The Impact of Choice Novels on Student Reading Motivation

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Abstract

Too often, reading instruction in schools does not encourage or support a classroom culture that fosters intrinsic reading motivation. Through this teaching inquiry project, I modified my approach to teaching literature and incorporated independent novel choice with book clubs into my high school English classroom. My research study examined if choice novels impacted reading motivation. Over the course of the project, I collected qualitative and quantitative data to determine the impact of choice novels on my students. Findings indicated that choice novels and book clubs enriched students' conversations about literature and furthered their connections to one another. I found that this choice novel reading program brought back a genuine interest in reading as a result of an increase in reading motivation.

Keywords: book clubs, choice novels, high school English, independent reading, reading motivation

As an educator, I endeavor to ascertain the interests of my students in hopes of increasing motivation and learning. I continually attempt to align the whole-class novels I select for students to read with their interests. Nevertheless, I still struggle to get my students to complete their assigned reading at home. I find that students do not always complete the assigned novels I choose for them and are not motivated to read. While I believe most of my students do want to read, and a lack of time seems to be the main contributing factor for their failure to read independently, I want to see if I can increase student participation and motivation to read when I allow them to take ownership of their reading through the use of book choice and book clubs.

While I hope my students can see the required whole-class novels I have chosen for them as valuable to their own lives and experiences, I want students to see reading as not always something they have to do but something they want to do. Students need a reason to read besides a grade or assignment, and I recognize assigning a whole-class novel may not be enough to engage and motivate my students to read. I hope allowing students to choose their own novels can help cultivate a greater love of reading as well as increase motivation and engagement. I want students to be able to focus on how the books make them feel and their emotional reactions to what they have read, building greater emotional empathy, not just academic skills. For these reasons, I decided to integrate book choice and book clubs into my curriculum, leading to the inquiry question for this study: How will incorporating book choice through book clubs impact student motivation to read independently?

Literature Review

Motivation is what moves a person to do or not to do something. Whether intrinsic or extrinsic, motivation impacts behavior. Too often, reading instruction in schools does not encourage or support a classroom culture that fosters intrinsic reading motivation. Besides increasing literacy, higher motivation in reading leads to higher reading comprehension and more engaged learners

(Guthrie et al., 2007). Students are more likely to feel successful when they believe the cause was internal and perceive they have choice in their learning and that their learning connects to them. Since much of the research on reading motivation reveals that students' reading motivation decreases as they grow older, it is important for teachers to identify instructional practices that can foster a student's reading motivation and engagement (Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016). Facilitating students' reading success and motivation occurs when teachers incorporate practices that promote autonomy, relevancy, social interactions, and self-efficacy (Wigfield et al., 2016). After reading the research on types of readers and their motivations and influences on reading motivation, I identified the most salient themes within the literature—choice, relevancy, and small reading groups.

Types of Readers and Their Motivations

There are different types of readers in every classroom. Guthrie, Coddington, and Wigfield (2009) identified four student profiles of readers: avid, ambivalent, apathetic, and averse. These student profiles are important in determining how different subsets of readers and their motivations influence achievement. Each group of students approaches the reading process differently. Guthrie et al.'s (2009) research connected a student's high or low intrinsic motivation with reading avoidance and the impact of each on reading motivations. Students can have multiple motivations, but it is important to recognize that some students can have high intrinsic motivation yet also be high on avoidance (Guthrie et al., 2009). There are many students who like to read in their free time but completely shut down and become disengaged when assigned reading in school. It is also important to note that Guthrie et al. (2009) concluded that some students, especially African American students, can be low in avoidance but relatively high achieving readers. Students may not be motivated to complete required reading assigned in school, but these same students do not always lack in achievement or comprehension. It is important to recognize these subsets of readers and their motivations in order to focus and change traditional reading instruction in the high school English classroom. Reading motivation is complex and cannot be easily broken down into simply intrinsic or extrinsic factors since the degree of avoidance and apathy can contribute a higher proportion of variance in reading achievement than intrinsic motivation (Guthrie et al., 2009).

Influences on Reading Motivation

Guthrie et al. (2007) researched the positive affect for reading and the impact of engaged learners on cognitive engagement. The more learners have control over their learning the more motivation they have, especially in relation to reading. Authentically engaging learners with rich texts and social interaction can increase reading motivation, so teachers must be cognizant when designing their instructional choices. Research indicates that incorporating rich texts by providing choice is not sufficient to promote motivation and learning, but interest in the choice and relevancy matters even more as a motivator (Flowerday & Shell, 2015).

Choice as a Motivating Factor

Students' reading motivation decreases when texts appear irrelevant to their lives and cannot be related to personally (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002). Students at the highest levels of motivation preferred to be in control and make their own choices about reading. This includes not only selecting topics and choosing their own book, but also when and where they read (Guthrie et al, 2007). Student responses in Ivey and Broaddus's research (2001) demonstrated that an increase in motivation occurred when students found good material to read and had a part in the selection of those reading materials. These results diverged with the same student survey responses which found students' worst reading experiences occurred when given assigned reading. Students

sometimes fail to see the connection between whole-class novels, or required assigned reading, and how it connects to their own lives, making required reading a disengaging process (Ivy & Broaddus, 2001).

Interest as a Motivating Factor

Not only choice, but also interest and relevancy impact motivation. Choice does not matter if student interest is not considered (Flowerday & Shell, 2015). When breaking down the effects of interest and choice on learning, Flowerday and Shell found that "interest and not choice was by far the most important influence on learning, reader response, engagement, and attitude" (2015, p. 139). When students' interests drive the text selections and students feel they have a voice, they are more intrinsically motivated to participate in the reading process (Lapp & Fisher, 2009). Relevancy matters as much as the choice. Assor et al. (2002) found an increased relevance had two important associations: positive feeling and cognitive engagement. Relevancy was the only teacher behavior in their research that significantly related to both associations; thus, positive feelings create a stronger intrinsic motivation, which then results in stronger engaged learners and learning. The practical implications for teachers around this research confirm that teachers need to actively understand their students' interests and goals before creating a choice reading program. If students can see the connection between their goals, interests, and schoolwork, it can create a classroom culture of positive engagement, motivation, and learning (Assor et al., 2002).

Small Reading Groups

Social interaction and social motivation also factor into reading motivation. Besides providing choice and relevancy to increase motivation, students need to be provided with opportunities for meaningful social interaction (Miller, 2015). Students need to see that their peers value reading as well, and a shared reading experience allows students to deepen their understandings of the novels they read together (Lapp & Fisher, 2009). While Guthrie et al. (2007) found that some of the most highly motivated students are more solitary readers, teachers must engage and motivate all student profiles of readers. Promoting interaction among students and teaching students how to collaborate, discuss, and share the books they read is an important construct in creating life-long motivated readers as well as a stronger classroom culture. In addition, collaborative discussion of literature generates higher levels of social relationships between students and their peers (Petrich, 2015). When giving students a space to discuss books, especially in small groups, a classroom culture of shared interests develops (Merga, McRae, & Rutherford, 2018). Doing so communicates to students the importance of reading, builds powerful communities of learners, and elevates the social status of books within the classroom (Merga et al., 2018).

The research on book choice, relevancy, and social interaction is clear: Positive reading motivations correlate to higher reading achievement and engagement (Guthrie et al., 2007). If the goal is for students to gain control of their own learning by becoming more cognitively-engaged high-level thinkers, then changing the motivating factors of why a student reads can greatly impact every student.

Study Context

The students who took part in this study are highly-motivated learners. The participants attend a university laboratory school where high school students are fully dual enrolled in university courses after a traditional ninth-grade year. The ninth- through twelfth-grade population consists of 42% White, 22% Hispanic, 13% Black, and 17% Asian students. The academic and personal qualities of each student are considered before admission, so students come academically prepared for a rigorous curriculum. This study's sample includes students enrolled in my English course during the fall 2018 semester.

My English class is the only high school English class students take before entering college. After students finish their ninth-grade year in English, they enroll in ENC 1101 and 1102—the two foundational freshman writing courses at most universities. In a traditional school setting, by the end of senior year, students will have taken a required four years of English classes. In that time, they would have been exposed to a myriad of literature, which I am trying to condense into two semesters. I have only four months to prepare my students for university level work, including developing their analytical writing, reading, and thinking ability. For me, besides increasing student motivation to read at home, I hope to acquaint my students with more diverse literature during this time period, so when they enter college, they do not experience a knowledge gap in the literature to which they have been exposed.

Researcher Teaching Philosophy

In order to unfold the maximum individual potential of all my students, I challenge all my students to reach their potential. Within my classroom, active not passive learning is my goal. In order to make this possible, I believe that learning is most likely to occur when students become personally engaged with the material and perceive the subject matter to be directly relevant to their own lives. The foundation of any classroom is built upon what I feel are virtues for life: kindness, patience, perseverance, and understanding. For me, the power of being an English teacher is using literature to explore these virtues. I believe the contributions of literature to the imagination are endless in both a receptive and a productive aspect. Literature not only furnishes our intellects with complex schemata that enable us to interpret the events of our lives, it also gives us models with which to imagine new creations. It is with this philosophy in mind, that I decided to rethink my approach to teaching literature and give greater autonomy to my students by incorporating choice novels. With a hope for more exposure to diverse literature and an increase in motivation to read at home, this inspired me to modify my approach to teaching literature and incorporate independent novel choice with book clubs into my classroom.

Methods

I conducted an action research study. The action research process is more than self-study. It requires the action researcher to collect data and pay careful attention to how the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted with the hopes of presenting validated findings that can be shared with a broader research community (Riel, 2019). As a result, the process of action research enabled me to reflect on my teaching by problem solving an area of concern within my classroom: student reading motivation. I then was able to address my concern through the research question: How will incorporating book choice through book clubs impact student motivation to read independently?

In hoping to develop a richer and more engaging reading practice within my classroom, I drew from multiple methods in my research. These methods included qualitative and quantitative data collected through student surveys on Google Forms as well as qualitative data gathered from my own observations that I documented in a research journal.

Procedures

The research study commenced at the beginning of the fall semester. During the research study, I completed two cycles of data collection within the course of the fall semester. Each cycle lasted four weeks, and participation in the choice novel book club was mandatory for all students in my classes. At the beginning of each month, I introduced students to their choice novels, except during the month of October when the class read a whole-class assigned novel. Students had four weeks to read their choice novel.

Cycle 1 focused on novels around the thematic topic of modern classics. Focusing on modern classics, especially contemporary selections, allowed me to provide selections that were inherently relevant to my students' lives since "by design, [contemporary selections] are responsive to the emotional and cultural challenges young people face in their everyday lives" (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 257). At the end of the four weeks, students participated in a book club during class. The book club allowed students to meet with their peers who also read the same novel. The book club lasted an entire class period of 90 minutes, and students engaged in discussions on their choice novel. I did not grade students on the reading of their novel, but on the book club discussion day, students evaluated their peer discussion, and I monitored student discussions by walking around the classroom. In my observations, students not only discussed the novel superficially but shifted to deep, insightful, and complex considerations, offering their varied viewpoints on a personal and social level outside of the text. After the book club, students completed a survey on their reading motivation and book club experience. In Cycle 2, students went through the same process, and I collected the same data, except the thematic topic of the novel choice options changed to dystopian literature.

To introduce the novels and get students excited to read their choice novels, I taught a mini-lesson on the characteristics of the genre during each cycle. I then gave students a choice of novels they could read through Google Slides, providing summaries of each novel and background information on the novels to spark initial interest. Within three days of introducing the choice novels, students completed a survey with their novel selection and reasons for choosing the novel.

Students were responsible for buying, borrowing, or downloading their own novels. If a student had trouble finding their choice novel, I would provide them with a copy. Every Friday during the four weeks, I would complete a reading check to see how students were progressing with their independent novels. Students identified what percentage of the novel they read and set reading goals for the week ahead. During the fourth week of class, all students participated in a book club discussion day. Students were separated into groups depending on the novel they read, and each group facilitated their own discussion. The book club discussion lasted 90 minutes during the regular class period. Each group was provided with questions to help focus and support their discussions if the group struggled without teacher support. The book club conversations were completely student moderated, but I did walk around monitoring the discussions as well as listening and asking questions of each book club group.

Data Collection

Throughout my action research, I kept a research journal in which I documented my process of planning and implementing choice novels as well as my observations during the book club discussion days. I collected student data through surveys on Google Forms from which I was able to glean both qualitative and quantitative data. The first question on the survey asked: "Did you feel picking your own novel impacted your motivation to read?" Students could provide only a binary choice of yes/no. This question provided my quantitative data. As a follow up to this question, I asked students to expand on their thinking. Students shared their thoughts on their choice novel as well as book club experience by answering four open-ended questions:

1. Why or why not did a choice novel impact your motivation to read?
2. Did you enjoy your choice novel? (Explain your answer.)
3. Did you enjoy your book club experience? (Explain your answer.)
4. What did you learn from your book club experience?

Student responses to the open-ended questions provided qualitative data for further thematic analysis while quantitative data were gathered from the yes/no questions.

Data Analysis

When analyzing student responses, I used the findings from the literature regarding types of readers and their motivations and influences on reading motivation as a priori codes: choice, relevancy, and small reading groups. I coded all qualitative data using the a priori codes and looked across coding categories for themes that addressed my research question: How will incorporating book choice through book clubs impact student motivation to read independently? The following themes were found: interest and choice as a motivating factor, enjoyment of reading as a result of no grading or assessment, and an increase of ownership and accountability. Seventy students participated in each cycle of choice novels and book club. The survey was administered electronically to all 70 students in both cycles. For the Cycle 1 survey, I received responses from 57 students, a response rate of 81%. For the Cycle 2 survey, I received responses from 69 students, a response rate of 99%.

Findings

After analyzing the data with the research question in mind, the following themes emerged from the data: the role of choice and interest on reading motivation, and the impact of student ownership on their learning. The themes will be further discussed in the sections that follow.

Choice and Interest Impact on Motivation

The appealing interests and selective choice of connecting to one's novel was the strongest motivator of increased reading motivation. The first question on the survey asked a binary yes/no question. In the Cycle 1 survey, 78% of students ($n = 57$) reported that picking their own novel positively impacted their motivation to read. In the Cycle 2 survey, 81% of students ($n = 69$) reported that picking their own novel positively impacted their motivation to read. Self-assessing their own reading motivation, students connected the positive experience of choice novels with a direct impact on their reading motivation.

Four open-ended questions on the survey required written feedback and reflection on how choice novels and book clubs impacted reading motivation. Students expressed in their responses how having choice in the novels they read impacted their reading motivation. They recognized how choice novels gave them "a better opportunity to pick something more akin to my tastes." Choice novels also allowed students to spend time exploring their novel options and "do [their] own research and find out if [they] would actually enjoy the novel." Students felt they had a direct influence on their choice, and they could not only pick books that interested them but also "find themes that [they] liked." Giving students a choice is critical, but connecting what they read to their interests and making the literature relevant to their lives was just as important. Students who did not finish their choice novel reflected that they still had trouble finding titles that interested them since choice reading "still felt like required reading," or as the literature suggests, some students, even factoring in choice and interest, may be apathetic to reading.

Choice novels also helped expose students to different genres of literature and writers they normally would not read. I had many students asking for book recommendations based off of their choice novels. For example, in Cycle 2 students could read *Gunslinger,* the first volume of Stephen King's seven-book *Dark Tower* series. After finishing *The Dark Tower I*, I had many students ask if I could make *The Dark Tower II*: *The Drawing of the Three* a choice for the next book club. A few students already let me know they purchased the next book in the series and had already started to read it. In addition, other students enjoyed reading Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and asked to read more of Bradbury's writing, so I provided students with a copy of Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*.

The increase in reading motivation reported by students in the survey also resulted from being part of a shared reading experience in the book clubs. Student choice connected students in class because students were grouped based on their choices and interests, rather than prior friendships. They were able to engage in conversations with peers whom they otherwise might not have. During the book club discussion day, students were motivated to share their reading experience, increasing the social aspect of their choice reading. In their book clubs, students were able to "talk about larger topics than just the book" and see all the "different perspectives and thoughts" other students had. It was also beneficial for students to see how their peers became "dumbfounded at the same points [in the novel] that I was and taken aback at others." This shared experience and social interaction suggests an interconnected relationship between choice, social interaction, and relevancy in increasing reading motivation.

Ownership of Learning

The responsibility of choosing one's own novel encouraged students to read and adhere to their reading. Students recognized how choosing their own novels made them more responsible for completing their reading. Students expressed in their responses how choice novels increased their self-efficacy. The desire to read did not come from a teacher mandate, but their own sense of urgency and accountability. Students finished their choice novel because they acknowledged that "if I didn't like the book, it was my own fault, and I would try harder to like it." Setting goals also impacted their motivation to read. As one student commented, "I knew my limits," allowing this student to pick the right book for his needs and interests, instead of a teacher prescribing a one-size-fits-all novel to the whole class. Choice novels especially benefited students who responded on their survey that reading was "an OK way to spend time" instead of a "great way to spend time." In this population of more reluctant readers, these students knew they had to "finish [the novel] because I was the one who picked it out." Without a teacher assigning novels to read or assigning a grade for reading, students still took ownership of their learning and held themselves accountable.

An important implication for teacher practice is that students still will complete work and take pride in their work without being assigned a grade. Student accountability and ownership of learning did not decrease as a result of not being graded. In fact, some students were motivated even more to read their novels because reading "wasn't just to answer questions but to genuinely figure out the novel" and personally connect to it. Some students even felt it was easier to read and "enjoy [the novel] knowing I wouldn't be graded." The ownership for one's learning occurred for multiple reasons, but ultimately all led to the same result: an increase in student reading motivation.

Implications

Through choice novel book clubs, I hoped to bring back a genuine interest and a love of reading in my students, and it seems choice novels and book clubs clearly impacted student reading motivation. Students were excited at the beginning of each month when I introduced the choice novels, and at the culmination of each book club, students were already asking what choice novels I planned for the next month. Besides offering choice to students, the book club discussions were also central to increasing motivation as I found the social engagement and activity were crucial to engaged reading. It is for this reason I plan to continue to provide opportunities for choice novel selection and further engage my students in the selection of their choice novels.

While this research may not be generalized to every classroom, there are larger implications about the role student choice plays within curriculum today. In this study, students had a voice in their curriculum and reported an increase in motivation and ownership of their learning. These

ideas have implications across disciplines and grade levels. Student involvement in curriculum choices based on their interests can be a key strategy for increasing motivation in any classroom.

Research is not some esoteric term that frightens me anymore. I realized I have already been conducting research in my classes, albeit informally. As a teacher, I continually ask my students for feedback on my teaching and their learning, and now, the research process has taught me the tools to formalize my questions and analyze the data based on supporting literature. These research tools have made me into a more systematic and data driven teacher. Developing a research question and taking it through the whole process of a research cycle is a fluid and dynamic process. There is no one way to go about answering the research question and the process can evolve over the whole research cycle. In addition, my research opened my eyes to some of the preconceived assumptions I had about my students, and instead, the research allowed me to learn and get feedback directly from my students and hear their voice that challenged my assumptions, making me a more openly conscious teacher.

I am proud of my students for willingly participating not only in this new reading program, but also in this research study. They continually met my expectations and took ownership over their learning and the book choice program. By fully engaging in the choice program, students connected to each other on a richer level as well as increased their academic and social experience.

Limitations

During this research study, I still encountered some students who were not engaged and did not complete their choice reading at home or in the required time. Nonparticipation, although small, limited my data collection and I was unable to collect data from a handful of my students. Since this study was conducted at one school site, the results may not be able to be generalized, but I believe they can be transferred to a myriad of classes. Some students also struggled to finish their choice novel in the required time because of other homework and obligations. While the data clearly show student motivation increased with choice reading and book clubs, I am still balancing how to make all students accountable for their choice reading because I did see some book club conversations suffered when all students in the group did not read the choice novel. When I see certain book club conversations lagging in depth, I need to find a way to pinpoint the students who did not read and find appropriate consequences. Even though not all students finished their choice novel, I found all students at least started their novel, and most of these students still recorded on their post reading survey that their reading motivation increased as a result of choice novels.

Future Research

Through action research, I can continue to refine my teaching practice and identify more areas where I can influence and improve student reading motivation. For the data collection, in my future research, I feel my research would benefit from a pre-test and post-test on reading motivation so I could measure for an increase in motivation and engagement instead of only focusing on one self-assessed question on reading motivation. In addition, there is still room to improve on student led book clubs and making sure the depth of conversation and participation increases. I feel more modeling of high-level discussions, clear expectations, and feedback can help improve the book club experience by giving students concrete and clear measures for success. For future research, I want to continue influencing all learners and readers while specifically looking at my student population of apathetic readers to see if choice novels change their reading attitudes, behaviors, and motivation. I want to specifically impact students who score lower in reading motivation on an initial reading motivation survey, so I can see if choice novels directly impact this specific student population.

Throughout this process, not only has the action research process improved my teaching, but also has had a positive impact on my classroom community because my students feel they are more valued and have a stronger voice. This process has empowered both students and me as a teacher by positively impacting the learning environment within my classroom.

When I began this research, I hoped to expose my students to more diverse literature and increase their motivation to read outside of class. I believe that my findings have significant implications for my teaching practice and highlight how essential it is for students to be involved in the decision-making surrounding the curriculum in which they engage. Teachers can directly impact a student's motivation not only to read but to participate in the learning process. Building a curriculum around choice and interest can promote a stronger collective classroom community and most importantly impact student motivation and learning.

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