was when students first began researching. I taught students how to turn on safe search in addition to how to utilize keywords to search. I then gave them choice on which websites they wanted to use to research their topic. Students utilized a variety of sources to find articles on their chosen topic and independently decided if sources were both trustworthy and worthwhile for their research or not. I was not concerned about the reading level of any of the sources that my students chose because like Kenney (2013) states, “gifted readers have reached a point where they are reading to learn rather than learning to read” (p.30). My advanced readers already have the necessary skills to read challenging texts, so reading level was inconsequential.

Overall through my observations and reflections, I found that when I gave students choice in their learning, they were more engaged. Students felt a sense of ownership of their research papers because they were able to choose and design it on their own, rather than using a given format and writing about a topic chosen for them. I also found that my students were much more excited about learning about their choice topics. Their engagement was so high at times that I felt like the room was “buzzing.” Figure 3 shows my observational notes from that day.

Date: 1-11-16
Strategy: Research based on choice topic
Observational Notes:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- high engagement, energy buzzing</li> <li>- Some students unsure- looking to me for more direction</li> <li>- examples I gave: Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Einstein, Michaelangelo</li> <li>- some topics : Walt Disney, Taylor Swift, Pablo Picasso</li> </ul>
Reflection:
<p>At first, students were unsure and seemed uncomfortable with the amount of choice/freedom given. I was reluctant to give too much direction because I really wanted students to pick a topic they were truly interested in without my influence. All students were highly engaged and the energy in the room felt almost electric!</p>

Figure 3. Observational Notes & Reflection 1-11-16

### **Finding Two: Advanced Readers Benefit from Explicit Instruction**

Throughout the unit, I made sure to utilize explicit instruction when introducing new skills or strategies to my advanced readers. Kenney (2013), Moore (2005), and Paul & Elder (2008) agree that critical thinking is a necessary skill for advanced readers and we as teachers cannot assume that advanced readers already know these skills and can apply them independently without explicit instruction. Through my research, I found that when I explicitly taught my advanced readers skills or strategies, they benefited.

One instance in which I explicitly taught a critical thinking skill to my advanced readers was when I taught a mini-lesson to them on inferencing. The day prior, I had assumed that my advanced readers could make inferences because to comprehend complex texts, readers must

infer. Because of this, I was under the impression that my advanced readers knew what an inference was and how to metacognitively utilize inferencing in their research. I gave students a sheet to infer about their research and they struggled greatly. They did not understand the directions and could not even explain what an inference was. This opened my eyes. I realized that it was important for me to never assume my students' knowledge and decided to teach a mini-lesson on inferencing the next day. Once I taught the mini-lesson on inferencing, I found that my students were much more successful at the worksheet that they struggled with previously. My advanced readers demonstrated mastery of the skill by completing a short worksheet independently then applying the skill to their research.

Another instance when I explicitly taught a skill was when students created controlling ideas for their research papers. Before expecting them to do this independently, I taught a brief 15 minute mini-lesson on controlling ideas and modeled some examples. Next, I had students draft their own controlling idea and peer revise with a partner before finalizing their controlling idea independently. I believe that my students created high-quality controlling ideas for their research papers because I explicitly instructed them on how to do so. I know this because many of their controlling ideas were modeled after the examples I gave and because during the independent work time, students were not asking me for help. Students were highly engaged in creating their own specific controlling idea.

Overall, I found that my advanced readers benefit from explicit instruction of skills and strategies. I believe my advanced readers are fabulous readers and work well independently, but it is important that I still instruct them. I found that when I explicitly instructed my advanced readers on a strategy or skill, they were very successful in applying that skill or strategy to their independent work.

**Finding Three: Advanced Readers Benefit from Homogeneous Groupings**

Thirdly, I found that advanced readers benefitted from homogeneous groupings. In my general education 5<sup>th</sup> grade ELA class, I often carefully pick partners to be sure that students who are struggling readers are partnered with advanced readers. This is common practice in elementary classrooms to help the struggling readers have access to grade level material (Wood, 2008). According to Wood (2008), there is research surrounding the benefits of mixed-ability groupings and though it may be advantageous for advanced readers from time to time, grouping advanced readers homogeneously makes it easier for teachers to differentiate. Furthermore, as Wood (2008) states, “gifted readers prefer and should be grouped with peers who work at similar ability levels” (p. 21). During this entire unit, my advanced readers were homogeneously grouped and I noticed their learning benefit from this experience.

I believe that my students benefitted from being homogeneously grouped for this experience because I was able to differentiate in a way that I normally cannot. Usually, when I have all 24 of my students of varied ability levels in my class, it is difficult to plan specific learning activities that each student needs. Having a room full of students with similar abilities related to literacy, it was much easier to develop a unit and lessons to meet their needs. My advanced readers were doing something completely different, yet parallel to my other students. I was able to design something completely unique and tailored to my advanced readers by grouping them homogeneously. I do still see value in heterogeneous groupings, but I found homogeneous groupings to be beneficial in the sense that I was able to differentiate more for my students.

I also found that advanced readers benefitted from homogeneous groupings when they were able to work in pairs or small groups. When I taught the students about controlling ideas



and had them create their own controlling ideas, I gave students a chance to peer review. During the time they were peer reviewing with a partner, I heard many great discussions involving students asking clarifying questions, making suggestions, and helping each other to make their controlling idea stronger. I also heard students thanking each other for their input. As I reflected on how this lesson went, I was blown away by the conversations I overheard among my students.

#### **Finding Four: Engagement is Necessary to Challenge Advanced Readers**

Lastly, I found that engagement with tasks is necessary in order to challenge advanced readers. My advanced readers were very engaged with the task of researching and writing a research paper because they were able to choose the subject of their research. My students felt a sense of ownership of their work because they were involved in the process of choosing topics. I found that my students were challenged in this unit because they were highly engaged and committed to the task. According to Moore (2005) task commitment “include(s) self-confidence, hard work, and an ability to recognize one’s own special talents and skills and the practical use of those skills” (p. 40). Task commitment makes advanced readers more prone to becoming interested in further developing their reading skills, as they are aware that they exist.

One instance where I found that engagement affected the rigor of the task is when students were searching for articles to do their research on. Students were incredibly critical of their sources and spent the entire class period of 45 minutes searching for the best sources for their research. Because students were engaged in the task, they were committed and therefore pushed themselves further to utilize their critical thinking skills to find the best sources.

Another instance where I found that engagement helped to challenge students was when they were deciding on topics to include in their research articles. Students were able to write about as many topics as they wanted related to their main topic. Because the students were

highly engaged and committed to the task, I had every student choose to write about at least four topics in their essay. Usually, I ask students to include at least two body paragraphs in extended response essays but because my advanced readers were so committed to the task and engaged, they all chose to write at least four.

Overall, I found that my students' high engagement and commitment to the task helped to appropriately challenge them. Students challenged themselves by setting high expectations for their writing and making efforts to make their writing the best it can be.

## **Discussion**

### **Conclusions**

Through this study, I can draw several conclusions. They are that (a) student-driven assignments engage advanced readers, (b) high task engagement leads to a sense of ownership in advanced readers and (c) a sense of ownership leads to students setting high expectations for themselves.

#### **Student-Driven Assignments Engage Advanced Readers.**

Firstly, I can conclude that my advanced readers were engaged in the activities in which choice was involved. Each day that choice was involved or activities were student-driven, my students were extremely engaged and remained focused on the task at hand for the duration of the time. I noticed my advanced readers were excited when it was time to work on their research projects each day.

#### **High Task Engagement Leads to Sense of Ownership.**

Secondly, I can conclude that high task engagement led my advanced readers to feel a sense of ownership of their work. I often observed a sense of pride in my students when talking

about their research or showing their projects to others. My students often referred to the project as “my” research and “my” project, which displays their sense of ownership of their work.

### **Student Ownership Leads to High Expectations.**

Thirdly, I can conclude that the sense of ownership my students felt for their project led them to set high expectations and challenge themselves. For example, when researching, my students tried to find the best articles they possibly could about their topic, rather than settling for the first ones they found. This shows that they cared enough to set high expectations for their own research. Also, students challenged themselves at times by making decisions that stretched them out of their comfort zone. For example, students had a choice in the product that they created. I had multiple students choose to create a Powerpoint presentation, something they had never done before. This shows that they were so excited about their research, they chose a more challenging option to display their work.

### **Summary of Conclusions.**

Overall, I can conclude that my advanced readers were extremely engaged in this unit. This engagement led to them feeling a sense of pride and ownership of the work they did and thus challenging themselves by extending their learning and trying new things.

### **Implications**

Through this study, I have developed implications for myself and the advanced readers in my classroom as well as other teachers who need advice or strategies to try with their own advanced readers. My implications are (a) advanced readers benefit from homogeneous groupings and (b) engagement assists in challenging advanced readers.

**Advanced Readers Benefit from Homogeneous Groupings.**

As I conducted this study, I found myself often thinking how fortunate I was to have the time with my advanced readers when they were grouped homogeneously. In my general education ELA classroom of 24 students, I have a plethora of needs and learning styles and my focus often goes to the students who are the neediest and struggling the most. When my advanced readers were homogeneously grouped and in a classroom with only me, I was able to give them more of my attention and plan specifically for them. I know that this is not always feasible so an implication for me and my classroom is to utilize a variety of groupings in my classroom. In order to better differentiate for my advanced readers, I need to be sure to include homogeneous groupings in my classroom.

All teachers should utilize a variety of groupings in their classroom and should be aware of how homogeneous groupings positively affect advanced readers. Homogeneous groupings help teachers to better differentiate for their advanced readers (Wood, 2008). Wood (2008) argues that gifted readers, like struggling readers, still require explicit instruction on specific skills and strategies, but with appropriate leveled texts. During their time homogeneously grouped, teachers should be explicitly teaching skills and strategies to advanced readers.

**Engagement Assists in Challenging Advanced Readers.**

There is a plethora of research surrounding choice having a positive effect on student engagement (Servilio, 2009, Ying Guo, Breit-Smith, Connor, Shuyan, & Morrison, 2015, Weih, 2014). When students are engaged, they are attending to the task at hand and therefore learning and growing. I found that in my study, when my advanced readers were engaged in a task due to their choice, I was able to challenge them more and therefore stretch their learning. Oftentimes, students challenged themselves when they were engaged. For example, one of my students

wanted to research the inventor of the toothpick. There was not much information on this inventor, but my student persevered and stuck with his topic, even when it was difficult. This student challenged himself by reading difficult articles and piecing together information from many different sources. This student had the choice to choose a new topic, but he stuck with his challenging topic because he was so engaged.

Teachers should keep in mind that when they are instructing advanced readers, advanced readers will often challenge themselves when they are engaged in the task. Even when things get tough, advanced readers will often push through because of their task-commitment when they are engaged. Teachers should consider utilizing activities in which advanced readers have choices, which will therefore increase task-commitment and therefore challenge students.

### **Future Research**

A suggestion that I have for myself for future research is to see how my struggling readers do with student-driven assignments. I found that my advanced readers set very high expectations for themselves and displayed a high quality of work because of how engaged they were in the student-driven assignment. I would like to research how my struggling readers and on-level readers do when given a similar engaging unit.

A suggestion that I have for other researchers is to further research the effects of homogeneous groupings on students of varied ability levels with a large sample size. I found that my homogeneous grouping of my advanced readers for a short period a day benefited them as well as my teaching, but I wonder how this would affect all students.

### **Overall Significance of the Study**

It was important for me to do this study because as a first year teacher, I was struggling to meet the needs of my advanced readers. This was significant to me because I learned strategies

to effectively engage and challenge my advanced readers and did so successfully. This study is significant to other teachers with similar feelings toward instructing their advanced readers.

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