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**A CONCEPTUAL STUDY ON EFFECTIVE INDEPENDENT READING  
PRACTICES TO FOSTER AN ENJOYMENT OF READING**

by  
Diana Mitchell

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Reading Education  
at  
Rowan University  
December 6, 2017

Thesis Advisor: Susan Browne, Ed.D.



## Abstract

Diana Mitchell

A CONCEPTUAL STUDY ON EFFECTIVE INDEPENDENT READING PRACTICES  
TO FOSTER AN ENJOYMENT OF READING

2017-2018

Susan Browne, Ed.D.

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this conceptual study was to analyze what factors impact students' engagement and motivation to read independently. Further, the study sought to determine effective modifications to independent reading for today's students. Because this study is conceptual in nature, an extensive review of the current qualitative and empirical literature on independent reading was conducted. From there, the data was coded inductively to generate new ideas about what independent reading should entail for students today. Some clear patterns emerged. First, student choice and autonomy were cited as important factors for fostering students' motivation and engagement with reading. Second, simply providing time for independent reading is immensely important in getting students to see themselves as readers, and therefore become more engaged and motivated to read. Finally, talk around text was found to be paramount to motivating students to engage in independent reading. After reviewing the available literature, the implications determined that these factors must be integrated into independent reading programs to make them successful for today's students.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Chapter 1: Understanding the Question .....	1
Introduction.....	1
The Story of the Question.....	2
Purpose Statement.....	4
Statement of the Research Question .....	10
Organization of the Study .....	10
Chapter 2: Research Study Context and Design .....	12
Context.....	12
Methodology .....	13
Quantitative Versus Qualitative Research .....	13
Why a Qualitative Conceptual Framework?.....	15
Data Collection .....	16
Analysis of Data.....	17
Chapter 3: Literature Review .....	18
Introduction.....	18
Reading Engagement .....	19

## Table of Contents (continued)

Motivation to Read .....	26
A Discussion of Independent Reading.....	32
Empirical Research on the Effectiveness of Independent Reading .....	34
Independent Reading as a Social Practice .....	42
Using Digital Texts During Independent Reading.....	53
Conclusion .....	60
Chapter 4: Conclusion.....	64
Summary .....	64
Implications for Today's Classrooms .....	66
Suggestions for Further Research .....	69
Final Thoughts .....	69
References.....	71

## Chapter 1

### Understanding the Question

#### Introduction

During a 10-minute independent reading session, I look around the room to take in a quick status of the class. Three students are at the bookshelf -again-, seemingly paying little attention while perusing the books bins. Two students are diligently reading the books of a Manga series that I picked up at a book sale at my local library. These two students talk frequently with each other about the books they are reading, and exchange books when they finish the volume they are on. Two other students appear to be engaged, reading novels that they have kept in their desks for silent reading time. Four students are whispering to each other until they notice me looking at them. Three are staring out the door or windows, and two are flipping pages, clearly more quickly than they can possibly be reading them.

This is a typical, and frustrating, scenario when I try to get my students to learn to enjoy reading by giving them time in class for free reading. Over the past few years, I have invested a fair amount of my time and money to enhance my classroom library, filling it with books at appropriate levels for my students, asking what they are interested in reading and finding books that complement what I was told, and organizing the books into leveled bins on the shelf. After just a few weeks, the books were completely disorganized, and I was not seeing the progress I was hoping for in fostering an enjoyment of reading in my students. I wanted to understand why this was, and why, year

after year, my students come in saying that they do not like to read (at best), HATE reading, or simply Do Not read (at worst). As someone who values reading both for myself and for my students, this is troubling.

Based on these observations, I decided that I wanted to delve deeper into independent reading, and how to make it a more useful activity for my students. Clearly, the traditional practices of sustained silent reading, where the children are expected to read quietly, and the teacher is supposed to be a model of silent reading by doing the same, were not working in my classroom. This study serves to investigate why the status of the class so frequently looks as it did in the above scenario, as well as to dissolve some of my naiveté about successful silent reading practices for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

### **The Story of the Question**

Teacher: What was your favorite part of the story?

Fernando: None!

Teacher: None? Why not?

Fernando: Because I hate reading!!!

Year after year I hear this sentiment expressed by many of my students. In my school, we administer the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2) to gauge students' reading abilities, and quite frequently, it is revealed at this time that my students do not enjoy reading. Unfortunately, this is an all too common exchange when students come into my classroom in September. I have wondered for quite some time why it is



that so many students “hate” reading. Is it that they do not know how to choose appropriate books? Do they not have a quiet place to immerse themselves in literature? Are they too comfortable with the fast-paced world of video games and social media to understand how reading a book can be enjoyable? Do their disabilities prevent them from being able to truly enjoy reading? All of these questions and more run through my head when my students tell me that they hate reading. I also wonder why my school does not seem to emphasize reading for our students, as we are only given Drop Everything and Read (D.E.A.R.) time once a year, for 10 minutes in the morning on Dr. Seuss’ birthday. Even this is only half-hearted, and unenforced. These curiosities led me to my question. I was interested to find out why students are so averse to reading, and what I could do to change their thoughts on the topic.

Growing up, I was not an avid reader, exactly, but I did not hate reading either. I was read to as a child and encouraged to read on my own as well. Reading was valued in my household. This does not seem to be the case for many of my students. When asked about reading at home, although many of my students admit that they read with a parent or siblings, a shocking number will say that they do not read with anyone at home, or that they do not read at home at all. Again, questions race through my mind. Do they know that novels are not the only texts that count as reading? Are they trying to downplay their reading habits so as not to appear uncool? Do they have books at home? Have they ever been to a library? Although my school does not place a high value on independent reading, I have been trying to get my students to enjoy reading more for the past two years. Each year, I choose a few popular young adult novels that may be a bit above the

average reading level of my students and let them vote on the one(s) they would like me to read aloud to them so that they can gain enjoyment of literature that their peers may also be reading. Books that have movies forthcoming are usually of particular interest to the students. Every year, some students really seem to enjoy this read aloud time, yet others seem bored by it.

As an adult, reading has become very important to me, and it is one of my favorite leisure time activities to engage in, especially when I want to relax. I think that it could be extremely beneficial for my student too, not only for relaxation, but also for building their reading skills, vocabularies, and imaginations. Because I place a high value on reading, and I believe that my students need to read more frequently than they do, I decided that I would focus my research on this topic. I wanted to investigate what the aversion to reading was, and what I could do as a teacher to lessen the dread some of my students feel when it comes to reading. Because of my conversation with Fernando, and so many other students like him over the years, research on independent reading, and how to adapt it to 21<sup>st</sup> century learners became my central focus. The present study showcases what I have learned through an extensive examination of the literature on independent reading.

### **Purpose Statement**

The question that I am seeking to investigate is: What factors impact students' engagement and motivation to read independently? It has been my experience that many students are reluctant to read, especially independently. Beyond this, I wanted to learn more about the individual factors that impact students' interest in reading, including how

giving them choices fits in, their value of reading, and what options are available to promote autonomy in students' independent reading. Independent reading is not a focal point at Memorial School, and therefore a culture of reading does not exist amongst my students. Personally, however, I think that it should. For this reason, I chose to conduct a study to learn more about independent reading in the classroom as it relates to students' engagement and motivation to read.

Lyman C. Hunt, Jr. is known as “the Father of Silent Sustained Reading” (Reutzel & Juth, 2014, p. 31). Through the 1960s and 1970s, Hunt published several articles about the nature of Silent Sustained Reading, emphasizing its importance, but also its opportunity for failure. Hunt explained that while engaged silent reading was important, without any accountability, this time could be useless (Hunt, 1971). Hunt (1971) proposed that talk is an integral part of silent reading stating, “conference time with book talks is the heart of the Silent Reading Time” (p. 29). Allowing time for talk helps readers to make sense of what they have read, and gives teachers the opportunity to gauge students' engagement with the text by listening to their interpretations of what they have read. This time also allows students and teachers to establish a reading culture within the classroom, providing for feedback and guidance from teachers, and allowing students to share their experiences with their peers (Reutzel & Juth, 2014). Furthermore, Hunt (1970) states:

By generating a discussion about the nature, quality and quantity of reading accomplished during silent reading time, the teacher helps to build a concept

within each student about the kind of reader he is becoming and what each needs to do to improve his own reading. (p. 149)

Seeing oneself as a reader is the key to increasing student engagement with reading, and motivation to read.

Increasing student engagement and motivation to read is a constant struggle for teachers, especially in middle school. Guthrie, Alao, and Rinehart (1997) contend, “Illustrative of this perplexing problem is a disturbing trend: As children move into young adulthood, the strength of their motivation to engage in voluntary reading during their free time declines” (p. 438). Guthrie et al. (1997) point to a lack of time spent reading as a primary reason for this decline stating, “The typical middle school students reads less than 5 minutes a day for his or her own interest, while a few students (about 10%) read voluntarily for 30 minutes per day or more” (p. 439). Simply not devoting time to reading independently causes students to lose interest in reading, and fails to help them gain the skills necessary for academic success. Guthrie et al. conclude with a positive outlook on this challenging problem. They identified particular characteristics of classrooms that were engaging to students. The authors explain, “These classrooms connect school to real-world learning, provide for self-directed activities, provide direct strategy teaching, and allow for varied forms of self-expression” (Guthrie et al., 1997, p. 445). These principles, the authors conclude, “increase long-term motivations and strategies for reading” (Guthrie et al., 1997, p. 445).

Daniels and Steres (2011) posit that students’ need for control is the most important factor in their declining engagement and motivation during adolescence.

Daniels and Steres (2011) state, “One factor inhibiting middle school students’ motivation is the feeling that they rarely control any part of what happens to them during a school day” (p. 3). In school, much is imparted onto students, rather than them feeling as though they are part of the decision-making process. As such, students lose motivation due to lack of autonomy. Because everything is determined for them, students, and humans in general, feel it unnecessary to exert effort or engage in a task because they have no control over the outcome (Daniels & Steres, 2011).

Similarly, Williams, Hedrick, and Tuschlnski (2008) believe that students need to develop an intrinsic motivation to read independently in order to build a sustained interest in reading, thus improving their reading skills. The authors state, “Unfortunately, promoting independent reading has become secondary to activities more directly aligned with high-stakes testing performance, such as matching children’s reading levels with appropriate reading material, practicing fluency, and guided reading” (Williams et al. 2008, p. 135). Hunt (1970) cautions against this practice noting, “Strong interest can frequently cause the reader to transcend not only his independent but also his so-called instructional level. Such is the power of self-motivation” (p. 148). Reminiscent of Guthrie et al. (1997), Williams et al. cite eight principles necessary for fostering the self-motivation necessary for reading success: choice and control, social interactions, novelty, feedback/response, attainable success, interest, real-world experiences/relevancy, and positive learning atmosphere. Each of these principles was mirrored in multiple sources encountered through the research conducted within this study.

After gaining a clearer picture of what factors impact students' engagement and motivation to read, it became necessary to investigate ways to increase students' interest in reading. It became evident that sustained silent reading (SSR) was important, but that traditional SSR practices may not be the best option for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. Hall, Hedrick, and Williams (2014) explain:

Teachers send a powerful message when they intentionally fill their classrooms with books that match their students' interests, provide support to develop concentration skills, and schedule time to read and discuss books. Further, teachers who maximize opportunities for students to choose and make decisions during the school day give students ownership in the classroom, empowering them as learners. (p. 96)

This, again, demonstrates the desire students have for autonomy in the classroom. Choice and talk around books is a common theme that reoccurred frequently in the research on independent reading.

Reutzel and Juth (2014) express the importance of social interaction when it comes to reading. In order to increase students' value of reading, talk surrounding text is necessary. Parr and Maguiness (2005) indicate, "deliberate instructional talk, in this case book talk in the context of SSR, has positive benefits for students in terms of 'get[ting] into reading' and for teachers in terms of knowing the reader" (p. 107). Despite the common terms "silent reading" or "independent reading", research has shown that reading is, in fact, a social practice. Students learn more by talking about their reading, and this practice also helps to build engagement with reading and motivation to read so

that students can join in on conversations about books. This increased value and interest in reading helps students to cultivate a variety of relationships. Knoester (2010) found, “Adolescents strategically selected, read, discussed, and avoided literature based on the relationships they hoped to cultivate” (p. 7). When students are interested in what they are reading, they want to share it with others. If they are disengaged in reading, they tend to disconnect from the social aspect of reading, thereby lessening their self-identification as readers, and losing motivation to read.

Another way of encouraging social interaction around reading and making text more relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century learners is by using technology to promote autonomy. Giving students the option to read digital texts not only allows for choice, but it also helps to connect common in-school and out-of-school practices which helps students to see themselves as readers. “Because learning does not occur in isolation, social interactions around the reading of interactive digital texts are important” (Brown, 2016, p. 45). The use of digital text allows students to connect not only with those in their classrooms, but with the outside world as well. Additionally, Brown (2016) found that:

The interactive features of digital texts encouraged students to remain on task reading, increased the amount of time spent reading, and engage in conversations with their peers that increased comprehension. Enthusiasm for reading flourished and students appeared more confident about their abilities. (p. 48)

21<sup>st</sup> century learners are well-versed in technological discourses, and accepting these new literacies into the classroom can be very motivating and empowering for today’s students. Digital text is beneficial to all students, but it can be especially powerful for English

Language Learners and students who struggle with reading disabilities when technology is used in meaningful ways in the classroom.

21<sup>st</sup> century learners require different methods of exposure to literature than what has been commonly used in the past. Because of the ever-changing world of new literacies that today's students are immersed in, engagement and motivation to read must be cultivated by classroom teachers by connecting the expectations of the classroom with the common practices of students outside of school. When choice, autonomy, talk about books, and new literacies are integrated into traditional independent reading practices, modifications can be made that work toward increasing students' engagement and motivation to read.

### **Statement of the Research Question**

The research question this study investigates is: What factors impact students' engagement and motivation to read? Because I encounter so many students who are resistant to reading, especially independently, I wanted to conduct a study to determine what variables seem to impact students' interest in reading, how giving students choices and building their autonomy during independent reading time would affect their engagement and motivation, and what options are available that would afford students choice during independent reading time.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter two of this research study provides an explanation of the context of the study, the methodology, and information about the data collection and analysis methods.



Chapter three presents an overview of the literature from the field regarding traditional independent reading as well as suggestions for adaptations for today's learners. Finally, chapter four of this research study provides the conclusions determined from the study as well as implications for independent reading practices in the classroom. Suggestions for further research regarding independent reading are also provided.

## Chapter 2

### Research Study Context and Design

#### Context

Although conceptual in nature, this study came about as a result of my observations throughout years of teaching in a large, urban school in northern New Jersey. The city has a population of 128,640 citizens, with 25.6% of those persons being under 18 years old. It has a diverse population which represents more than 50 countries and 37 language groups. Census data reveals that 75.5% of people over the age of 5 years speak a language other than English at home. 19.0% of citizens of the city live in poverty. Of people 25 years old and older, 72.8% are high school graduates, and 11.6% hold a Bachelor's Degree or higher (census.gov).

Memorial School is a large school with nearly 1,000 students enrolled from grades Pre-K-8, and 87 certified teachers. The student population is 54% male, and 47% female. The students come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The New Jersey School Performance Report lists the school's population as 62.4% Hispanic, 29.0% African American, 7.1% White, 0.9% Asian, 0.2% American Indian, 0.2% Pacific Islander, and 0.1% Multiracial. 18% of the student population are English Language Learners, many of whom receive English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Students come from a variety of cultures, and speak languages including Spanish (46.0%), English (40.5%) Haitian Creole (5.9%), Portuguese (3.9%), Arabic (2.4%), and it was reported that 1.6%

speak a language besides the ones listed. 91% of the population of Memorial School is considered economically disadvantaged (NJ School Performance Report, 2016).

Memorial School also has a high special education population, with 16% of students receiving special education services. My classroom is comprised of 16 students in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade self-contained, mild language and learning disabilities program. 3 of my students are female, and 13 are male. Of these students, 13 are Hispanic, 2 are African American, and 1 is White. 10 of my students' native language is Spanish, and the native language of the other 6 is English. 8 of the students are classified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD), 6 are classified as Other Health Impaired (OHI), and 2 are classified as Communication Impaired (CI). 9 students receive Speech/ Language Therapy. Based on DRA2 assessments, the students range in independent reading levels from 6 to 60, or Kindergarten to 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

## **Methodology**

**Quantitative versus qualitative research.** This study follows a qualitative conceptual framework paradigm. Qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative, looks to gather data on broad topics, primarily uses written text, occurs in a natural setting, and considers the perspectives, values, and biases of both the researcher and the research participants. Quantitative research, on the other hand, focuses on narrow questions and uses numbered data and statistics to analyze the topic. Quantitative research paradigms are often set in artificial environments, and are designed to report unbiased, objective findings. The purpose of a quantitative research paradigm in education is to find proof to measure the effectiveness of teaching practices by describing, comparing, or attributing

causality to practices through the use of numerical data. Researchers using a quantitative research design believe that, “variables should be mathematically measured, and data should be repeatedly verified” (Madden & Browne, n.d.). The natural biases and perspectives of the researcher and the research participants are not considered in quantitative research (Madden & Browne, n.d.).

In teacher-research, the perspectives of the teacher-researcher as well as the student participants must be considered in order to obtain a complete picture of what is happening in a classroom. Qualitative research provides a means for allowing research to be conducted in a natural setting, with individual personalities and biases being accounted for. Qualitative research was developed in the late 1960s to counter quantitative educational research. Researchers who developed the qualitative research paradigm found quantitative research to be lacking in the ability to mirror authentic learning environments, and to be too focused on the researcher’s view, rather than acknowledging the unique perspectives of the participants and their natural environments. The qualitative research paradigm explores broad questions and uses text based data to document variables related to the research question. Data sources such as field notes, journals, interviews, and participant artifacts are used to assess the research question(s). In qualitative research, the views of the participants are critical to the success of the study (Madden & Browne, n.d.). Because humans each bring unique perspectives to the research, it is imperative that researchers conducting qualitative studies are subjective in their work, considering not only his or her own values, beliefs, and biases, but also those of the research participants and the environment in which the study is being conducted.

Practitioner research is a powerful tool which allows teachers to question things that they observe in their classrooms, and use a systematic framework to work through the questions and make informed decisions about how to proceed. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), in discussing the origins of qualitative practitioner research, state:

Much of this work examined the cultures of schools and classrooms and attempted to represent educators' knowledge from their own perspectives inside schools; it also explored and began to unpack many inequities in the structures, opportunities, and outcomes of teaching, learning, and schooling for various groups and subgroups of students, based on race and culture as well as socioeconomic, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds. (p. 91)

Because qualitative practitioner research allows teachers to take an in-depth look at issues in the classroom by considering the individuals and context involved, and comparing that to other data sources from the field, it can be utilized as a basis for inciting change in schools, and providing an avenue to the development of better practices for today's students. As Shagoury and Power (2012) write, "It's no wonder that teacher research has emerged not only as a significant new contributor to research on teaching but also as a source of systemic reform within individual schools and districts" (p. 2).

**Why a qualitative conceptual framework?** A conceptual framework is a written explanation of the observed relationships between certain variables or concepts.

Conceptual frameworks can be self-sufficient, or part of a larger work. Kobelski and Reichel (1981) state, "Conceptual frameworks are general principles drawn from a field of study and used to organize the content of an instructional presentation" (p. 73).

Research data from the field and observations in a classroom can be used in concert to make determinations about classroom practices. Kobelski and Reichel (1981) posit, “The use of conceptual frameworks allows the teacher to build a cognitive structure that will improve student learning” (p.74). A conceptual framework provides a structure for analyzing these data sources to make meaningful determinations for improving some aspect of teaching and learning. The use of a qualitative conceptual framework is ideal for conducting a research study on classroom practice when participant artifacts are not viable sources of data, as was the case in this study. Here, research from the field is compared to observations made by the researcher to find the relationships between students’ attitudes about reading and possible innovations to traditional independent reading that may increase student engagement and motivation to read. Shagoury and Power (2012) define research as, “a process of discovering essential questions, gathering data, and analyzing it to answer those questions” (p. 2). The qualitative conceptual framework is the structure by which this research study is achieving these goals, as it relies on narrative data that considers the views of both the researcher and the students that are being observed. Due to the subjectivity of the research topic, but the inability of the researcher to include student work as part of the data collection, the qualitative conceptual framework is the best research paradigm for this study.

**Data collection.** Data collection for this research study is in the form of a literature review. The data source for this research study is a collection of qualitative and empirical data from the field. By analyzing studies that have been conducted previously,

ideas can be merged to draw conclusions, make assumptions, and inform best practices to be utilized in the classroom.

**Analysis of data.** The data collected over the course of this study was analyzed to formulate new ideas about what independent reading can and should look like in today's classrooms. All of the data was coded inductively, using the information gleaned to generate new ideas. The qualitative and empirical studies that I read helped immensely to inform my study. When I set out on this research study, I knew that I wanted to investigate independent reading because I was bothered by the fact that students seemed to be so opposed to reading. Through reading related research, I was able to discover variations to traditional sustained silent reading that I felt would be beneficial to my students. These sources helped to refine my thinking, and allowed me to make instructional decisions that pushed my study further. Finally, by reflecting on my teaching, I was able to make determinations about what would work for my students and I when it comes to building motivation and engagement in independent reading practices.

## Chapter 3

### Literature Review

“Silent reading can become more than a time to practice reading. It can be an opportunity for students to recognize- and celebrate- their skills as readers”

(Trudel, 2007, p. 308)

### Introduction

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), traditionally, is a period of time in school where students are expected to read silently and independently for anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes while the teacher serves as a model of silent reading by joining his or her students, reading silently as well (Garan & DeVogd, 2009; Trudel, 2007). Typically, students are given the freedom to choose the books they want to read, and where they want to read them. There are no accountability measures associated with traditional SSR time (Trudel, 2007). Its goal is purely to allow students to read for enjoyment (Esteves & Whitten, 2011).

While the value can be seen in such a practice, the National Reading Panel’s (2000) inconclusive report on SSR, as well as the often strict curriculum mandates imparted on teachers as a result of today’s emphasis on high-stakes testing has made teachers shy away from allowing time for students to read for the sake of enjoyment. Chapter three of this research presents a review of current literature that highlights the benefits of independent reading. The first two sections present current theory on the topics of student engagement and motivation to read. Next, a discussion of in school



independent reading is presented, followed by empirical research on the effectiveness of independent reading in schools. In the fifth and sixth sections, research based modifications to traditional SSR are presented. The fifth section presents research focused on reading as a social construct, and the sixth section emphasizes that point, while adding research data stressing the need for the integration of technology in today's literacy classrooms. The chapter concludes with a summary of the takeaways from this literature review.

### **Reading Engagement**

When thinking about students' independent reading, it is necessary to investigate their engagement and motivation in such a task. Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009) state, "Without engagement, learning is difficult. Engaged readers actively interact with text, seeking to understand what they have read" (p. 313). Likewise, "If intrinsically motivated to read on their own, children will sustain interest in reading and improve their reading abilities" (Williams et al., 2008, p. 135). Students need to be both motivated to read and engaged in their reading to build their reading and comprehension skills. Independent reading helps to engage and motivate students to read because it allows them to choose text that is interesting to them. Having the autonomy to choose, coupled with support from teachers, encourages students to become more interested in reading, do it more frequently, and thus, improve their skills.

Guthrie has written extensively about reading motivation and engagement in students. Guthrie (2004) discusses the necessity for reform in literacy instruction stating, "The crisis of our schools today is that too many children are disengaged from literacy"

(p. 2). Lack of reading engagement is a major factor in the current state of literacy in schools. Students must be engaged in their reading in order to achieve. When a student is not engaged, reading achievement is stunted, creating a widening gap as the student progresses through the grade levels. A refocusing on time for independent reading in schools can help reignite engaged reading.

The type of texts that students are engaged in reading will likely determine their level of success with reading achievement. Guthrie explains that students are likely to achieve at higher levels on tasks related to the type of texts they are primarily engaged in. This is because, as some would say, engagement and competence go hand in hand. Specifically, students who are good at reading enjoy it, and do it often. Those who are not good at reading avoid it, and therefore do not achieve as highly as those who are good at reading and have more practice with it. Guthrie (2004) disagrees with these sentiments, countering with, “The better explanation is that engagement and achievement are reciprocal” (p. 6). Guthrie cites Stanovich’s (1986) “Matthew Effect” as the link between reading engagement and achievement. Reading engagement and achievement are an interconnected spiral which is reliant on self-confidence and one’s identity as a reader. Guthrie (2004) states, “students on the upward spiral see themselves as readers who are learners and thinkers; these students internalize literacy as a part of who they are” (p.6). On the other end of the spectrum, students who are not as skilled in literacy avoid texts and tasks associated with reading, therefore allowing themselves to be exposed to fewer opportunities for practicing their skills. These students do not see literacy as part of who

they are, and as such, remain disinterested in reading. Both engagement and achievement are areas that need to be addressed in the literacy classroom.

Through his research on building engaging classrooms, Guthrie noted insufficient evidence on how to best structure a reading program based around engagement. He did, however, suggest five “ingredients” that are essential to the recipe for a successful, engaging literacy classroom: interesting topics, the nature of the text’s structure and organization, allowing students to have choices, social classroom discourse, and time for engaged reading. Each of these elements was incorporated into Guthrie’s CORI framework. In researching and implementing the CORI framework with elementary and middle school students, the importance of autonomy was addressed. Guthrie (2004) found, “With minor forms of ownership over their literacy, students dig deeper for meaning, monitor their understanding, and express their newfound knowledge more elaborately than do students without these choices and decisions about learning” (p. 12). This, as well as using rich, high interest texts, are important elements when it comes to analyzing student engagement and motivation in independent reading endeavors. Students who are not intrinsically motivated to read require more time to engage in reading in school to build their skills. Encouraging students to take ownership of their literacy achievement by allowing them to have choices when it comes to the texts that they read and how they display their understandings of what they read will help to foster reading engagement. Although this may not be the norm in literacy classrooms, Guthrie contends that trying new educational ideas is a worthwhile practice. Guthrie (2004) concludes by stating, “We live in threatening times. Policy makers encroach on our

professional dominion, and the implications of some of their policies may reduce, rather than increase, engagement in school-based literacy. We need to take our destiny in our own hands by re-envisioning literacy learning on a new scale” (p. 26). Ways to close the “achievement gap” is a constant consideration in education. Guthrie suggests that focusing on engagement, and following a set of practices similar to his CORI framework, could be an avenue toward this end.

Another option for increasing student engagement in reading is creating a school wide culture of reading. Daniels and Steres (2011) present, “the results of one middle school’s efforts to improve student engagement through an increased emphasis on school-wide structured reading” (p. 2). At the heart of student engagement and motivation to read is autonomy. Adolescents need to feel that they have at least some control over their lives, and if they don’t, they lose interest in engaging with the tasks at hand. (Daniels & Steres, 2011). This relates directly to academic endeavors, including reading. Daniels and Steres (2011) state, “If they do not know how to engage with an academic discipline, they lose their ability to control their own participation because they are not able to do what their teachers ask or expect” (p. 3). This could account for many students’ reluctance to read. Without an intimate knowledge of how to use reading skills and strategies to assist with reading and understanding what one reads, students feel a lack of control and fight back against this feeling by choosing not to participate.

Although most teachers would like their students to read independently outside of district mandated texts, “Students know what teachers and schools value by the amount of time they devote to any given activity” (Daniels & Steres, 2011, p. 3). As such,

schools that do not devote time to independent reading are sending a message to students that reading is not a valuable activity. Additionally, because students do not have much choice when it comes to what they read as part of the curricula, the desire to engage in the assigned tasks decreases because of the lack of autonomy experienced by students (Daniels & Steres, 2011). Daniels and Steres' (2011) study explores how creating a school-wide reading culture led to an increase in student engagement with reading.

The study took place in a Southern California middle school in an urban area. 1,356 students in total took part in the school-wide reading culture, and of those, 108 participated directly in the study. 17 of the 85 adults working in the school also directly participated. Data was collected in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade English classes at all three ability levels: gifted, regular, and structured (Daniels & Steres, 2011). Interviews and observation tools were used to collect data. The interviews were transcribed, and assessed to look for, "emerging themes that illuminated the students' and teachers' experiences with the reading culture and/or explained why most people on campus were reading more (in terms of both the number of books read and time spent reading)" (Daniels & Steres, 2011, p. 5).

The authors found from the transcribed interviews that although said in different ways, the students and teachers had very similar responses to the question of their perceptions about the culture of reading in the school. Daniels and Steres (2011) report, "The conditions noted were: (a) making reading a top priority, (b) modeling by and support from the adults in the school, and (c) the creation of motivating learning environments" (p. 6). Time devoted to reading was another common theme. English

teachers were told to devote at least 15 minutes per day to self-selected silent reading. In addition to this mandate by the school's principal, faculty meetings and professional development workshops were focused on preparing teachers to become comfortable with young adult literature and how to talk to students about books (Daniels & Steres, 2011). From their interviews, Daniels and Steres (2011) deduced, "It appeared that when the adults explicitly prioritized reading, the students responded by valuing it as well" (p. 7). Because students were given time to self-select books, read independently, and talk about books with both adults and peers, they became more motivated to read. The importance of autonomy became evident in supporting student engagement in reading. Daniels and Steres (2011) state, "The sheer volume of time devoted to reading appeared to contribute substantially to the creation of a school-wide reading culture. Making reading explicitly a priority positively influenced student engagement" (p. 7). The value of reading for enjoyment became evident through the creation of the culture of reading at Parkdale Middle School.

Daniels and Steres (2011) summarize, "Parkdale's faculty and staff created a motivating learning environment by emphasizing choice (autonomy), believing all students could and would read if given enough support (expectations for success), and understanding the context of middle school influences engagement (sociocultural theory)" (p. 9). The authors provide three takeaways that middle school leaders should consider when working toward the goal of fostering student engagement in reading. First, they emphasize that reading needs to be prioritized as a school-wide endeavor, and discussed often. Next, Daniels and Steres (2011) describe the necessity for ongoing

professional development to help faculty and staff gain knowledge about young adult literature. The authors explain, “The students in this study felt more engaged with books and reading because their teachers constantly talked about books and modeled active reading” (Daniels & Steres, 2011, p. 10). Seeing their teachers engaged in reading and talking about books made the students believe that reading was important. This was especially true when teachers showed an interest in what their students were reading. (Daniels & Steres, 2011). Third, the authors suggest considering committing resources in the form of money and time to rich classroom libraries and facilitating the effective use of them.

Although the increase in student engagement was evident in this study as a culture of reading was created at Parkdale Middle School, Daniels and Steres (2011) acknowledge that their results cannot be generalized to other populations. Additionally, whether or not the gains made in student engagement were permanent and sustainable was not addressed. The authors suggest, “Future research should follow this middle school to determine whether the increased engagement is ongoing” (Daniels & Steres, 2011, p. 10). Despite these limitations, this study corroborates the findings of other research studies in the notion that student engagement increases when time devoted to reading is given on a daily basis. Daniels and Steres (2011) conclude with a lesson learned from their study: “If building a school-wide culture of reading can positively influence more students’ engagement, middle grades teachers will have yet another means of reaching their students” (p. 10). Daniels and Steres’ (2011) study provides yet

another layer of proof ascertaining the importance of providing students with time for self-selected, independent reading.

### **Motivation to Read**

Students' motivation to read can be an indicator of their level of success with literacy tasks. Frequently, students who read well read more often, and therefore improve. Those who struggle with reading tend to avoid the task, and therefore do not improve. This cycle of avoidance is known as the "Matthew Effect" (Stanovich, 1986). When children are met with repeated failure in reading, their motivation to engage in reading tasks declines. Successful independent reading programs encourage students to read texts that are interesting and at an appropriate level, thus allowing students to experience success with reading. This, coupled with choice and opportunities for social interactions around text helps to regain a child's motivation to read. Fostering a student's intrinsic motivation to read is a powerful antidote for the "Matthew Effect".

Although it is understood that student motivation to read is an important factor in students' reading success, instruments to measure reading motivation are uncommon and do not address all content areas and possible motivations for reading. Currently, the Motivations for Reading Questionnaire (MQR) is the most common instrument for measuring student motivation to read (De Naeghel, Van Keer, Vansteenkiste, & Rosseel, 2012, p. 1006). De Naeghel et al. (2012) explain, "An in-depth understanding of the concept of reading motivation is essential to keep children motivated to read and to promote reading motivation" (p. 1006). The ambiguous theoretical basis of the MQR has been called into question. As such, the authors use a research based theory of motivation,



self-determination theory (SDT) as the basis of their study (De Naeghel et al., 2012). SDT is successful in differentiating between different types of motivation in a qualitative way. De Naeghel et al. (2012) use the terms autonomous reading motivation and controlled reading motivation in their study. To define these terms De Naeghel et al. (2012) state:

autonomous reading motivation refers to engaging in reading activities for their own enjoyment or because of their perceived personal significance and meaning, whereas controlled reading motivation refers to participating in reading activities to meet internal feelings of pressure (e.g., guilt, shame, or pride) or comply with an external demand, obtain a reward, or avoid punishment. (p. 1015)

Their study aims to use SDT to develop and validate a questionnaire that can be used with children in late elementary school that would measure students' recreational and academic reading motivation. They also sought to determine relationships between reading motivation, behavior, and performance (De Naeghel et al., 2012). For this study, 1,260 students from 45 different elementary schools in Belgium were given their instrument, the Self-Regulation Questionnaire- Reading Motivation (SQR-Reading Motivation), twice: once measuring recreational reading motivation, and a second time to measure academic reading motivation. The questionnaire items were then scored on a 5-point Likert scale (De Naeghel et al., 2012). Their findings, "indicated a high significant correlation between autonomous reading motivation in the recreational and in the academic context between controlled reading motivation in both settings" (De Naeghel et al., 2012, p. 1013). They also found that girls significantly outscored boys in recreational

and academic autonomous reading motivation, however recreational and academic controlled reading motivation were the same for both genders (De Naeghel et al., 2012). Furthermore, De Naeghel et al. (2012) found, “Recreational autonomous reading motivation in particular was more positively associated with reading frequency, engagement, and comprehension, but controlled reading motivation was not significantly related to reading engagement and even yielded a significantly negative relation with reading comprehension” (p. 1015).

In analyzing the relationships between reading motivation, behavior, and performance, De Naeghel et al. (2012) found, “the present study confirms that recreational autonomous and controlled reading motivation, as well as reading self-concept or perceived reading competence, make independent contributions to reading behavior (i.e., reading engagement and frequency) and performance” (p. 1017). A positive self-concept as a reader was shown to be associated with a higher frequency of recreational reading, as well as increased reading engagement and comprehension. In academic reading, the relationships between self-concept and higher levels of reading comprehension were even more pronounced (De Naeghel et al., 2012, p. 1017). Students who are self-motivated to read on their own are, in fact, more engaged in the reading they do and score higher on standardized comprehension tests than those who read because they feel pressured to do so. De Naeghel et al. (2012) also found that when students are externally pressured into recreational reading, their comprehension scores actually suffer. A significant correlation between reading frequency and reading comprehension was not

found. De Naeghel et al. (2012) suggest that this may be due to a lack of reading comprehension skills and strategies.

The implication of the findings of De Naeghel et al. (2012) is that autonomous reading should be encouraged as this practice heightens reading motivation, which, in turn, increases reading behaviors and performance. The authors state, “This implies that interventions to promote reading motivation should primarily focus on encouraging autonomous reasons for reading or enhancing students’ willingness to read” (De Naeghel et al., 2012, p. 1018). Further, they suggest offering choice, ensuring that students understand the purpose for reading, acknowledging students’ interests, and offering support stating, “These reading promotion interventions not only have the potential to break through the declining trend in reading motivation throughout children’s educational career but will further help us to create a positive reading climate” (De Naeghel et al., 2012, p. 1018). The authors conclude with an acknowledgement of some limitations related to their study. They suggest that the study should be opened up to all of the late elementary school grades across national and international contexts. De Naeghel et al. (2012) also believe that research which includes qualitative measures such as interviews, reading journals, and observations would be beneficial. Due to the limited number of items on the scales used, the authors suggest expanding the concepts that they touch upon, as well as using a longitudinal design in future studies (De Naeghel et al., 2012). Based on their findings, De Naeghel et al. (2012) posit:

Interventions aiming at fostering reading motivation and, hence, breaking through the decline of reading motivation as children grow older should especially focus

on enhancing autonomous reasons for reading, because autonomous reading motivation in particular leads to more qualitative reading behavior and better reading performance. (p. 1019)

The findings of this study offer relevant data and instructional suggestions related to independent reading in schools. The impact of student motivation on reading behaviors and achievement are significant. This information, as well as the suggestions of interventions teachers should use to increase motivation, serves to confirm the benefit of in school independent reading time.

Gutierrez (2011) incorporates new literacies with a discussion of the idea of “fandom” as it relates to students’ motivation to read. Gutierrez (2011) explains that children may be fans of certain authors, books, or series’, but these types of texts are often overlooked for use in the classroom. Gutierrez (2011) states:

This is too bad, really, given that K-12’s rapprochement with fandom arguably stands the best chance of uniting in-school and outside-of-school literacies, not to mention helping students develop critical thinking skills and a host of media and ‘new literacies’ - that is, empowering them to become ‘readers’ in the broadest, most meaningful sense of the word. (p. 226)

Independent reading is supposed to help foster a love of reading in students. Neglecting to offer a vast array of options, particularly texts that students may be engaged in reading outside of school, is a disservice to children. Unfortunately, however, schools often do not stock books related to video games, television shows, movies, or comic books that

students may be fans of, simply because of their subject matter. Gutierrez (2011) cautions, “Students pick up on this judgmental attitude and may come to the conclusion that enjoying such books does not really constitute reading; as a result, they may not consider themselves readers to the extent that they should” (p. 228). If students are not allowed to read what is interesting to them, their motivation to read will be left behind for other activities that offer them more freedom of choice and personal preference.

Because 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are digital natives, educators need to keep in mind the discourses that students are familiar with. Schools cannot rely solely on print-based reading materials. Digital media-based text is an integral part of today’s literacy. To this point, Gutierrez (2011) states, “it is becoming more and more difficult to partition print from other media, especially where young readers are concerned” (p. 229). Successful independent reading programs necessitate the acceptance and use of new literacies to accommodate the discourses of today’s learners. Allowing for choices in the format of independent reading is a necessary consideration when planning an independent reading program for today’s youth. Likewise, the social component of independent reading demands consideration as well. Today’s students are used to communication and interaction with peers now more so than ever before. Reutzel and Juth (2014) state, “Social interaction is an important aspect of reading motivation” (p. 31). Integrating a social piece with traditional independent reading adds another layer of motivation for students. Students want to talk about what interests them, and they can learn from others as well as deepening their understandings, and increasing intrinsic motivation to read through discussions about text. Gutierrez (2011) contends, “fandom is essentially a self-

selecting community that ‘responds’ to a text, varied literacies are brought to bear as community members engage in ongoing, meaningful, and authentic discourses with *each other*” (p. 230). This opportunity for communication can be highly motivating for children, and may encourage them to read more closely, thus helping them to engage with the text and strengthen their value of reading. Gutierrez (2011) concludes, “The trick is how to insert grown-up standards, experience, and wisdom into the mix without also diminishing all the joy, inspiration, and peer-to-peer communication” (p. 230). This is the essence of a successful independent reading program in a classroom. This study will attempt to find methods for accommodating these needs.

### **A Discussion of Independent Reading**

Allowing students to read independently in the classroom to foster an enjoyment of reading is simply common sense. Children need time to practice their literacy skills as well as build autonomy when it comes to reading. When children see literacy as part of who they are as people, they are more likely to engage in reading and succeed in becoming literate adults.

In today’s high-stakes testing society, Garan and DeVogd (2008) acknowledge that teachers may be uncomfortable with a traditional SSR model where the students and teacher read silently for a certain period of time. The authors suggest that this might not be the best model, and that, in fact, innovations to traditional SSR could help ease these tensions for teachers, as well as promoting student accountability and autonomy, thus enhancing the benefits of silent reading in the classroom. Garan and DeVogd (2008) cite several innovations to traditional SSR in which conversation is a large component of

students' independent reading experience. Teachers may conference with students, teach minilessons to guide silent reading, engage in discussion with students about the books they are reading, or encourage peers to work together to read and discuss their books. By imparting these strategies, students are held accountable, and data can be collected on the effectiveness of independent reading in the classroom. From the teacher-research studies cited by Garan and DeVogd, it was reported that the use of SSR, "resulted in demonstrable growth in many areas of reading" (Garan & DeVogd, 2008, p. 342). The authors also hope that the research inspires other teachers to test their innovations in the classroom and gain data of their own to support the use of modified sustained silent reading. The authors state, "This can serve as encouragement for other teachers to document student progress so they meet accountability requirements and district standards" (Garan & DeVogd, 2008, p. 342). With hard data to support the benefits of SSR on student literacy, teachers and administrators will feel more comfortable with providing time for independent reading in their classrooms.

Krashen (2006) explains that through his research, he has found that it is suggested that free reading is important in developing students' vocabulary, spelling, comprehension, and literacy competencies. He states, "The secret of its effectiveness is simple: children become better readers by reading" (Krashen, 2006, p. 43).

In his over 20 years of research, which includes reviewing studies that compare students who engage in SSR to those who do not, Krashen (2006) states, "I'm confident that children who read for pleasure do as well or better than SSR deprived peers" (p. 43). The research that he has come across has led Krashen to the conclusion that SSR is

effective in helping students learn the aspects of reading that are measured by standardized tests, as well as providing skills and attitudes not tested. At worst, Krashen notes, SSR groups and their comparison groups make the same progress. This is mostly seen in short term studies. When time is allowed for students to engage in SSR, the results become more strongly in favor of the benefits of SSR.

Krashen supports the use of SSR in classrooms, and posits that the best way to get children to read is by providing high interest books for them. Krashen believes that despite socioeconomic status, children with access to high quality books do better than students without the same access. He states, “Schools can undo at least some of the effects of poverty by providing children with books” (Krashen, 2006, p. 45). By simply providing time for students to read and books that they are interested in, Krashen believes that children can move beyond the basics and make literacy part of their everyday lives. He concludes his article by stating, “Encouraging students to read for pleasure and providing them with interesting reading materials may not guarantee that every child will become a dedicated, highly literate reader, but it’s clearly a necessary step in the right direction” (Krashen, 2006, p. 45).

### **Empirical Research on the Effectiveness of Independent Reading**

Trudel, a teacher researcher, was using SSR in her classroom, and was disheartened by the findings of the National Reading Panel, as well as by the observations she was making in her classroom during the silent reading time she had set up. Because of this, she conducted research, and determined that her students did need time to read independently, but that the traditional SSR model which she had been



following was not the best fit for her and her students. Her article (2008), discusses her teacher research. What Trudel found through her research was a structured Independent Reading (IR) program that she thought might be worthwhile. Trudel (2008) states:

I wanted to see if a structured IR program would make a difference in their engagement (time spent reading) and their overall attitudes in reading. Ultimately, I wanted to determine if the data I collected about my students would suggest that IR would be a more effective model for silent reading. (p. 310)

She set out to determine test this model versus the traditional SSR model that she had been using previously. Trudel (2008) states, “The goal of a structured IR program is to provide students with the self-selected reading time that they need and the social supports that foster reading engagement” (p. 309) In the IR model, unlike the SSR model, both the students and the teacher play more active roles in independent reading time. The teacher helps students learn how to select appropriate books for independent reading, students keep records of what they read and reflect (in writing or verbally) on what they read, and students participate in mini lessons and discussions. Additionally, in the structured IR model, the teacher is not reading at his or her own desk unless he or she is modeling a skill. Instead, the teacher spends the IR time engaging with the students to enhance their reading skills, engagement, and attitudes.

To collect data on students’ reading behaviors during both SSR and IR, Trudel used a journal to record her observations, student created documents related to their reading, and conference notes. To assess their attitudes toward reading, Trudel used a notebook to record the students’ perceived attitudes, as well as a reading attitude survey

both after 5 weeks of SSR and again after 6 weeks of IR. At the conclusion of this research period, Trudel compared the data she collected from SSR to that of IR. With regard to reading attitudes, Trudel found that her students' attitude scale scores decreased slightly when switching from SSR to IR. However, her observations did not support this. Trudel's observation notes, "suggested an increase in overall reading attitudes after students switched from SSR to IR" (Trudel, 2008, p. 311). She also observed that negative behaviors exhibited during SSR ceased by the end of the IR study period. In meeting with each student individually, Trudel found that, "None of the student whose attitudes on the written survey appeared to decrease indicated in the interview that a decrease in their reading attitude had occurred. Some even thought that their reading attitude had increased during IR" (Trudel, 2008, p. 311). After reviewing all of her data, Trudel (2008) says, "it was clear to me that there was more evidence to support a rise in reading attitudes after switching to IR" (p. 312).

To track reading behaviors during both SSR and IR, Trudel (2008), "kept track of what students were doing three times over the 30-minute period, noting whether they were off task or on task" (p. 312). She found that on average, students were on task 84% of the time during SSR. After implementing IR, however, Trudel found that 14 of the 16 students in her class increased their on-task time. She also found that 15 of her 16 students were choosing appropriate books by the end of the IR study period, which had not been the case during SSR. Additionally, Trudel saw an increase in the quantity and quality of conferences with students during IR as compared to those during SSR, thus providing her with valuable assessment data about the reading skills being used by her

students. Student response journals were created and analyzed during IR as well. Trudel required students to complete at least 2 journal responses per week. The range of responses were in categories including: summaries, vocabulary, questions, predictions, visualization, sharing with a partner, and connections. This data allowed Trudel to, “monitor what reading strategies they were engaging in on their own. This helped me plan for whole-class minilessons as well as individual reading conferences” (Trudel, 2008, p. 313). The lack of student guidance and assessment opportunities with traditional SSR seems to be one of its biggest downfalls. As Trudel found through her teacher research, however, “IR has the potential to equip teachers with more assessment data than traditional SSR so that they can better determine appropriate instruction for their class as a whole and for individual students” (Trudel, 2008, p. 314).

When questioned by a colleague about taking the fun out of reading by requiring the students to complete tasks associated with their independent reading, Trudel says that she was concerned about this. After conducting her research, however, Trudel states, “What I discovered was a group of active learners (at all different skill levels) who were eager to improve their reading skills and share their new insights with one another and with me” (Trudel, 2008, p. 315). She emphasizes the importance of establishing an atmosphere that sets a purpose for reading, and helps students to see the benefit in the work that they are doing. Trudel concludes by stating that the silent reading period in her classroom was not a time solely to “practice” reading, but instead it became, “an opportunity for students to recognize-and celebrate- their skills as readers and improve upon them with teacher support” (Trudel, 2008, p. 315). Although Trudel’s research

study was conducted over a brief time period and with only the 16 students in her class, she provides compelling evidence of the possible benefits of independent reading in the classroom. Similar to Garan and DeVogd's assertion that innovations to SSR would be more beneficial to teachers and students, Trudel found that one such innovation, IR, was a better fit for her students than traditional SSR practices.

Chua's (2008) empirical study came about due to an analysis of research on students' reading habits. It was found in an international study, that most children spend more time watching television than reading. In response to this study, Chua states, "This finding points to the need to invest further efforts to design effective programs to cultivate reading habits among youths" (Chua, 2008, p. 180). Further research on the topic of children's reading habits related to SSR led Chua to opposing viewpoints. He found some studies that highlighted positive outcomes of SSR, and others that reported negative outcomes. Chua (2008) states, "Based on these contrasting results, more studies were clearly needed to discover the limitations of the SSR program" (p. 101). As such, Chua used a time-series design to conduct his own study on the effects of SSR programs on students' reading habits and attitudes both in and outside of school.

Chua used questionnaires on three occasions over the course of a 12-month time period in which middle school aged students were engaged in regular SSR periods during the school day. On each of the three occasions, Chua received over 200 responses to the questionnaire, which included questions about students' active reading habits during the SSR period, perceived proportions of the students' classmates reading habits during the SSR period, the number of hours students spend reading for leisure outside of school, and

students' attitudes toward reading for leisure. The questionnaires were distributed by a teacher, and after being briefed on the expectation of how to answer the questions, students were given twenty minutes to complete the questionnaire. Chua got mixed results in comparison to his assumptions. The percentage of students who were actively engaged in reading during the SSR period increased steadily over the course of the 12-month study. Likewise, the percentage of students who estimated that at least half of their classmates were actively reading during the SSR period rose steadily over the course of the three administrations of the questionnaires. Chua found that the percentage of students who perceived their classmates to be engaging in off task behaviors steadily decreased of the course of the 12-month period. Each of these findings supported Chua's expectations. What did not follow his expectation was the effect of SSR on students after school reading habits. He found that there was not a significant change in the percentage of students who spent more than one hour reading for leisure after school. Chua (2008) reports, "Actually, the percentages of students who reported spending more than one hour on reading books for leisure after school were 23.87 percent, 14.98 percent, and 18.39 percent in the respective measures" (p. 182).

Interestingly, Chua found that the percentage of student who reported that reading books for leisure was an enjoyable activity increased over the 12-month period, but those who felt that reading books for pleasure was useful or meaningful did not change significantly. Chua (2008) surmises, "It seemed that the SSR program improved students' affective reactions but not their cognitive reactions to reading books for leisure" (p. 183). Overall, Chua deduced that the SSR program was successful in cultivating positive

reading habits and fostering an enjoyment of reading in school, however these effects were not generalized to reading outside of school. What this means, according to Chua, is that the students may not have found reason in reading for pleasure. Although students' attitudes toward reading did increase, that did not cause students to spend more time outside of school reading for pleasure. "In sum," states Chua, "the results of this study suggest that additional programs should be designed to counter the limitations of the SSR program, target cultivating the value of reading among students, and promote students' reading habits beyond the classroom" (Chua, 2008, p. 184).

Years later, Siah and Kwok (2010) pick up where Chua's previous research left off, and sought to explore specific conditions that make SSR effective. They studied the relationship between students' value of reading and the amount of time that they spent engaging in reading activities with their parents, the associations between students' value of reading and their reading engagement during SSR, and the correlation between students' value of reading and their thoughts on the effectiveness of the SSR program. The SSR program that the students were engaged in required reading for 20 minutes every morning for a six-month period, while their teachers acted as role models, reading books at the same time as the students. The authors state, "Students were expected to read their books without interruption and were encouraged to write notes and reflections for each book in their reading journals" (Siah & Kwok, 2010, p. 170). To conduct their study, Siah and Kwok gave questionnaires to 362 middle school-aged students in Hong Kong. After analyzing the questionnaires, the authors split the students into two groups: high value of reading (HVR), and low value of reading (LVR).

The results of the questionnaires showed that the high value of reading group almost always held more positive views of reading and the SSR program. There was no significant difference between the two groups when it comes to the value of reading and the frequency with which they watch television or play computer games with their parents. There were, however, significant associations between students' value of reading and the frequency of their parents' reading activities, the students' self-motivation to read during SSR, the students' value of reading and their attitudes toward leisure books, and the value of reading and students' attitudes toward the effectiveness of the SSR program that they were involved with. In each of these categories, the high value of reading group had significantly more positive feelings as expressed on the questionnaires. As a result of these findings, the authors determined, "we can say that the SSR program is more effective for students who have a high value of reading than for students who have a low value of reading" (Siah & Kwok, 2010, p. 173). Further, they encourage schools that use SSR programs to get parents involved in reading activities with their children. Parental involvement, according to the authors of this study, is a crux of instilling in children a high value of reading.

This study is limited in that there is little information on the background of the parents of the students who were involved in the study. Additionally, it is unclear from this study whether the results would be similar in students from other cultural backgrounds. These are factors that could be analyzed in future studies to gain a more detailed picture of the factors that contribute to students' value of reading and their attitudes toward the SSR program. With more information, suggestions could be made for

teachers and administrators regarding the best ways to implement SSR for students with a low value of reading. These are the students who need to be empowered with regard to their literacy skills in order to become well prepared for reading at higher levels.

### **Independent Reading as a Social Practice**

Students are naturally social beings. As such, the proposition of making independent reading a social practice makes sense for today's students. Independent reading can be transformed into a collaborative effort by embracing conversation, and creating a culture of readers in the classroom through shared literary experiences.

Parr and Maguiness (2005), worked with three teachers and eight students in a yearlong trial. Each of the students had been considered reluctant readers during SSR time, and were chosen based on that fact. The teachers wanted to implement changes to SSR that would foster engagement. Parr and Maguiness (2005) state, "Collaboratively, the teachers at the school decided to support students in choosing and engaging with texts by removing the *silent* from SSR" (p. 99). After extensive research and professional development, the teachers along with the second author set out to create and implement, "an instructional conversation model to support SSR practice where, through talk, teachers and students shared experiences, exchanged knowledge, and made explicit the practice of choosing and engaging in text" (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 99).

In an effort to develop a conversation model, the teachers discussed what they felt would be the most important elements to use talk productively. They chose to focus on how students were choosing (or rejecting) reading material, and the frequency and quality



with which students were initiating conversation versus that of teachers. The authors note, “their aim was for the teacher to move from initiating and controlling the conversation to facilitating the interaction with and among the students” (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 100). The goal of this study was to move away from teacher led questioning, and encourage students to take the lead. The established conversation elements were to be used as a guide for the teachers to get the conversations off the ground. Eight specific features, both content oriented and procedure oriented, were added to the conversation elements including: a focus on choosing and reading books, time to discuss their reading experiences or prior knowledge, turns taken in conversation between the teacher and students, and language used by the students that shows evidence of their self-perceived identities as readers. (Parr & Maguiness, 2005). Once the focus elements were agreed upon, the three teachers began implementing instructional conversations with their students.

The teachers found actually implementing the conversations to be challenging. One of the teachers commented, “getting them to start talking.... They were quite happy to answer questions but to actually start a conversation was quite difficult” (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 102). The authors equate this with the fact that the students, “had to renegotiate their positions in the context of a significant departure from usual SSR practice” (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 102). Of the three teachers participating in the study, two, Helen and Chris, moved from group conversations to individual conferences over the course of the year, and one, Audrey, maintained the group conversation model initially chosen. The authors note, “In terms of moving from controlling the conversation

to sustaining interaction with the student, Helen and Audrey had some way to go” (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 103). The two types of conversations yielded different results in terms of the procedural elements. In Helen’s extended conference conversations, both the student and teacher turn count was similar, but the talk was largely teacher initiated. Audrey’s group discussion format caused a higher teacher turn count than student turns, but the talk was student initiated more frequently. With regard to the content elements, Helen’s conference format was more successful than Audrey’s group format. The authors conclude, “It appears that the more control of the interaction a teacher assumes, the easier it is to incorporate the agreed on, desirable content-related elements of an instructional conversation” (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 103). Based on the analysis of this data, another surprising factor emerged. The authors found that the setting had an effect on the success of the conversations as well, stating, “The conversations with the highest number of content-related elements and the highest percentage of evidence statements all took place in the library, where the texts, as objects of discussion, were readily available” (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 103).

After the conclusion of the study, the teachers were interviewed to deduce the value each teacher placed on each of the elements that were implemented. The results of these interviews showed that the teachers disagree on the value of each element, and this correlated to the observations made by the authors on each teacher’s success (or lack thereof) with the elements. The teachers’ personal philosophies mirrored the value that they placed on each element, and also how well they utilized the element within their classroom conversations. In addition to differences of opinion, the authors also

discovered that the features chosen initially did not accommodate for student opinion or co-constructed conversation where one student would add on to what another had said. Neither of these situations could be coded, based on the initial set up of the study, and therefore were not considered in the results. The teachers felt that addressing the aforementioned issues, as well as coming up with a way to make the conversations quicker, less formal, and more frequent, would be vital to the success of an instructional conversation model.

The teachers were also interviewed at the end of the study regarding their perceptions of the students' progress, as were the students themselves. By the end of the study, two of the students had improved greatly in their willingness to read, and two were still considered reluctant readers. Most of the students valued the opportunity to engage in conversations about their reading, but some were undecided about their feelings on the conversation element being added to SSR time. Despite the mixed feelings about the conversation model, the authors state, "Students also recognized the social dimension, and they reported observations that reinforced one teacher's view that a reading community seemed to be developing" (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 105). The teachers revealed that they felt that the study was beneficial both to the students and to themselves, as the conversations allowed students and teachers to learn more about each other as readers, and as people. The authors state of the teachers, "Above all, they felt that they, and the students, had developed a common understanding that voluntary reading (like all literacy practices) is socially situated and, therefore, should naturally include talk" (Parr & Maguiness, 2005, p. 106). Although the study revealed some

tensions with students' idea that reading in school was not always socially acceptable, and the issue of reaching instructional goals through interactive conversations, the results were positive overall. Parr and Maguiness (2005) state:

The implications for classroom practice are that deliberate instructional talk, in this case book talk in the context of SSR, has positive benefits for students in terms of 'get[ting] into reading' and for teachers in terms of knowing the reader. (p.107)

Because of the social nature of students, talk can be an engaging and motivating element when it is valued as part of SSR time. Teachers can use conversation as a modification to traditional SSR to encourage students to become engaged with reading so that they can share their experiences with their peers and teachers, and gain a sense of literacy as a part of their identity.

Dickerson, a teacher-researcher also took students as social being into account when she chose to make changes to the traditional SSR time in her classroom. In her article, Dickerson (2015) considered her students' educational backgrounds in comparison to her own, and decided to make instructional decisions based on these factors. She observes, "Most importantly, many of my students do not initially enjoy reading, whether independently or as a class. For this reason, I have consistently tried to make reading both entertaining and relevant" (Dickerson, 2015, p. 1). To enhance her teaching practices, Dickerson embarked on a two-year research project to incorporate more independent reading into her classroom. To collect data, Dickerson used surveys, the San Diego Quick Assessment, and readers' notebooks, as well as her own

observations on conversations she had with her students. Dickerson chose to avoid the term “SSR”, and instead named her independent choice reading time, “Reading Zone”. In the first year, Dickerson’s students were given 10 minutes of Reading Zone three days per week at the beginning of class. They kept track of their progress by using reading trackers to note the dates, minutes read, and number of pages read in each session. The students were also given the opportunity to write an extra credit paper at the completion of each book they read, but Dickerson says that many students did not choose to utilize this as an option, so her data is limited in this area.

In the second year of her study, Dickerson came up with five rules for Reading Zone. She states, “These five rules gave students more choice and autonomy while also presenting reading as a community activity” (Dickerson, 2015, p. 2). Additionally, she implemented readers’ notebooks as a form of data collection. In the second year of her study, Dickerson required student to write journal entries at least three times per week related to the books they were reading. Reading trackers, as well as thinking stems were contained within the students’ readers’ notebooks to help them think and write about their reading. Dickerson also made the Reading Zone more collaborative by posting a large tracker in the classroom where students could list the titles and genres of the books that they had read, thus promoting collaboration as students were able to consult each other for book recommendations. Surveys and anecdotal notes were also used during year two to gather data.

In analyzing the data, Dickerson found that after the first year of Reading Zone implementation, her students increased between one and three grade levels on the San

Diego Quick Assessment. Dickerson acknowledges that Reading Zone cannot be directly linked to these increases, however. She also administered a Reading Zone survey at the end of the first year. From this survey, Dickerson (2015) states, “This approach achieved moderate success” (p. 3). In the survey, when asked about changes to Reading Zone for the next year, 47.9% of students said that it should be implemented every day instead of just three days a week as it was being implemented in year one. When asked about their level of enjoyment of reading, 54% said they like reading the same amount as they did before Reading Zone, but 41% stated that they liked reading more after the implementation of Reading Zone.

Dickerson, in her analysis of the study’s findings explains that she imagines readers may be questioning whether all of the time and money invested into the project was worth it. Dickerson (2015) asserts:

Yes, it was definitely worth it. I can see the value of choice reading and independent reading on my students’ faces every day. I can hear their disappointment if we have to read for a shorter amount of time than they had expected. I can tell that they are grateful for their autonomy in the way they interact with me. (p. 6)

Dickerson’s study was in its second year at the time of the writing of her article. A survey given to her students at the end of the first quarter of year two revealed much support from Dickerson’s students regarding the use of Reading Zone in her classroom. Students noted that reading calms them down, helps to expand their vocabulary and thinking skills, and makes them speak to people they would not normally speak to, among other things.

Though these comments were from Dickerson’s honor students, she states, I have found significant empirical evidence that Reading Zone made a difference even for non-honors students” (Dickerson, 2015, p. 6), providing anecdotes of the literacy successes experienced by some of her non-honors students.

Dickerson also highlights the classroom management benefits of Reading Zone. Dickerson contends that the connections that she develops with her students through Reading Zone helps her when it comes to managing the behaviors in her classes. Because her students are engaged in reading, due to the classroom climate she has created, Dickerson explains that disruptions are limited. Also because of the bond that Dickerson is able to form with her students around their shared enjoyment of reading, Dickerson (2015) states:

Rather than seeing me as a teacher who gives mandates, my students see me as a fellow reader with whom they can talk about books. I also see my students differently: Through these conversations, I see my students’ natural analytical strengths, remember their passion for learning, and better understand their lives and their personalities. (p. 7)

In conclusion, Dickerson discusses the necessity for teachers to recognize their students as individuals. She reminds teachers that students are forced to sit quietly for hours a day, engage in standardized curriculums and testing that are not particularly interesting, and that the students’ interests are rarely at the forefront of instruction. Dickerson calls for changes to teaching in order to see progress in today’s students. She states, “If we are to educate for character and growth and success, we need to stop seeing our students as a

standardized other, one on which we need to impose a certain kind of knowledge” (Dickerson, 2015, p. 8). This is where change needs to begin, according to Dickerson. Embracing independent choice reading, and creating a classroom culture that values individuality, autonomy, and shared reading experiences are the first steps toward building stronger literacy skills and practices for today’s students.

In another empirical study, Hall, Hedrick, and Williams (2014) analyzed the effects of increased choice during in school independent reading (ISIR) time on students’ involvement in reading. The authors state, “The goal of this study was to increase students’ reading involvement during ISIR through opportunities for making choices” (Hall et al., 2014, p. 92). The participants, twenty-one third grade students, were given the option to listen to soft background music during independent reading time, or not, and provided time to talk about their books after reading, in addition to choosing the books that they wanted to read.

This study was conducted by three trained undergraduate education majors, accompanied by the three authors, all literacy professors. The university students collected field notes and observations as a means of data collection. Interest inventories were completed by the students at the beginning of the four-week study, and teachers provided the university students with DRA2 and Lexile information to determine students’ reading levels. Based on the results of the interest inventories and reading level information, four books were ordered, per student, that matched the interests and reading levels of the participants. iPod Shuffles, preprogrammed with instrumental music, were also brought to the classroom. Because research shows that social interactions are



beneficial when it comes to reading and discussing books, book talks and turn and talk opportunities were also built into the ISIR time. The authors state, “Immediately following independent reading time, students were allotted two minutes to turn and talk to a peer, choosing how they wanted to discuss the books that they read” (Hall et al., 2014, p. 94). The teachers provided conversation starters, as needed.

The authors report, “Findings indicated that opportunities for choice during ISIR positively affected students’ reading involvement” (Hall et al., 2014, p. 94). Their observations showed that the students were excited about the choices they were given, and the students were enthusiastic about ISIR. The students were not forced to choose the books that had been ordered based on their reading levels and interests, though the authors note that the students usually did select these books. With regard to the iPod Shuffles, the students had various reactions. Hall et al. (2014) state:

The majority of students chose to use the iPod Shuffles during ISIR, sometimes ‘shuffling’ to another song in the playlist. Several students eventually decided the music was a distraction and elected not to use it. Some chose to use it a few days a week rather than daily. (p. 95)

This shows that the students understood when the music became a distraction for them. They understood themselves, as readers, well enough to know whether they should keep playing the music, or if it would be best for them to turn it off. Knowing that the opportunity to talk about their reading was coming also seemed to help the students, and was motivating for them as well. The authors observed, “Students typically took turns sharing what they read that day and making predictions or connections to other books.

We often observed students showing their partners an illustration or sharing a joke” (Hall et al., 2014, p. 95). Knowing that time to talk was a regular part of the ISIR experience helped even the students who previously had difficulty with staying quiet during ISIR time. The opportunity to talk about their reading allowed such students to regulate their behavior, making notes during reading rather than blurting out information in the moment.

The most challenging aspect of the study, according to the authors, was finding appropriate books based on the students’ interests and reading levels. This was another area in which talk was beneficial. Students who were choosing books that were of interest to them, but written at higher levels were able to understand the books better as a result of the collaborative nature of discussing their reading. Hall et al. (2014) recount, “the teacher observed that turn and talk and discussions at other times allowed students who were at lower reading levels to enjoy and comprehend the more challenging books” (p. 96). This is helpful, as many students would not otherwise have access to these types of books and rich literacy experiences outside of school.

In conclusion, the authors praise ISIR time as a chance for students to practice their skills and to learn and grow as readers. Hall et al. (2014) state:

Teachers send a powerful message when they intentionally fill their classrooms with books that match their students’ interests, provide support to develop concentration skills, and schedule time to read and discuss books. Further, teachers who maximize opportunities for students to choose and make decisions

during the school day give students ownership in the classroom, empowering them as learners. (p. 96)

Although they acknowledge that students will need support and practice with making responsible decisions in their learning, these are necessary skills for developing autonomous learners. ISIR, the authors conclude, is an excellent opportunity to make an impact on students and help them to grow into responsible, literacy minded individuals.

### **Using Digital Texts During Independent Reading**

Today's learners are digital natives. As such, consideration should be given to the prospect of using technology to enhance independent reading and critical thinking skills. Gee has written extensively on the benefits of digital media on students' literacy. In his article, "Digital Games and Libraries" (2012), Gee urges adults to support students in 21<sup>st</sup> century digital media skills stating, "What is crucial for a child is not just having access to digital media, but also having access to good mentoring around that media" (p. 63). Though the article is targeted at librarians, teachers must consider the digital media they are using in their classroom libraries as well. The use of, and quality of support with digital media is the next big thing in education. Gee (2012) predicts that without access to digital tools, and instruction on the use of these tools, "we will open up a large digital gap to go with the reading gap we are already trying to close" (p. 64). Linking the social aspects of literacy with the digital aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, Gee (2012) highlights the importance of exposing children, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to, "the hive of social activities around books, leading to higher-order literacy and learning" (p.

64). To follow is a discussion of empirical research that has been done surrounding the use of digital media to enhance independent reading.

The idea of SSR time can invoke a variety of different emotions in students, some positive, some very negative. This is particularly true of students with reading disabilities. Esteves and Whitten (2011) conducted a study using digital audiobooks as an accommodation for students with reading disabilities during SSR time in school. Esteves and Whitten (2011) state:

The overall goal of assisted reading with digital audiobooks is similar to the goal of SSR in that students are exposed to literature; however, assisted reading approaches provide scaffolded support by using a fluent model as an example of effective reading practices, whereas SSR does not. (p. 23)

MP3 players with downloaded audiobooks and their accompanying texts were provided to 10 upper elementary school students with reading disabilities in five different schools. A control group of 10 similarly classified students were not provided with MP3 players, but participated in traditional SSR time. All 20 students were pre- and post-tested using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment for reading fluency, and an Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS) to obtain data on their reading attitudes at the beginning and end of the 8-week study period. The primary researcher, someone unfamiliar to the participants, conducted the pre- and post-testing with each student individually.

After pre-testing was conducted, the students in the treatment group were given a list of audiobooks to choose from, and their selection was downloaded onto their device. A hard copy of the book was also provided to the student. When the students completed a book, his or her teacher got in contact with the primary researcher so that the student's next selection could be downloaded. Whereas the control group spent 20-30 minutes per day, four to five days per week engaging in traditional SSR time, the treatment group used digital audiobooks within the same time parameters. The students in both groups were allowed to discontinue the reading of a book if they so chose. Over the course of the eight-week study, one participant from the treatment group was dismissed due to lack of participation; the control group remained intact.

At the onset, Esteves and Whitten (2011) wanted to address the following questions: "Is there a significant difference between the reading fluency rates of the treatment and control groups, as reflected in the pretest and posttest fluency scores?" and, "Is there a significant difference between the reading attitude scores of the treatment and control groups, as reflected in the pretest and posttest scores?" (p. 29). After the eight-week intervention period, the authors found that both the control and the treatment groups improved in their reading fluency from the pretest to the posttest, but that the treatment group made larger gains. From the pretest, it was determined that both groups were on the same level. With regard to the reading attitude assessment, it was determined that there was no statistically significant change for either group at the time of the posttest as compared to the pretest. The authors hypothesized that the lack of significant gains in reading attitude may be due to the short timeframe between the administration of the

pretest and the posttest measures. The authors posit, “A longer intervention period may have enabled students to realize the transference of skills acquired through the practice of assisted reading with audiobooks to their independent reading” (Esteves & Whitten, 2011, p. 33).

Still, the authors believe that using audiobooks is a viable option for accommodating students with reading disabilities during SSR. Esteves and Whitten (2011) state, “Providing access to materials needed to implement assisted reading with digital audiobooks in students’ recreational time could be a step toward increasing the exposure students have to literature” (p. 34). They encourage future researchers to supplement their research by extending the implementation timeframe, and by making the use of audiobooks an option, rather than a requirement. The authors also believe that further investigation is necessary on the effects of using audiobooks on other literacy skills like prosody and reading comprehension. At present, Esteves and Whitten (2011) find promise in the use of digital audiobooks for students with reading disabilities stating, “This method will, hopefully, find its way into the reading programs of students with reading disabilities as a means of further differentiating instruction in reading” (p. 37). Knowing one’s students is a powerful tool, and using digital audiobooks is a viable option when it comes to using technology to encourage students to become more engaged in literacy.

Similarly to the articles mentioned in the previous section of this report, researcher Sally Brown found and detailed the immense value in the social interactions that surrounded reading in her 2014 research study. Brown (2016) details the use of E-

Readers by students in a second-grade classroom with a large English Language Learner (ELL) population. Brown studied the current research on new literacies, and found that there was little research related to the experiences of ELLs with digital literacy. As such, Brown created her study which, “documents the year-long experiences of a group of culturally and linguistically diverse 2<sup>nd</sup>-graders as they interacted with Nook e-readers for the purpose of reading multimodal picture books” (Brown, 2016, p. 43).

With 21<sup>st</sup> century learners being accustomed to using digital formats outside of school, Brown urges schools to use technology based texts to bridge the in and out of school experiences. (Brown, 2016, p. 43). The benefits of digital texts have been well documented in recent years through numerous studies. Because this is the way in which education is moving, Brown (2016) contends that, “Establishing a multimodal pedagogy will prove advantageous in giving value to the role of images in new literacies and encouraging readers to consider them as parallel content with words” (p. 45). With this new wave of literacy skills comes a change in the view of the importance of talking as a valuable aspect of reading. Brown (2016) states, “Dialogue among students provides opportunities for sharing thoughts, asking questions, making connections, and constructing new understandings about text” (p. 45). This is especially crucial for ELLs and students with reading disabilities.

To frame her study, Brown considered two research questions. First, Brown asks, “How does interacting with multimodal picture books on a digital device contribute to the reading process for diverse learners?” Her second research questions is, “What can be learned from the interactions among students as they engage in digital reading

experiences?” (Brown, 2016, p. 45). To collect data, running records with retellings were conducted at the beginning and at the end of the study. Literacy minilessons were conducted by the teacher based on the observations of student need from the running records. In addition to small group instruction by the teacher, the researcher also conducted small group instruction two days per week following a digital reader’s workshop model. In the researcher’s small group lessons, students were taught minilessons about digital and/or literacy topics, talk was centered around books and digital literacies, or the students were exposed to demonstrations based around technology (Brown, 2016, p. 46). Data was collected through videotaped recordings of all interactions surrounding the devices, field notes from the researcher, and journal entries kept by the teacher. Audiotaped student interviews were conducted at the end of the study as well. All audio- and videotaped portions of the study were transcribed.

During the study, the students were allowed to use the e-readers as they felt necessary, and they were encouraged to engage in conversation with their peers about the texts they were engaging with. Brown (2016) states:

The interactive features of digital texts encouraged students to remain on task reading, increase the amount of time spent reading, and engage in conversations with their peers the increased comprehension. Enthusiasm for reading flourished and students appeared more confident about their abilities. (p. 48)

The students recognized that talking to one another was beneficial to their understanding and enjoyment of the texts. They also noted that they read more books because using the e-readers was “fun”. Although other digital tools were offered as a means of responding



to the texts being read, talking was the preferred method of response. Brown observes, “The transactions surrounding the multimodal texts were highly social in nature and resulted in physical reactions (removing headphones to talk, tapping a peer on the shoulder, etc.) and face-to-face dialogue” (Brown, 2016, p. 49). Like the findings of Parr and Maguiness (2005), Dickerson (2015), and Hall et al. (2014), Brown, too, determined that peer interactions were an integral part of maintaining focus and building literacy skills in the students she was studying. Choice was also an important factor in Brown’s study. Brown (2016) states,

This sense of agency revolved around the ways in which resources were mediated, such as listening to the cyber voice read versus reading independently, using digital tools (dictionary, note taking, journal), tapping images for animated movement, replaying sections of text, clicking on pictures for vocabulary words, and changing the size of the font (p. 51).

This mirrors the findings of Hall et al. (2014). In both studies, student choice led to increased autonomy and student engagement with their learning. Likewise, talk was an integral part of the success of the study. With ELLs, talk and small group instruction works as a scaffold to support their growing English language literacy skills. Of her study, Brown (2016) writes, “The ELLs were not only acquiring literacy and technology skills, they were also immersed in authentic English listening and speaking events” (p. 52).

At the conclusion of the study, each of the twenty-one students showed growth based on their running records and retellings, progressing an average of four reading

levels. The author concedes that this cannot be attributed solely to the use of the e-readers, however. The small sample size and the restrictions of the students to express themselves in English limits the ability to generalize the findings of this study to other groups of students (Brown, 2016). What the study does show, however, is the importance of pairing technology with peer interactions to enhance students' literacy skills. The author concludes that her findings prove that multimodal literacy should be used daily in today's classrooms. Acquiring high-quality, culturally responsive, multimodal literature is of the utmost importance for 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms. The benefits of e-readers in their ability to be manipulated in ways that allow ELLs to hear the English language and interact with texts in ways that support their individual comprehension and linguistic needs is undeniable. Like Gee (2012) and Esteves and Whitten (2011), Brown (2016) contends that new literacies must be regularly integrated into classrooms to connect what students are already doing outside of school with what is required of them in school.

## **Conclusion**

After reviewing the available literature, it can be said that moving away from traditional SSR, and embracing talk around text may be the wave of the future. The literature is successful in exemplifying the benefits of reading being acknowledged as a social endeavor. Because of this fact, Knoester (2010) suggests, "the term 'independent reading' might be a misnomer" (p. 7). Children are motivated by having the opportunity to share books with their peers and adults alike. Knoester (2009), based on an analysis of his data states, "I found evidence suggesting that independent reading is intimately connected to various social practices despite commonly held views that independent

reading is a solitary activity” (p. 9). Therefore, reading is not actually an “independent” activity, as the end goal of engaging in reading is to share the experience with others. As evidenced in Daniels and Steres’ (2011) study, creating a school-wide culture of reading increases student engagement and motivation. When reading is seen as a social practice where positive relationships can be built, students are more likely to have the desire to engage in reading so that they are able to join in on the conversation. Knoester (2009) corroborates this notion based on the findings of his study at Jefferson School stating, “independent reading is a social practice in significant ways, and students choose to read or not to read based not only on ability, nor solely on parental support, but also on complex questions of identity and interest in the cultivation of particular peer and adult relationships” (p. 677). The teacher plays a critical role in fostering such engagement. Reutzel and Juth (2014) describe the teacher’s role in supporting students’ motivation to read by stating, “A teacher becomes a reading model by enthusiastically ‘blessing’ or promoting books, by reading aloud interesting books, by discussing books, and by explicitly teaching the strategies and dispositions of skilled and joyful reading” (p.31).

In addition to allowing for talk to be a central part of “independent” reading, using technology in the classroom to bridge home and school is another necessary endeavor for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. Digital literacies are more engaging for today’s learners, and teachers need to find ways to integrate these new literacies into their classrooms to help foster a love of reading in their students. Brown (2017) found, “The interactive features of digital texts encouraged students to remain on task reading, increase the amount of time spent reading, and engage in conversations with their peers

that increased comprehension” (p. 48). This helps students to build self-confidence and enjoyment of reading.

Although all students can benefit from the use of technology with regard to independent reading, this is particularly true of students who are English Language Learners or struggling readers. Digital literacies afford students to opportunity to hear text read out loud, which takes the pressure off of them to decode, allowing for greater engagement with the text. This may also motivate students to want to read more frequently, thus improving their reading abilities. Brown (2017) states, “It would benefit classroom instruction if in-school literacy practices were as creative and innovative as the ones students engage with out-of-school” (p. 43). Because students are well versed in the use of technology outside of school, schools need to integrate technology into the classroom as well. If students feel that reading done in formats other than traditional print-based books is not valued in school, they will be less likely to feel like this is “real” reading, and thus, that they are true readers (Gutierrez, 2011; Guthrie, 2004).

Additionally, when students are given choices in how they learn, they gain autonomy which often leads to increased confidence and achievement. Reutzel and Juth (2014) state, “One way to motivate readers to engage in reading is to allow choice” (p. 34). Children are empowered when they are afforded choice. This allows students to feel as though they can exert some control over their academic lives (Williams et al., 2008). The autonomy gained through the empowerment of making decisions about one’s education causes students to become more engaged in their reading and encourages them to read more, according to research (Hall et al., 2014).

These are all factors that must be considered when deciding on how to structure independent reading in the classroom. Knoester (2010) states, “Given the complex relationships among independent reading habits, literacy learning, and school success, more research on independent reading practices and reading motivation during adolescence is needed” (p. 1). It is my hope that this study will serve as another piece of research that will continue to shape the future of independent reading for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. The next chapter of this thesis will detail the conclusions drawn as a result of this literature review, implications for classroom teachers, and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

#### Summary

Through the research presented in this study, it becomes clear that changes to Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) are necessary for today's learners. There is great value in exploring new literacies to bridge at home endeavors with classroom practices with regard to independent reading. Reading material needs to be relevant to the lives of the students, and interesting. Allowing students choice when it comes to what they read, where, in what format, and how they respond to reading is also important. Today's students need to feel empowered in order to maintain motivation and engagement with reading. Affording them choices in their independent reading reinforces this notion, and helps to keep students interested.

Perhaps the most significant change when it comes to independent reading for today's learners is the value of talk around reading. For the most part, reading is no longer thought of as an independent, silent activity. A review of the literature suggests that motivation and engagement in reading increases for today's students when there is an expectation that talk will be part of their reading experience. Conversation is highly motivating for most students. This can come in the form of conferences with the teacher, book talks with peers, book clubs, literature circles, and simply sharing a joke or a picture from one's reading, among a multitude of other things. Children build relationships around literature, and choose whether to engage in reading, or not, based on the

relationships they are seeking to build (Knoester, 2010). Creating a classroom culture of reading by showcasing books, talking about books, and ensuring that there are plenty of interesting, relevant materials available to students is crucial.

To facilitate independent reading for today's learners, it is necessary for schools to invest time and money into reading. Teachers need to be trained on how to create a classroom or school-wide culture of reading, as well as the best ways to highlight and talk to students about books. If teachers are unprepared to engage in such conversations with their students, it is impossible for independent reading programs to be successful (Daniels & Steres, 2011). This means that teachers will also need to be trained on new literacies and how to utilize them in their classrooms.

Additionally, money should be allocated to the purchase of high quality texts that are interesting and relevant to today's students and the environments in which they live. Multicultural literature should be a focus for schools as so many of today's students come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. Texts written about media sources should also be considered. Students enjoy reading about their favorite games, television shows, and movies, and books about these topics should be considered. Likewise, schools should invest in books in different formats including Manga, graphic novels, and comic books. Digital texts should also be emphasized by schools, as it has been my experience that these frequently pique today's students' interests more than traditional paper based texts.

As noted by Gee (2012), 21<sup>st</sup> century learning is upon us, whether students and teachers are ready for it or not. If the use of digital tools is not taught to students explicitly, a digital achievement gap will emerge in addition to the reading gap that

currently exists. Teachers must be kept abreast of changing literacies as well as best practices when it comes to digital literacy. This will not only enhance students' skills with technology for learning, but it will also help students see themselves as readers which aids in maintaining engagement and motivation. This is due to the fact that outside of school, students are much more likely to use technology for reading than paper based texts. When outside of school practices are linked with in school expectations, students gain confidence, and in turn, see themselves as readers. The autonomy created by students seeing themselves as readers can have an immense impact on student engagement and motivation to read.

### **Implications for Today's Classrooms**

Students need to see themselves as readers. The best way to achieve this goal is by giving students the opportunity to read, and supporting them on their way. When students see reading as something that they are not good at, they tend to shy away from reading rather than doing what they really need to do in such a situation: READ. Classroom teachers should work toward creating a culture of reading in his or her classroom. By building excitement toward books through talk and building relationships around reading, teachers will enhance their students' motivation to read. Likewise, when reading is made a focal point in classrooms, students will read more, and their confidence with reading will increase.

To build autonomy, teachers will need to spend time teaching reading skills and strategies that support students' needs as readers. This can be done through conferences, mini-lessons, or whole group instruction. When students have the skills necessary for



successful independent reading, they will engage more fully in the activity. This, again, builds motivation. Additionally, students need to understand that they can and should take ownership over their reading. As described by Parr and Maguiness (2005), one of the struggles encountered by the teachers in their study was getting students to start a conversation about text. Students are so used to being one-sided receivers of information in school, that they are often uncomfortable with being given power and a voice. This is something that needs to change. Students should be empowered by reading, inciting discussion about text, not just passively responding when they are questioned by the teacher. By building students' confidence with regard to reading, they will become more independent not only with reading text, but talking about it as well.

Because today's students are digital natives, technology is a necessary part of any successful reading program. Teachers need to allow students to make choices in their learning, and the use of technology presents many opportunities for choice. In addition to technological gadgets like mp3 players, digital audio books, e-readers, and computers, tons of websites for reading and collaborating with peers in discussions around reading are available. Websites like GetEpic.com offer large digital libraries, with a variety of text types, for students to access. Likewise, blogs, social media, discussion boards, and gaming websites can be used to connect students to their peers to engage in conversations around text. When students understand that these types of endeavors count as "real" reading and not just something that can be done at home for fun, again, they will begin to see themselves as true readers, thus increasing confidence, value of reading, motivation, and engagement.

Many schools and teachers have gotten away from allowing time for independent reading in the classroom, for a variety of reasons. Based on the research presented in this study, it is clear that it would be wise to return to the practice of affording students time to read in school. Modification to traditional SSR are necessary for today's learners, including the use of technology and talk around text. The only way for children to become better readers is by reading. If reading is not seen as something that is valued by teachers and schools, students are less likely to be intrinsically motivated to read. Students pick up on the cues given by the adults around them. As such, teachers have a crucial role in inciting excitement about reading for students, as well as creating a classroom culture that values reading of all kinds. When teachers are excited about literacy, and have the skills necessary to convey their excitement effectively to students, confidence blooms, and students blossom.

All of the aforementioned considerations should be taken into account when deciding on an independent reading program for today's students. Although independent reading should be adapted to individual classrooms and learners, the main themes of choice, talk, and technology are consistent, based on the literature reviewed in this study (Williams et al., 2008; Trudel, 2007; Parr & Maguiness, 2005; Hall et al., 2014; Brown, 2016). Teachers should use these elements as a base to determine what works best for their students. Regardless of exactly how teachers choose to use independent reading in their classrooms, the important fact to take away is that students will only improve their reading by practicing. Independent reading in classrooms, therefore, should be reaffirmed as an integral part of students' school day.

## **Suggestions for Further Research**

Much research from the field exists on independent reading practices, but these studies often neglect to incorporate all of the elements that this research study has suggested. Empirical research on motivation and engagement with reading is necessary. Though some such research does exist, it should be retested, with a focus on 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and learners. Further, research on the best ways to stay on top of and effectively use technology for independent reading would be beneficial to the field.

## **Final Thoughts**

Although this research study is limited to a review of current literature, it is my hope that it will contribute to the changing views of independent reading practices for today's learners. Independent reading is an integral part of reading education, and should be practiced regularly with the support of well-trained adults. Students will find things that interest them to place value on. If reading is not promoted as a worthwhile activity, students' attention will turn elsewhere. Creating a culture of reading in one's classroom, building relationships around reading, and making students feel like true readers by affording them autonomy in their decisions about reading will increase students' interest in reading. Without a desire to read, students risk becoming stuck in a place where their reading skills are stagnant, and may even decrease. It is our job, as educators, to make reading fun, interesting, and engaging to all students by allowing them to start where they are, and skillfully supporting and challenging them as their reading progresses. The ability to read is one of the most fundamental academic skills. With digital literacies becoming more and more prominent, it is important that students can read and think

critically about their reading in order to successfully navigate today's digital world. Teachers must be there to get students to see literacy as a part of who they are. As evidenced from the literature review contained within this study, students need time to read, teachers who are prepared to build a classroom culture of reading, and materials that are reflective of their lives. Modifications to traditional SSR are necessary to appeal to today's students. Suggestions taken from the literature review within this research study can be powerful tools for teachers to use to begin the journey of getting students to see the value in reading, thus creating lifelong readers in their students.

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