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RUNNING HEAD: INDEPENDENT, SELF-SELECTED READING IN THE MIDDLE  
GRADES

Improving Attitudes and Motivation to Read  
Through Independent, Self-selected Reading  
in the Middle Grades

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Master's Research Project

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*This research project is dedicated to my parents  
who gave me one of life's greatest gifts, a love of reading.*

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### *Problem Statement and Its Significance*

In the decade since the passage of President George W. Bush's sweeping education reform bill, *No Child Left Behind*, an emphasis on accountability and measurable student progress has reshaped Reading and Literature education dramatically. Expensive reading programs are now a dime a dozen and are often prescribed with the enthusiasm of a magic bullet. While in some cases this "results" weighted formula has produced higher literacy levels among American students, this narrow vision of success dangerously ignores an even greater element of the equation: getting students to read. According to Thomas and Moorman (1983), "The student who *can* but chooses *not to* [read] is probably the most crucial concern confronting our educational institutions today. It is not illiteracy we are combating, but *aliteracy*" (p. 137).

Students in the middle grades present a unique challenge to English Language Arts education. Research has found that interest in reading declines during these transitional years and continues this descent throughout high school (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995; Goodman, 1996; Tunnell, Calder, & Phaup, 1991). Students in this age bracket find themselves at a crossroad between learning how to read and reading to learn. Ivey and Broaddus (2009) add that as students continue to develop their reading skills in the middle grades they are "also beginning to explore possible identities and a range of personal interests about the world," including their own perceptions of themselves as readers (p. 353).

Because time spent reading is correlated with competence in reading, students in the middle and secondary grades who choose not to read risk backsliding academically, even if they were not struggling readers initially (Mullis, Campbell, & Farstrup, 1993). Therefore, reading engagement and student attitudes are an essential consideration during this developmental stage.

Independent and self-selected reading practices are one such method for developing positive attitudes towards reading and encouraging the exploration of students' "reading identities." Stairs and Burgos (2010) add that "Independent, self-selected reading creates a classroom culture where reading and student choice are valued and the standards are met by employing meaningful pedagogy" (p. 43). By teaching students to engage authentically with books and literature in ways that are representative of how millions of independent, literate adults engage with texts on a daily basis, schools are far more likely to instill reading as an enriching, life-long practice.

Many teachers, however, are not so convinced. Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009) presented various opinions from educators who view independent reading as a waste of time and therefore have dropped it from many classes. Ivey and Broaddus (2009) say, "Some may argue that free reading programs driven by students' choices may lead to students reading narrowly in non-challenging materials" (p. 368). Furthermore, if one were to look to the federally mandated *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002, the five areas of reading instruction are defined as: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. For teachers who prioritize their instruction according to the skills their students are required to reproduce at the end of each academic year, affective learning, such as a love and interest for reading, falls to the bottom of their priority lists.

However, reading as a life-long skill and practice may be of greater national importance than once believed. According to a 2007 study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, declining reading trends among American adolescents can be linked to civic, social and economic implications. This study found that literary readers are more likely than non-readers to engage in positive civic and individual activities such as volunteering, attending sports and cultural events, and exercising (<http://www.nea.gov/news/news07/TRNR.html>, 2007). Such

activities generate a considerable income for communities, while additionally impacting community cohesion, and public health. Furthermore, what was once considered a national job market is rapidly becoming globalized, and American students find themselves in competition for their own intellectual and economic stake in this new world order. But can our students keep pace with their international counterparts? American fifteen-year-olds ranked fifteenth in average reading scores among 31 industrialized nations, a deficiency that is drawing increased awareness amongst industry professionals. In a poll of our nation's workforce leaders, nearly two thirds ranked reading comprehension as a "very important" skill for high school graduates, and yet thirty-eight percent of this same group consider most high school graduates deficient in the basic skill (<http://www.nea.gov/news/news07/TRNR.html>, 2007). Such findings bring a fresh perspective to just how important reading is, not only as a skill, but as a lifelong habit.

Independent, self-selected reading challenges the traditional whole-class novel approach by empowering students to explore their individual reading preferences and presenting reading as a natural and enriching activity. As students continue to develop as both individuals and readers, their demands of written text will fluctuate to meet their immediate needs. Round-Robin reading, book-reports, and multiple-choice assessments do little to teach reading as anything more than a digestible skill. Once achieved it is quickly forgotten. In order for students to reap the tremendous benefits of reading, they must first come to appreciate it on their own terms and see it as a practice that is both integral and essential to their lives.

### *Research Question*

The purpose of this research project is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' present attitudes towards reading and the power of independent and self-selected reading to impact these attitudes and increase reading engagement amongst middle school

students. By highlighting students' voices through attitude surveys, interviews and student writing, it is a secondary goal of this project to provide educators with a well supported rationale for incorporating more opportunities for independent reading and student selection of reading material into their classrooms. Therefore, the formal research question for this study is, *does independent, self-selected reading improve attitudes and motivation to read amongst middle school students, as compared to a traditional teacher-centered classroom.*

## Chapter Two: Perspectives and Previous Studies

### *Literature Review*

One could well argue that independent, self-selected reading is a pedagogical tool as age old as reading itself. Prior to the establishment of public schools in the United States, many of our most prominent thinkers were self-educated entirely through independent and self-selected reading. It is well known that President Lincoln's formal education was primarily self-directed and consisted of hours of independent reading. In our more modern history figures such as Malcolm X, who dropped out of school after junior high, credited massive amounts of free reading in prison for his own literacy development. He wrote in his autobiography,

Many who hear me today somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I've said, will think I went to school far beyond the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies...In every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading in my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. (El-Shabbazz, 1964, p. 179)

Over the last twenty to thirty years, research studies have found independent, self-selected reading to be one of the most powerful strategies for increasing students' engagement and attitudes towards reading. Consequently, increased reading can be attributed to better writing, better spelling, better grammatical competence, better comprehension, and greater world knowledge (Krashen, 1997, 2004; McQuillan, 1998, Kuhn et al., 2006). In 1985 the National Commission on Reading released the report *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, in which they specifically recommended the use of independent reading in K-12 classrooms, and also stated that, "Increasing the proportion of children who read widely and with evident satisfaction ought to be as much a goal of reading instruction as increasing the number who are competent readers"

(p. 15). Unfortunately, twenty-five years later, free reading in the classroom is still extremely limited, as is the amount of voluntary reading performed by adolescents outside of school. English Language Arts classes at the middle and high school level are dominated by whole-class novels that limit students' exercise of choice and alienate those who do not read on grade level. For such students, independent, self-selected reading could be the key that unlocks a lifelong love and appreciation for reading.

This chapter will present a review of the current research regarding independent self-selected reading, specifically focusing on what it is and how it operates within the classroom, how it is supported by pedagogical theory, how it supports the unique developmental needs of students in the middle grades, how it increases students' attitudes and motivation to read, and finally how positive attitudes and motivation affect students' long-term reading development.

#### *What is Independent, Self-selected Reading?*

Independent, self-selected reading exists behind the guise of several different names. Some may refer to it simply as independent reading, silent sustained reading, or even FVR, free voluntary reading. At its core is a student-centered pedagogical approach, which emphasizes the readers' personal choices of material and authentic interaction with the text (i.e.- reading, discussing, reflecting). In the introduction to his book *The Power of Reading*, Stephen Krashen (1993) defines free voluntary reading [independent, self-selected reading] as "...reading because you want to. For school-age children FVR means no book report, no questions at the end of the chapter, and no looking up every vocabulary word. FVR means putting down a book you don't like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading that highly literate people do obsessively all the time" (p. x) This model stands in great contrast to the teacher-centered instruction that tends to dominate middle school classrooms.

As described by the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLR) ([www.nclr.org](http://www.nclr.org)), teacher-centered classrooms place primary focus upon the instructor as the source of all knowledge. The instructor chooses all educational topics and is solely responsible for assessing the learning that has taken place. In middle and high school environments, this can often take the form of the whole-class novel, an approach in which the instructor chooses a single text to be read and analyzed by all students homogeneously.

This approach has been characteristic of ELA classrooms for decades; however, Fisher and Ivey (2007) assert, “Students are not reading more or reading better as a result of the whole-class novel. Instead, students are reading less and are less motivated, less engaged, and less likely to read in the future” (p. 495). Ivey and Broaddus (2001) add that such institutionalized curricula that are unresponsive to students’ needs, interests and preferences may foster both negative attitudes and school failure. In contrast, independent, self-selected reading activates student engagement by empowering their sense of autonomy and appealing to their unique and varied reading tastes.

Independent, self-selected reading may take a variety of forms and vary in the degree to which it is integrated into the course curriculum. It can occur in a more self-contained format, such as silent sustained reading time, also known as DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), during which students are afforded a specific amount of time to independently read outside of the classroom curriculum. Teachers may otherwise choose to incorporate independent reading more integrally through classroom book clubs, or literature circles. Yet another method that has grown in popularity over the last several years was first introduced by Nancie Atwell, and places sustained independent, self-selected reading and authentic textual interaction at the center of the classroom design. This approach is known as Reader’s Workshop.

In her own words, Atwell (2009) describes Reader's Workshop as, "a deliberate environment that supports immersion. Immersion in stories, in characters and the beauty of written language" (<http://www.heinemann.com>). In her 1998 book, *In the Middle*, Atwell identifies five key components of the Reader's Workshop:

- **Time:** students need substantial time to read and look through books
- **Choice:** students need the opportunity to choose reading material for themselves
- **Response:** Students should respond in natural ways to the books they are reading through conference, written entries, classroom discussion and project
- **Community:** Students are part of a classroom reading community in which all members can make meaningful contributions to the learning of the group
- **Structure:** the workshop rest on a structure of routines and procedures that support students and teachers.

The format of the Reader's Workshop program is closely related to that of the Writer's Workshop. It is comprised of mini lessons that teach some aspect of literature or reading strategy, followed by independent reading time in which students can practice their new skills, and finally sharing time where students converse with peers and teachers about their reading and reflect through journal entries or other forms of authentic assessment. According to ReadersWorkshop.org, "The program emphasizes the interaction between readers and text. Students learn to ask questions, make connections with prior knowledge and previously read texts, and ask questions to clarify faulty comprehension they recognize has occurred" (<http://www.readersworkshop.org/>).

The basis of independent, self-selected reading in all of these varying forms is rooted in student centered, constructivist educational theory. The work of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and

Louise Rosenblatt support the use of independent, self-selected reading as an appropriate instructional method.

*What pedagogical theory supports independent, self-selected reading?*

At its core, independent, self-selected reading promotes authentic interaction with literary texts. As opposed to the teacher-centered whole class novel approach, students are encouraged to engage with material as true readers and to respond to each text from a critical, yet personal perspective.

This model is essentially constructivist in nature and draws heavily from Dewey's belief that learning occurs through authentic interaction with situations and materials that resemble those found in the natural world. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), he states, "if knowledge comes from the impressions made upon us by natural objects, it is impossible to procure knowledge without the use of objects which impress the mind" (p. 217-218). In the same vein, if we are to teach students how to read, and to enjoy reading, we must allow them to truly read. Unfortunately, the rigorously controlled activities that we label as reading in the schools are sending a mixed message. In the national report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985), the authors convey that, "Many of the tasks assigned to children in the name of reading are drudgery. Thus, it is not surprising that in one study for instance, interviews with a sample of poor, black children reading a year above grade level indicated that most [of them] liked to read, but few like the activities called "reading" in school" (p. 15).

Dewey additionally recognized that the learner should not be a passive recipient of knowledge, but rather should actively participate in her education. By placing the student at the center of the learning equation, he also knew that the individual needs and interests of the learner would be integral to her process. In Philips and Soltis's (2009) text, *Perspectives on Learning*,

they described Dewey's perspective as follows, "in nature, thinking was stimulated by problems that the learner was vitally interested in solving; the learner was both physically and mentally active and alert and engaged...[for this reason] Dewey vigorously advocated activity methods, and he argued that problems that were meaningful to the pupils must emerge from situations that fell within their interests and experiences" (p. 38-39). Over fifteen years of research on student motivation has found student choice to be a critical factor in encouraging them to read. Johnson and Blair (2003) corroborate this notion stating that, "In addition to fostering intrinsic motivation, allowing students to make choices gives them control. When real world readers choose a text, they are reading to learn and enjoy. They accomplish these tasks by selecting a text that fulfills their needs. Selecting what to read is a major part of becoming a reader" (p. 183).

It may be easily misconstrued that independent reading is an individual task, and therefore not inherently social; however, the sharing of new knowledge and reading experiences with others remains an essential component of independent, self-selected reading. Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* theory addresses this notion that through interaction with others, particularly through speech (both inner-speech and oral), individuals construct greater levels of understanding. Similarly, independent, self-selected reading enables each student to access literature that meets their unique needs as a developing reader; and authentic engagement with peers and teachers, provides a natural scaffold to higher level skills and strategies.

Independent, self-selected reading also draws heavily from Rosenblatt's (1938) reader-response criticism. This school of literary theory rejects the traditional notion that there is one agreed upon interpretation of a given text, and instead focuses upon the interpretation and experience of the individual reader. In the 1994 article, *Reader-Response Theory and the English*

*Curriculum*, Robert Probst coolly refocuses the goals of the K-12 classroom stating, “Our primary goal in the English curriculum is not to make literary scholars of all of our students. It is to make them readers and writers, independent and self-reliant thinkers who employ language and literature to enrich their lives” (p. 44). In order for students to “see” themselves as readers, it is essential that classrooms uphold a respect for the uniqueness of the individual reader and the value of the individual reading. As Probst explains, “a work may mean to a reader what it did not mean to its author. It may trigger responses, evoke memories, awaken emotions and thoughts that could not have been predicted by the writer. And those associations may be of much more interest and importance to the reader than anything the writer could have predicted” (1994, p. 38). Through reader response, the developing reader is already equipped with the tools that ensure their success, as opposed to conceiving of a meaning that is distinctly outside of them self.

Exploring these theoretical underpinnings provides a broader understanding of how independent, self-selected reading functions as a pedagogical tool. However, in order to fully comprehend the benefits of this practice, one must understand the unique needs and literacy trends that characterize students in the middle grades.

#### *Developmental trends of students in the middle grades*

Students in the middle grades are positioned at a uniquely transitional point in their development, both as adolescents and readers. These individuals range in age from eleven to fourteen, which typically includes grades 6-8. Students at this stage are often found literally in the middle of emotional, physical, psychological and intellectual changes; and as Atwell (1998) explains in her book *In the Middle*, these students often struggle between their own needs and the demands of new roles placed on them by society. Kasten and Wilfong (2005) found that

“Adolescents are quick to judge things in school as related or unrelated to their lives. [Although] often things associated with school literacy are not seen as relevant by adolescents” (p.657). In order to appeal to this developmental need, schools must find ways of contextualizing their curriculum in ways that make it significant to their audience.

As students in the middle grades become increasingly aware of themselves as individuals, they begin to exhibit and pursue a vast variety of topics and interests. Additionally, individuals’ variance in reading ability becomes more apparent as students emerge from the elementary grades. Middle school finds these students at a crossroad between learning to read and reading to learn; it is no surprise that at this intersection of needs, a one size-fits all curriculum proves insufficient.

Research conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts and the NAEP results have consistently shown a decline in voluntary reading amongst American middle school students, accompanied by a decline in reading achievement (Atwell, <http://www.heinemann.com>). Ivey and Broaddus (2001) explain that middle schoolers are often depicted in research as apathetic, reluctant readers, exhibiting negative attitudes and resistance towards reading. Others, they say, draw a clear distinction between their personal reading lives and reading that takes place in school. In a study of two adolescent young women, they revealed that the purpose of reading in school was to “answer questions, and to accomplish other academic tasks,” while out-of-school reading was linked to “personal and socially oriented activities in which they explored a range of new roles and identities, such as being a performing artist” (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001, p. 354). This study additionally revealed that students perceive academic reading material as limited to test prep, while out-of-school reading included a range of print media and technology (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

In an effort to identify *why* students in this age group have such poor attitudes towards reading, several patterns emerged, including: a lack of accessibility, a lack of student choice, and a lack of fluent reading. As a result of the whole-class novel, many developing readers who struggle to keep up with teacher-selected materials frequently experience frustration and failure. Fisher and Ivey (2007) note, “we know that students still struggling to read do not get better at reading from tackling difficult books. It would be hard to locate one book that addresses the needs of all students in any given classroom” (p. 495). Similarly, a single book cannot appeal to the plethora of interests present in a classroom and may actually limit the variety, depth and quantity of student reading that occurs. The Ivey and Broaddus (2001) study revealed that most students (42%) were motivated by finding good materials to read and having choice in the selection of their reading materials. Conversely, students described their worst school reading experiences as related to assigned reading, which they linked to comprehension problems and boredom. Class novel studies are often tedious and time consuming, devoting most of the instructional time to activities focused on content details. This slow moving and choppy progression through pieces of literature directly detracts from what students say they like most, simply reading.

In 1984, a study performed by Linda Gambrell attempted to gauge just how much classroom time was dedicated to the act of fluid reading during teacher-led reading instruction. Her observations of classrooms in grades 1-3 revealed that first grade students spent only three minutes engaged in contextual reading. Second grade students spent an average of five and a half minutes and third grade students read for an average of five and three-quarters minutes. She concluded that, “the amount of reading practice students received during teacher directed instruction might not be sufficient to support literacy development” (p. 16).

With the needs of developing middle school readers identified, it is appropriate to explore how independent, self-selected reading as a pedagogical approach is particularly suited to combat these trends of decreased motivation and negative attitudes towards reading.

*How does independent, self-selected reading increase students' attitudes and motivation to read?*

Increasing student motivation continues to be an elusive and challenging task amongst classroom teachers; however, educational research on motivation consistently resonates back to student empowerment through choice. According to Anderman and Midgley (1997), "one of the most prominent motivational theories in respect to middle school students is the self-determination theory. This theory describes students as having three categories of needs: needing a sense of competence, of relatedness to others, and of autonomy (or self determination)" (p. 44). Autonomy specifically involves initiating and regulating one's own actions. Through independent, self-selected reading, students not only choose the materials that they interact with, but they regulate their own pace, and construct their own meanings from the text, as illustrated by Janet Allen (2000):

Unfortunately, just providing time is not enough. Students need to know that they have real choices during this time. In "Choices for Children" Kohn supports the importance of such ownership for authentic learning: If we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility, and plenty of it. Independent reading time is the time students can begin to take responsibility for their reading habits and behaviors: learning to make good choices; learning when to abandon a book; discovering how to find books that support their author, genre, or theme tastes; and more important, how to find books that will help them know they are truly readers. (p. 101).

This authentic context for reading helps students to bridge their school life with their private life. For those who exhibit such a disconnect, the act of reading takes on new meaning and is therefore assigned a new sense of value in that child's life. Additionally, students who lack an intrinsic motivation to read, or who perhaps are unable to access text on grade level, are afforded a new freedom to select reading material that is sufficiently engaging and appropriately challenging.

Independent, self-selected reading additionally has the power to generate an atmosphere of positive peer pressure to read. Kasten and Wilfong (2005) explain that as students share and discuss books (an essential component of reader's workshop and most classroom independent reading) they tend to become more interested in what their peers have read. These interactions among peers have the ability to change students' perceptions about books and create an enthusiasm for reading, which becomes contagious. In a study of 22 seventh grade honors reading and language arts students, the implementation of an independent, self-selected reading program called Book Bistro proved to dramatically and comprehensively alter students attitudes toward voluntary reading. An attitude survey administered prior to the Book Bistro determined that only 3.2% of students had positive attitudes toward independent reading and 96.8% students had negative attitudes toward independent reading. However, a post-test attitude survey found that 96.8% of students had positive attitudes towards independent reading after having participated in the Book Bistro, and only 3.2% of students reported negative attitudes (Kasten & Wilfong, 2005). This data reveals a dynamic shift in the classroom culture as the result of independent, self-selected reading.

The students from the Kasten and Wilfong (2005) study were recognized as advanced reading and language arts students. This may beg the question, does independent, self-selected

reading produce similar results with students who are recognized to be developing or struggling readers? A qualitative study by Lapp and Fisher (2009) documented the experiences of 24 eleventh grade students, who represented a large mix of cultural backgrounds and who came from predominantly one-parent families. Over half of the students spoke English as a second language, 15% of students qualified for special education services, and all but one student qualified for free lunch (Lapp & Fisher, 2009). As the result of enacting an independent reading unit in which the students assisted the teacher in selecting texts, topics and assignments, the following behaviors were observed: a) students expressed increased interest and motivation by choosing to read more books than were assigned, b) students discussed characters as if they were peers by using insights and sensitivities from their own experiences, c) students took ownership of the project by bringing in supplementary materials from home or outside of class, and d) students expressed a desire to maintain this learning structure for the rest of the year (Lapp & Fisher, 2009). The results of this study highlight the impact of choice and student interaction as key elements of any independent, self-selected reading program.

A study conducted by Stairs and Burgos (2010) examines the capacity of independent, self-selected reading to forge deeply personal and life-long connections with reading. A sample of 53 eighth grade students from a public middle school in Portland, Maine were asked to write a regular reading workshop journal entry about a favorite book. Their writings revealed an overwhelming connection between self-selected texts and deep, personal connections to texts. Not only did all students in the study write for a full twenty minutes, reinforcing the motivating power of an authentic writing task, but among their entries, 92% of students cited a self-selected text as their most influential book (Stairs & Burgos, 2010). The authors concluded that, “When students were provided time in school to choose books, read them, and reflect on them, they

became more interested in reading and connected characters and themes in their favorite texts to their own lives in meaningful ways” (Stairs & Burgos, 2010, p. 46).

Positive attitudes towards reading are in essence a requisite to becoming a lifelong reader. While for many educators this is a sufficient goal in itself, our current educational atmosphere is firmly weighted on the side of measurable achievement outcomes. Each year teachers and students alike are responsible for meeting specific and predetermined benchmarks on standardized tests to prove objectively that learning has occurred. For those who desire a more tangible rationale for using independent, self-selected reading, we will now explore how increased motivation to read has been shown to impact reading achievement and long-term reading development.

*How do reading attitudes and motivation to read affect students' long term reading development?*

Multiple bodies of research have linked increased motivation to read with increased reading, and consequently a slew of secondary skill development. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) note, “Students highest on the intrinsic motivation composite read nearly three times as many minutes per day as did the group lowest on this composite” (p. 429). They add that children who read more often and more broadly are likely to continue to do so (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). It is through this repeated practice of reading that students develop the critical skill of reading fluency. As noted previously, the traditional teacher-centered classroom provides few opportunities for sustained reading practice. Worksheets and stop-and-go classroom discussions of literary passages do little to reinforce the whole act of reading. “Correlational studies confirm that students who do more free reading, read better, write better, spell better, have better grammatical competence, and have larger vocabularies” (Krashen & McQuillan, 2007, p. 68). Krashen (1993) also notes in his book *The Power of Reading* that, “The California Assessment

Program (CAP) reported a clear positive relationship between the amount eighth graders said they read per day and their scores on the CAP test of English and Language Arts. These tests cover reading comprehension, both ‘basic skills’ and ‘critical thinking,’ as well as writing” (Krashen, 1993, p. 5-6).

The theoretical foundation, and large bodies of research in support of independent and self-selected reading provide a strong rationale for its use in the middle school classroom. Often, however, teachers are reticent to alter their practices in light of a method that is either unfamiliar or requires them to relinquish some element of control. The repercussions of high stakes testing further exacerbate this tension, and unfortunately it is often the students’ voices that are lost in the shuffle. The purpose of this study is to explore students’ attitudes towards reading and how the elements of choice and independent reading may impact these feelings and motivations. Their responses will hopefully shed new light on independent, self-selected reading as a pedagogical tool and provide educators with a fresh perspective on how it can be used to create a community of readers within every classroom.

### **Chapter Three: Research Design**

#### *Methods*

Independent, self-selected reading by its very nature depends upon the input and participation of students. For this reason, it will be the voices of both 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle schoolers that will comprise the bulk of the data for this study. The following sections will outline the subjects and setting in which this research was conducted, the instrument that was used, the processes for collecting data, and how that data is to be analyzed.

#### *Setting & Participants*

The students that will be participating in this study are 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Comprehensive English Language Arts students at Athens Middle School in Athens, Ohio. The City of Athens itself is an historic college town located in the Hocking Valley region of Southeastern Ohio. Athens is home to the oldest university in the state of Ohio, Ohio University, and was thus named after the epicenter of higher learner in Athens, Greece. As recorded in July of 2008, the population of Athens is roughly 22,088 people, 10,348 of those residents being male and 11,740 being female. The median resident age is 21.5 years and the estimated median household income, calculated in 2007, is \$19,039 with a state average of \$46,597. The racial breakdown of the city is predominantly represented by the white majority, with 88.4% of residents identified as Caucasian. Other ethnicities present are Blacks (3.8%), Chinese (1.7%), Hispanics (1.4%), Asian Indians (1.0%), Japanese (.6%) and American Indians (.6%). 6.3% of residents identify themselves as being foreign born (<http://www.city-data.com/city/Athens-Ohio.html>).

It is essential when considering these statistics to recognize the strong influence of the university population. Each year nearly 26,000 students attend classes on OU's main campus in Athens, and roughly 2,000 academic staff are employed by the institution. Both the median age

and the cultural diversity of the community are undeniably impacted by this transient university population.

The students of Athens City Schools represent a wide variety of backgrounds, again spanning the divide of local community and the university community. In 2000, 14% of families lived below the poverty line, 21.3% of these families had children under the age of eight-teen, 35.3% had children under the age of five. Furthermore, 41% of households were headed by a single female with no husband present. This combination of poverty and unstable familial relationships leaves many children vulnerable to an array of dangers, such as abuse, neglect, and malnutrition.

The participants of this study are comprised of 84 seventh and eighth grade middle school students, 52 female and 32 male. The breakdown by academic grade is 19 seventh grade students and 65 eighth grade students. It is worthy of note that these students represent a wide range of ability and experience levels, as the comprehensive track attracts the bulk of students who fit into neither the honors nor basic tracking levels. The students themselves represent a wide variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds as well. There are currently 430 students at Athens Middle, 86.6% of students are representative of the dominant culture, 14.4% of students are identified as racial minorities, 16% of students have identified disabilities, and 42.8% of students are recognized as being economically disadvantaged (ODE, 2010). AMS is currently the only middle school serving the Athens City School District, which funnels the students from five elementary schools into a single building serving the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. These highly transitional years are referenced in the school's mission statement which reads: Athens Middle School will provide an efficient education in a safe environment for all children with a focus on their successful transition from student-centered learning to subject-centered learning.

The data disclosed on each district's report card can provide a general understanding of the student population by demographic and their average achievement on state standardized tests, but they reveal little about students attitudes and motivational levels. Further data collection will need to take place to assess these characteristics. This study will also examine students as individuals, with unique tastes, preferences, and needs.

### *Instruments*

A single student attitude survey will be used to collect and analyze data regarding the reading attitudes and learning preferences of the sample population. All surveys will be distributed within the classroom environment, and will be submitted anonymously. The instrument that will be used to collect and analyze this data is as follows.

### *Student Attitude Survey*

A reading attitude survey will be used to assess students' perceptions of their own attitudes towards reading, their learning preferences, and their perceptions of how choice of reading material might impact their attitudes and interests in reading. The survey employs a combination of closed and open form responses and will collect both factual and opinion based information.

### *Procedure*

The student attitude surveys were distributed during the fourth academic quarter of the school year. Two days prior to their distribution, students and parents received a letter and parental consent form from the researcher briefing them on the study and stressing its voluntary nature. The surveys were then distributed by their instructor during the students' regularly scheduled English classes. The researcher was not present at this time to avoid any undue pressure to participate in the study. Students were reminded that the survey was both voluntary and

anonymous. Students were given ten to fifteen minutes to complete the survey, at which time they were collected and sealed in a manila envelope for later recovery by the researcher.

### *Data Analysis*

The information disclosed regarding student's self-assessed reading attitudes, reading habits, and opinions about self-selection of texts (non-extended response questions) will be compared across the survey population as a whole, and then disaggregated by gender, grade level and attitude level.

Questions two and three, regarding explanations of students' reading attitudes and learning preferences, will be analyzed for emergent patterns including student selection of texts, independent reading time, or other components of reading workshop such as interest in reading material and access to reading materials.

Questions five and six, regarding the titles of assigned and self-selected texts, will be compared by the quantity of responses provided for each question, as well as by genre and lexile level.

## Chapter Four: Results of the Study

### *Question One: Attitude Ranking*

Survey question number one asked participants to rank their attitude toward reading on a scale of one (lowest) to ten (highest). For better analysis, this scale has been divided into three levels: low (1-3 ranking), medium (4-7 ranking) and high (8-10 ranking). When examined as a whole group, the sample population reported significantly higher/more positive attitudes towards reading than previous studies and trends would have anticipated. Forty-eight percent of respondents ranked themselves in the highest attitude level, forty-five percent ranked themselves in the medium attitude level, and only seven percent ranked themselves in the lowest attitude level.

When this data was disaggregated by gender, the predominant pattern persisted with the vast majority of students ranking themselves in the medium and high attitude levels; however, attitudes amongst female students in the highest attitude ranking (56%) were significantly higher than compared to male students (34%). Furthermore, more male students reported themselves as having medium or low attitudes towards reading than their female counterparts.

The data was additionally disaggregated by grade level. This analysis revealed that significantly more 7<sup>th</sup> graders (68%) ranked themselves in the highest attitude level, while only 42% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders ranked themselves within this same level. Fifty-two percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, compared with 21% of 7<sup>th</sup> graders, ranked themselves as having medium level attitudes towards reading, while low-level reading attitudes were comparable across the grades.

### *Whole Group Analysis ( $N_{WG}=84$ )*

Attitude Ranking (10-high; 1-low)	Frequency of Attitude Ranking
10	14 students
9	13 students
8	13 students

7	11 students
6	8 students
5	13 students
4	6 students
3	1 students
2	2 students
1	3 students

Attitude Ranking (Level)	Frequency of Attitude Ranking	Percentage of Whole Group
High (8-10)	40 students	48%
Med (4-7)	38 students	45%
Low (1-3)	6 students	7%

*Analysis by Gender ( $N_{female} = 52$ ;  $N_{male} = 32$ )*

Attitude Ranking (10-high; 1-low)	Frequency of Attitude Ranking: Females	Frequency of Attitude Ranking: Males
10	12 students	2 students
9	6 students	7 students
8	11 students	2 students
7	7 students	4 students
6	6 students	2 students
5	5 students	8 students
4	2 students	4 students
3	1 students	0 students
2	1 students	1 students
1	1 students	2 students

Attitude Ranking (Level)	Frequency of Attitude Ranking: Females	Percentage of Females
High (8-10)	29 students	56%
Med (4-7)	20 students	38%
Low (1-3)	3 students	6%

Attitude Ranking (Level)	Frequency of Attitude Ranking: Males	Percentage of Males
High (8-10)	11 students	34%
Med (4-7)	18 students	56%
Low (1-3)	3 students	9%

*Analysis by Grade Level ( $N_7 = 19$ ;  $N_8 = 65$ )*

Attitude Ranking (10-high; 1-low)	Frequency of Attitude Ranking: 7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Frequency of Attitude Ranking: 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade
10	3 students	11 students
9	5 students	8 students
8	5 students	8 students
7	0 students	11 students
6	0 students	8 students
5	2 students	11 students
4	2 students	4 students
3	0 students	1 students

2	1 students	1 students
1	1 students	2 students

Attitude Ranking (Level)	Frequency of Attitude Ranking: 7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Percentage of 7 <sup>th</sup> Graders
High (8-10)	13 students	68%
Med (4-7)	4 students	21%
Low (1-3)	2 students	11%

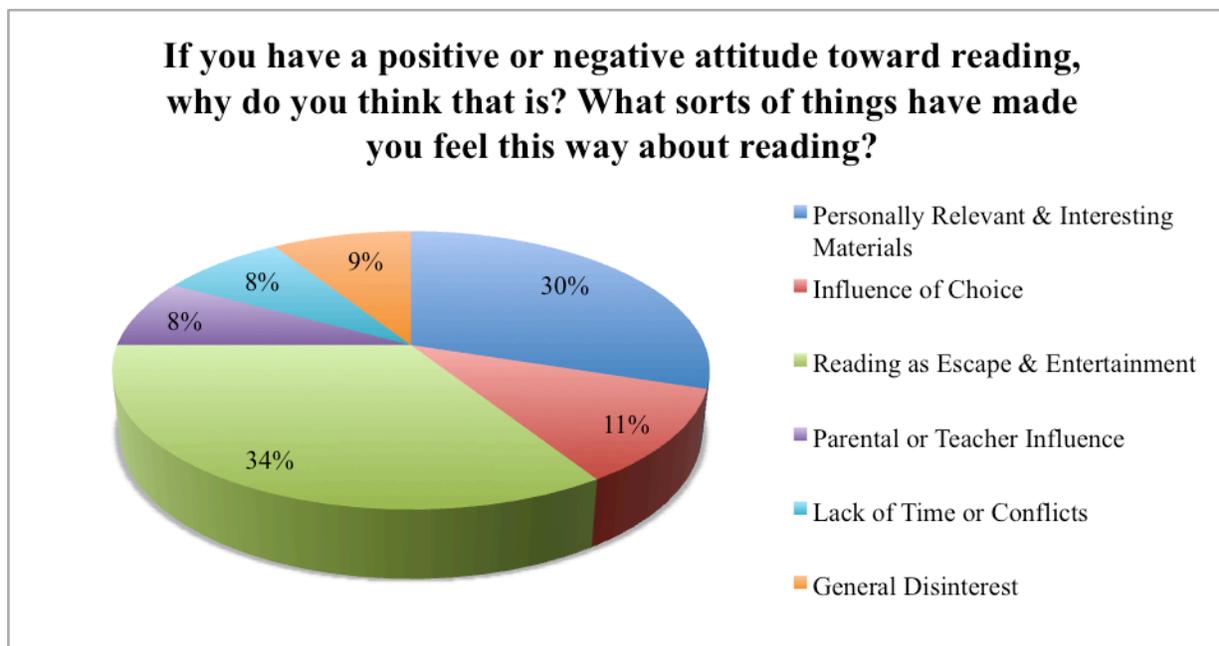
Attitude Ranking (Level)	Frequency of Attitude Ranking: 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Percentage of 8 <sup>th</sup> Graders
High (8-10)	27 students	42%
Med (4-7)	34 students	52%
Low (1-3)	4 students	6%

***Question Two: Explanation of Reading Attitude***

Survey question two asked participants to consider the reasoning behind their attitude ranking by responding to the question, *if you have a positive or negative attitude toward reading, why do you think that is, what sorts of things have made you feel this way about reading?* Students’ responses were then found to fall into one of six emergent patterns: 1) personally relevant and interesting materials, 2) influence of student choice, 3) reading as escape and entertainment, 4) parental or teacher influence, 5) lack of time or conflicts, and 6) general disinterest.

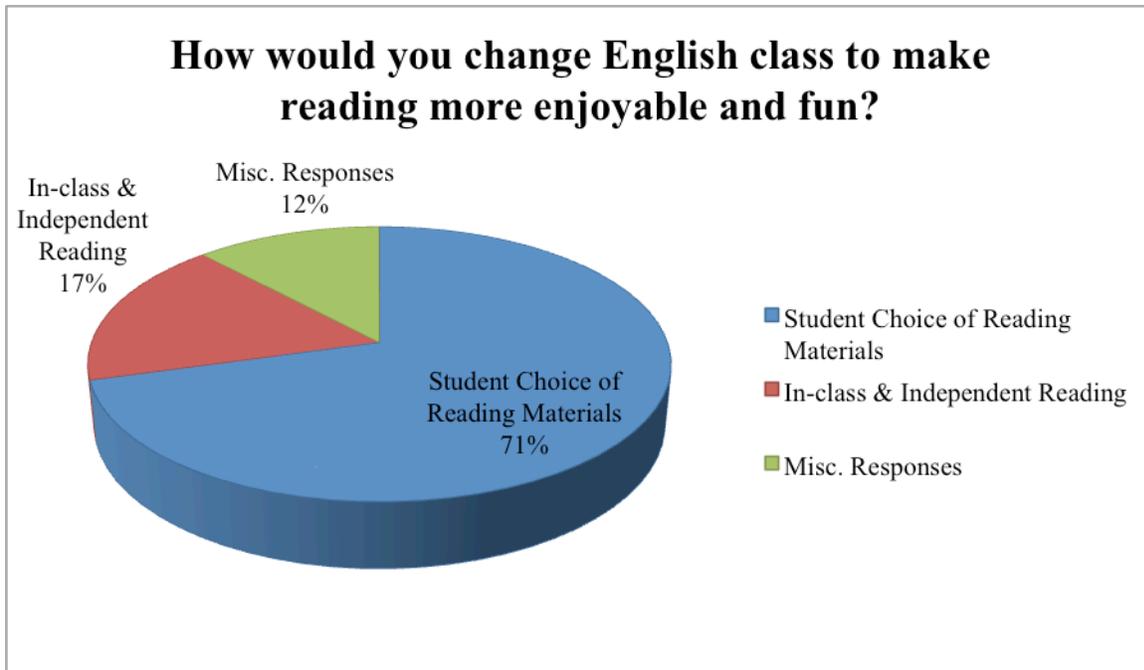
Seventy-six responses were collected, the majority of which pertained to patterns consistent with the principles of independent and self-selected reading and/or reader’s workshop. Thirty percent of student responses pertained to the influence of personally relevant and interesting reading materials. Students who ranked their attitudes as both positive and negative attributed this factor as a major component in the construction of that attitude or feeling. Eleven percent of student responses directly mentioned the influence of student choice (choice of reading materials and reading activities) as an influential factor in the construction of their reading attitudes. The largest response pattern, however, comprising 34% of student responses, linked reading attitudes with the value of reading activities to provide escape and entertainment.

The remaining 25% of responses are consistent with previous attitudinal research; however, are not directly linked with the principles and structures of independent, self-selected reading. These responses can be grouped into three patterns: the influence of teachers, parents, and/or family members, a lack of time or conflict with other activities, and general disinterest in the act of reading.



***Question Three: Learning Preferences (suggestions for more engaging classroom)***

Survey question number two asked student participants to respond to the question, *how would you change English class to make reading more enjoyable and fun?* This question offered students an opportunity to share their learning preferences and voice opinions regarding how they currently learn and how they feel they could learn best. The responses overwhelmingly pertained to increased student choice of reading materials (71%) and in-class independent reading opportunities (17%). The remaining 12% of responses showed no consistent pattern, and ranged from suggestions for increased group work to the elimination of grammar curricula.



***Question Four: Reading Preferences (independent vs. school reading)***

In order to ascertain where and under what circumstances student participants are doing the majority of their reading, students were asked to select whether they read more books that are assigned for school or books that are self-selected for pleasure. Of eighty-four responses, 76% of students reported that the majority of their reading is of independently selected material, whereas 24% reported that the majority of the books they read are assigned or required reading for school. This trend remained consistent when the data was disaggregated by both gender and grade level; however, the gender analysis revealed that 83% of female participants claimed independent reading materials as their primary reading source, compared with only 66% of males, and 17% of females claimed assigned reading materials as their primary reading source, compared with 34% of males.

An analysis of this data by student reported reading attitudes, however, displayed a slightly different trend. An examination of the independent versus assigned reading preferences of students with low, medium and high attitude levels revealed a positive relationship between

independent reading preferences and positive reading attitudes. Students with a self-reported reading attitude in the lowest ranking reported a 67% preference for school assigned reading and a 33% preference for independent reading. Students in the medium attitude range reported a 39% preference for school assigned reading and a 61% preference for independent reading. Lastly, students with the highest attitude rankings reported a 2% preference for school assigned reading and an overwhelming 98% preference for independent reading.

*Whole Group Analysis ( $N_{WG} = 84$ )*

Reading Preference	Frequency of Reading Preference	Percentage of Whole Group
Independent Reading	64 students	76%
School Reading	20 students	24%

*Analysis by Gender ( $N_{female} = 52$ ;  $N_{male} = 32$ )*

Reading Preference	Frequency of Reading Preference: Females	Percentage of Females	Frequency of Reading Preference: Males	Percentage of Males
Independent Reading	43 students	83%	21 students	66%
School Reading	9 students	17%	11 students	34%

*Analysis by Grade Level ( $N_7 = 19$ ;  $N_8 = 65$ )*

Reading Preference	Frequency of Reading Preference: 7 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Percentage of 7 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Frequency of Reading Preference: 8 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Percentage of 8 <sup>th</sup> Graders
Independent Reading	15 students	79%	49 students	75%
School Reading	4 students	21%	16 students	25%

*Analysis by Attitude Rank ( $N_{low} = 6$ ;  $N_{med} = 38$ ;  $N_{high} = 40$ )*

Reading Preference	Frequency of Reading Preference/ Percentage of Low Ranking (1-3)	Frequency of Reading Preference/ Percentage of Med. Ranking (4-7)	Frequency of Reading Preference/ Percentage of High Ranking (8-10)
Independent Reading	2 students / 33%	23 students / 61%	39 students / 98%
School Reading	4 students / 67%	15 students / 39%	1 students / 2%

***Questions Five and Six: Assigned and Self-Selected Titles***

Questions five and six asked students to generate two lists, one of book titles assigned by their current English teacher for in-class reading, and a second of book titles independently selected and read by the student that year. These titles were then compiled and compared by quantity, genre, and lexile text measure. A lexile text measure refers to a text's readability. It is determined by analyzing the text's syntactic and semantic characteristics resulting in a score value between 0L to above 2000L. The lexile scores for each text submitted on the student surveys were acquired from the Lexile Framework for Reading website, which holds an extensive database of texts and corresponding lexile measures (<http://www.lexile.com/findabook/>).

When examined by quantity, students submitted significantly more independently selected titles than school assigned titles. Out of 84 surveys students listed only twelve book titles that they have read as part of in-school, assigned reading. This stands in stark comparison to the 156 different titles that students read independently over the same school year.

The variety of genres that school assigned materials versus independently-selected reading materials represent are relatively comparable with only slight variation. The school assigned book titles listed by students cover the genres of: Adventure/Survival, Biography, Fantasy, Fiction, Non-Fiction, Graphic Novel, Historical Fiction, Mystery, Sports Fiction and Young Adult Fiction. In comparison, the independently selected book titles submitted through the surveys cover the genres of: Adventure/Survival, Fantasy, Fiction, Hispanic Fiction, Historical Fiction, Non-Fiction, Horror, Military/War Fiction, Mystery, Romance, Sports Fiction, and Young Adult Fiction.

This consistency between both groups of materials can also be observed in the lexile measures and corresponding academic grade recommendations of both school assigned and independently-selected books. The average lexile score of all school assigned texts was 794.5L with a corresponding grade level average of 5.2. With only slightly lower measures, the average lexile score of all independently-selected texts was 785.4 with a corresponding grade level average of 5.15.

***Question Seven: Impact of Choice on Attitude***

Survey question most directly confronts this study's central research question, by asking students whether an increase in student choice of reading material would increase their attitude toward reading. Out of 84 total respondents, 77 (92%) answered yes and 7 (8%) answered no. Disaggregation by both gender and grade level revealed no significant changes to this trend: 92% of females and 91% of males answered yes; 8% of females and 9% of males responded no. Eighty-nine percent of seventh graders and 92% of eighth graders responded that yes, student choice of reading materials would increase their attitude towards reading, and only 11% of seventh graders and 8% of eighth graders answered no.

Similar to question four, however, the data from question seven showed greater variance when examined by attitude level. Students in the high and medium level attitude rankings both displayed 95% positive to 5% negative responses (consistent with the patterns above), where as students comprising the lowest attitude ranking responded 50% yes and 50% no.

*Whole Group Analysis ( $N_{WG}=84$ )*

<b>Impact of Choice on Attitude</b>	<b>Frequency of Response</b>	<b>Percentage of Whole Group</b>
Yes Response	77 students	92%
No Response	7 students	8%

*Analysis by Gender ( $N_{female} = 52$ ;  $N_{male} = 32$ )*

Impact of Choice on Interest	Frequency of Response: Females	Percentage of Females	Frequency of Response: Males	Percentage of Males
Yes Response	15 students	92%	29 students	91%
No Response	4 students	8%	3 students	9%

*Analysis by Grade Level ( $N_7 = 19$ ;  $N_8 = 65$ )*

Impact of Choice on Interest	Frequency of Response: 7 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Percentage of 7 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Frequency of Response: 8 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Percentage of 8 <sup>th</sup> Graders
Yes Response	17 students	89%	60 students	92%
No Response	2 students	11%	5 students	8%

*Analysis by Attitude Level ( $N_{low} = 6$ ;  $N_{med} = 38$ ;  $N_{high} = 40$ )*

Impact of Choice on Interest	Frequency of Response/ Percentage of Low Ranking (1-3)	Frequency of Response/ Percentage of Med. Ranking (4-7)	Frequency of Response/ Percentage of High Ranking (8-10)
Yes Response	3 students / 50%	36 students / 95%	38 students / 95%
No Response	3 students / 50%	2 students / 5%	2 students / 5%

***Question Eight: Impact of Choice on Interest***

In a similar vein, survey question eight asked students whether an increase in student choice of reading materials would increase their interest in reading. Out of 82 total survey responses, 75 (95%) students answered yes and 7 (9%) students responded no. However, when disaggregated by gender, grade level and attitude ranking, students expressed a slightly weaker correlation between choice and reading interest. Only 76% of female students responded yes compared with 84% of male students; furthermore, 89% of seventh graders and 77% of eighth graders responded yes. Although still representative of the majority, a significant decrease was observed.

The analysis of responses by attitude ranking revealed a positive relationship between attitude levels and a belief that student choice increases student interest. Students in the lowest

attitude ranking responded 60% yes to 40% no; students in the mid-level attitude ranking responded 71% yes to 29% no, and finally students in the highest attitude ranking responded a much higher 90% yes to 10% no.

*Whole Group Analysis ( $N_{WG} = 84$ )*

Impact of Choice on Interest	Frequency of Response	Percentage of Whole Group
Yes	75 students	91%
No	7 students	9%
NR- no response	2 students	

*Analysis by Gender ( $N_{female} = 52$ ;  $N_{male} = 32$ )*

Impact of Choice on Interest	Frequency of Response: Females	Percentage of Females	Frequency of Response: Males	Percentage of Males
Yes	39 students	76%	26 students	84%
No	12 students	24%	5 students	16%
NR- no response	1 student		1 student	

*Analysis by Grade Level ( $N_7 = 19$ ;  $N_8 = 65$ )*

Impact of Choice on Interest	Frequency of Response: 7 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Percentage of 7 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Frequency of Response: 8 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Percentage of 8 <sup>th</sup> Graders
Yes	16 students	89%	49 students	77%
No	2 students	11%	15 students	23%
NR- no response	1 student		1 student	

*Analysis by Attitude Level ( $N_{low} = 6$ ;  $N_{med} = 38$ ;  $N_{high} = 40$ )*

Impact of Choice on Interest	Frequency of Response/ Percentage of Low Ranking (1-3)	Frequency of Response/ Percentage of Med. Ranking (4-7)	Frequency of Response/ Percentage of High Ranking (8-10)
Yes	3 students / 60%	27 students / 71%	35 students / 90%
No	2 students / 40%	11 students / 29%	4 students / 10%
NR- no response	1 student	0 students	1 student

## **Chapter Five: Discussion of the Results**

The aforementioned data has informed several key observations regarding the relationship between independent, self-selected reading and its impact on the reading attitudes of students in the middle grades. While several of these observations serve to confirm this study's hypotheses, a small handful exist in opposition to the trends and patterns outlined by prior research studies, and therefore beg further exploration.

One such point of conflict exists in the self-reported reading attitudes of the student respondents. Although a large body of research has suggested that students in the middle grades experience a dramatic decrease in reading engagement, interest and attitude, the seventh and eighth grade students who participated in this study reported relatively high/positive attitudes towards reading. This may be due, in part, to the fact that students have already forged independent reading lives separate and outside of the school environment, as suggested by Ivey and Broaddus (2001). Seventy-six percent of students reported that the majority of their reading is done on their own. Furthermore, 34% of students freely expressed an intrinsic value for and enjoyment of the act of reading. Such students may have experienced the motivating factors of independent and self-selected reading; however, these experiences have perhaps taken place primarily outside of the classroom. Such students therefore run the risk of disassociating their personal reading lives with their school reading lives.

Another explanation attributes the variety of genre and young adult themed reading materials present among school-assigned reading lists with increased reading attitudes. As can be observed in both the school-assigned and independently selected text lists from questions five and six, the types of reading materials and level of difficulty were remarkably similar. This

theory, however, deemphasizes the impact of choice on reading attitudes and focuses rather on the types of reading materials being utilized.

The influence of personally relevant and interesting texts is reconfirmed as a significant factor in reading attitude formation, as observed in students' responses to survey question two. Thirty percent of students reported that their attitude toward reading, either positive or negative, pertained to the availability of books that meet their unique interests and preferences. Eleven percent of students specifically mentioned the words choice and self-selection of such texts. In both instances, students are expressing a strong desire to engage with books that meet their individual needs as readers. Independent, self-selected reading as a pedagogical tool specifically functions to pair students with personally relevant texts, while additionally empowering their budding sense of self-determination. Not only is this practice developmentally appropriate, but it is closely aligned with the theoretical perspectives of John Dewey who stressed the importance of personally relevant subject matter and learning opportunities.

The basic principles of independent, self-selected reading were reiterated in students' responses to survey question three, *how would you change English class to make reading more enjoyable and fun?* In this case students' responses fell into two predominant categories, student-choice of reading material and opportunities for in-class independent reading. Such responses are particularly revealing, as they were posed as open-ended questions. To achieve such consistency across an entire subject group suggests the broad significance of both factors.

Question four illuminated, not only the reading preferences, but the reading habits of the student respondents. Seventy-six percent of students reported that they predominantly read independently selected texts, while 24% of students reported that the majority of their reading is done using school-assigned texts. Further analysis, however, uncovered a direct relationship

between reading attitude and independent reading preferences. The students with positively ranked reading attitudes overwhelmingly engage in independent, self-selected reading, while the students with lower/less-positive attitudes towards reading limit themselves to the texts selected and assigned by their teacher. Such students appear reluctant to take ownership of their own reading lives, unlike their positively ranked classmates. This observation raises the question, if classrooms and instructors encourage such ownership, will even reluctant readers experience an increase in reading attitude?

Survey questions seven and eight directly address this relationship between student choice of reading material and both increased attitudes towards reading and increased interest in reading. Although 92% of students responded yes, choosing their own reading material would increase their attitude toward reading, only 50% of students in the lowest attitude ranking provided the same affirmative response. Similarly, 91% of students responded that student choice of reading materials would increase their interest in reading, yet only 60% of students ranked one through three agreed with this statement. This may suggest that students with the lowest reading attitudes may be the most resistant to improvement. Factors that may contribute to these negative attitudes could be deeply rooted in a student's sense of worth and/or value, and therefore have little to do with the materials themselves or the ability to select them. Individuals who suffer from various reading or learning disabilities may have developed negative associations as a result of their struggles. Others may find themselves in cultural or familial conflict with the act of reading. Such barriers exceed general disinterest, and may account for some of the most challenging student cases, often characterized by low/negative attitudes towards reading.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

As society continues its march into an age marked by individualism, choice, and ubiquitous access to resources, schools and 21<sup>st</sup> century ELA classrooms must keep pace if they are to ensure student success. Large bodies of literature, fortified by the voices of present day students, stand as evidence that independent, self-selected reading practices are an excellent method for developing positive attitudes towards the act of reading. Having been funneled through the educational sieve from different primary school experiences and family backgrounds, students in the middle grades represent a wide spectrum of interests, abilities and developmental needs. Given such variety, a one-size fits all curriculum is doomed to fall short. Choice and independence, however, are two ways in which educators can pair students with appropriate and relevant materials *and* spark the beginnings of self-determination.

The resulting data from this study lends support to the theory that independent and self-selected reading positively impacts the reading attitudes of middle school students. Their personal testimony to such, in combination with an analysis of their reading habits and self-reported reading attitudes clarifies a strong connection between attitude and both choice and independence. However, future research in this area may benefit from a more calculated measure of attitude, beyond that of self-reporting. The survey structure of this study lends itself to a degree of unreliability, as the accuracy and sincerity of student responses are vulnerable to variance.

A lingering question that begs further exploration is the degree of self-selection necessary to positively impact students' reading attitudes. As outlined in the literature review above, independent, self-selected reading can take many forms, and varies widely in the degree to which instructors relinquish control of reading materials. While a more liberal design might provide

students with unrestricted choice of texts, alternative approaches may narrow student selections to a pre-approved list or genre from which to choose. Future research and ELA instruction would profit by more specifically defining the threshold of choice necessary to produce attitudinal benefits.

Significant connections were additionally observed between the types of reading materials utilized and students corresponding attitudes towards reading. It is possible that the materials themselves are of great influence to students' attitudes beyond the act of self-selection. Greater exploration of this link and the degree to which it impacts students attitudes compared with that of independent, self-selected reading could be of great pertinence to this area of study.

Also of great import is a better understanding of the environmental and cultural factors that influence and shape the reading attitudes of students in the Appalachian Ohio Region. A longitudinal study that follows students from their earliest years and throughout their primary and secondary education could provide rich information that could be used to inform reading education and reading intervention techniques throughout the K-12 system.

Until this body of research is available, independent, self-selected reading provides an excellent solution for developing personal relationships between students and books. This can be achieved in multiple ways that range from minimally invasive (silent sustained reading, scheduling library time, and engaging students in conversations about their reading tastes and experiences) to shaping and coloring the classroom design (reader's workshop, weekly books talks, and literature circles). By allowing students to claim ownership of their reading lives, educators are not only empowering them to uncover their own interests, curiosities and needs, but they are communicating to students that they value, respect and encourage their ability to do

so. This place of common appreciation and respect is fertile ground for developing positive attitudes and life-long readers.

**Appendix A (Student Attitude Survey)**

Gender (circle one):    Male    Female

Grade (circle one):    7<sup>th</sup>    8<sup>th</sup>

1. How would you rate your attitude (how you feel) about reading? (10 meaning very positive, and 1 meaning very negative)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

2. If you have a positive or negative attitude about reading, why do you think this is? What sorts of things have made you feel this way about reading?

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3. How would you change English class to make reading more enjoyable and fun?

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4. Do you read more books that are assigned for school or that you pick out on your own?

For School             On My Own

5. What are some of the books that you have read so far this year that were assigned by the teacher?

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6. What are some of the books that you have read so far this year that you picked out for yourself?

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7. If you were allowed to choose the books you read in class, do you think you would feel more positively about reading?

Yes             No

8. If you were allowed to choose the books you read in class, do you think you would be more interested in reading than you are now?

Yes             No

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