Using book clubs to encourage middle school reading interest: a qualitative case study

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USING BOOK CLUBS TO ENCOURAGE MIDDLE SCHOOL READING INTEREST:  
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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Curriculum and Instruction  
by  
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APPROVAL OF DISSERTATION

We, the faculty supervising the work of Marc Shoemaker, affirm that the dissertation, *Using Book Clubs to Encourage Middle School Reading Interest: A Qualitative Case Study*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the EdD Program in Curriculum & Instruction and the College of Education and Professional Development. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.

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ABSTRACT

Reading has been central to my life since my earliest years and has molded me into the adult I have become, for better or worse. My conversations in classrooms, backed by research, has made it plain that today’s students value reading far less than in the past. Books are still read in class, but less out-of-class reading takes place, and a lessening number of students carry a love of reading into adulthood. Student attitude toward reading changes during the middle-school years. As reading increases children’s empathy and critical thinking abilities, this becomes a significant concern. For my research, I chose to take a student-centered approach to this problem and talk to a group of seventh grade students as they begin the school year in which the largest decrease in reading enjoyment occurs. In cooperation with Sissonville Middle School, in particular seventh-grade teacher Cassandra Allara, I conducted a six-session book club reading and discussing a novel and probing the students’ reading backgrounds and preferences as well as their general interests and activities. Through this group, the students revealed that while few read in their free time or engage in time-consuming outside activities (their primary thoughts concerning their town involve drug use), all enthusiastically reported playing online video games with other students, both locally and worldwide. This seems to be the one area where all the students encounter story. I close this paper with thoughts as to how this can be used to increase student interest in reading.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Positionality

Something about the house where I spent my earliest years drew me in to the idea of stories, of narratives that moved the world, yet remained a mystery. Perhaps it was the isolation. I lived nearly a mile up a dirt road between two narrow hills, with no close neighbors and only my grandmother to keep me company while everyone else was at work or school. My grandmother was a storyteller, and when she would leave me to play alone as she worked elsewhere in the house I would make up intricate stories on my own, using whatever plastic figures and cars I could find. Children are natural storytellers, turning easily to games of pretend whether alone or with others.

Perhaps it had to do with the way the shadows would suddenly cut off the sunlight as I sat in the floor and played, or the way that the summertime window fans seemed to pick up voices from far away, or maybe the way the quiet breeze would suddenly be interrupted by the roar of the airplanes that flew overhead, seeming to touch the trees as they made their approach to the Charleston airport. These things hinted at a larger world, at a wider story than the one I had known, and this world, this story, frightened me. This fear brought its own pleasure, however, and the frisson of excitement I felt when sounds or shadows I could not identify made their way into my own story propelled me forward into the unknown. I determined to discover the truth behind my fears, and this curiosity shaped my young life.

I learned early on that stories helped me make sense of life. In such a rural, isolated place, I sorted my experience through what was brought in from outside. This included stories told by
my family, as well as the narratives of the television programs that kept me company when I was alone and added their unfamiliar narratives to my expanding worldview. Most of all, the stories that enlarged my perspective came from books. My mother and grandmother taught me to read when I was only three, and this simple act opened up my universe. With other children rarely around, I read about how kids in other places lived and played, and I vicariously experienced lives different from my own. Books also fueled my imagination, as my curiosity nudged my reading toward such subjects as space travel and haunted houses. Told-for-true ghost stories were my family’s specialty, and I heard these a bit earlier than may have been wise, thus the macabre drew me in like nothing else. The television programs I enjoyed most were those that dealt with the fantastic, such as Twilight Zone and The Prisoner, as well as late-afternoon creature features about mud monsters and other consequences of man’s meddling. When my grandmother gave me a volume of Poe for my eleventh birthday, my path was set.

When I entered school, I found new friends who loved books, but I also found limitations placed on my reading. We read from beginner schoolbooks that introduced words with pictures but little or no story (see Spot run), and while we were encouraged to read, we seemed to rarely be given the opportunity to do so, at least to the extent that I had grown accustomed to. Luckily, I had a library card that allowed me to discover stories that brought joy and not just occupation. I scoured the dark second story of the corner library for kid-centered mysteries and, most exciting of all, collections of old ghost stories. This kept my love of reading alive.

As I moved through school, it seemed that fewer and fewer of my peers shared my love of reading. I had teachers, however, who did their best to encourage us, such as a junior high English teacher who looked for books we might like and urged us to read more of these authors on our own. Her suggestions, along with those of my mother, grandmother, and many others,
helped teach me to delve into the literary landscape and develop malleable tastes that deepened as I matured, yet I never gave up the darker tales that always lay at the heart of my exploration. Finding that accepted classics included stories about ghosts and pirates and strange journeys served to make me believe that such themes were not childish preoccupations that I would need to surrender as I grew up. My annual Halloween pirate costume might be left by the wayside, but my love of *Treasure Island* and my fascination with Blackbeard would remain.

As I grew older, I realized that students from my particular area were not expected to love reading. In 1980, the year I graduated from high school, a computerized study found that students in central Appalachian counties showed lower rates of literacy than students in the non-Appalachian counties that surrounded them (Crew, 1985). This study agreed with the culturally accepted image of an Appalachian family as one that placed education at a lower level of importance than supposedly more practical values such as common sense and hard work. While this attitude did exist in some form in my family and community, reading and discovery were valued as highly as these other matters. Because of this, I was slow to recognize the Appalachian stereotype. By the time the junior high teacher I mentioned earlier told how when she attended an organizational meeting for talented and gifted programs, some questioned why she was there since our county was too rural, too poor, to have any gifted students, I understood the concept, but I still found it troubling that educators would buy into the stereotype in this way. It was as if our existence as a demographic made considering us as individuals unnecessary.

I am afraid that we who live in central Appalachia have conformed more and more to this stereotype. We have in many ways moved in the wrong direction, and as we are devalued by the wider culture, we have made these insults a point of pride. In spite of this, we continue to own the right to define ourselves and to be who we actually are instead of who others believe us to be.
The popularity of J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) reinforced this stereotype among many both in academia and in the wider culture by portraying Appalachian natives as a backward people who were largely responsible for their own unfortunate condition (Catte, 2018).

Elizabeth Catte took exception to Vance’s narrative and published a book-length response, *What You are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* (2018) in which she discussed the implications of the conversation *Hillbilly Elegy* had provoked:

According to the bulk of coverage about the region in the wake of Trump’s election and the success of *Hillbilly Elegy*, currently at fifty weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller list, I do not exist. My partner does not exist. Our families do not exist. Other individuals who do not exist include all nonwhite people, anyone with progressive politics, those who care about the environment, LGBTQ individuals, young folks, and a host of others who resemble the type of people you’ll meet in this volume. The intentional omission of these voices fits a long tradition of casting Appalachia as a monolithic “other America.” (Introduction, para. 10)

These stereotypes have created expectations that have made me reluctant to take possession of my heritage, in spite of my awareness of how my proclivities were shaped by my growing up in a hollow and being raised by parents and grandparents who had themselves lived in a coal town not long before. I knew who I was and who my family was, but this identity did not match the identity that others believed I should have by virtue of my living in Appalachia. This word, this location, took on a meaning that I found to be too restrictive. I came to believe, as Catte wrote, that “people woefully overuse the term ‘Appalachian culture’” (2018, What is Appalachia? para. 18).
My challenge became finding a way to forge my own identity without rejecting the culture that shaped me. One way to reconcile this seeming dichotomy was to consider the significance of books in my development. I began by attempting to frame my reading life as a natural part of my culture rather than the result of some influence that lay outside my contextual experience. I continued to search for books that excited me. Rather than read stories about characters who looked and acted like me, I searched for exceptional individuals who could only exist in the invented world that formed inside my imagination. When I discovered comic books, I found that Batman not only existed in the bright colors of the popular television series, but also inhabited a world of dark hues populated by vampires, dark magic, and other nightmares. As I moved on to junior high, I found *Around the World in Eighty Days*, which I knew from a Saturday morning cartoon, and thought it was the most exciting adventure yet. I began reading all I could find by Jules Verne and found an even more exciting story: *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. My teacher thought I might like Sherlock Holmes, and I read nothing else until I had consumed all of the original stories. I then followed these with Conan Doyle’s Vernesque *The Lost World*.

My attraction to genre fiction had led me to read classic literature without realizing that I was supposed to find it boring. I had already begun to dip into Shakespeare, reading *Julius Caesar* after being told this was the source of my name, and finding conspiracies, hauntings, and rampant violence. I already loved comics and found no huge difference in the types of stories in these two categories of fiction. My grandmother began to subscribe to *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, and I read this cover-to-cover as well. By the time I became a teenager, I was devouring lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow fiction alike, neither understanding nor caring that one was considered more proper than the other.
An appreciation of my family and my background keeps me searching for balance. West Virginia folklore, superstitions, ghost stories, and the like have always been present in my memory and have influenced what I read and what I write. However, I do not believe these stories create a full picture of who I am or where I come from. Being from Appalachia is not a single thing but rather a composite of the expected, the experienced and the learned. Every one of us creates an experience based on our own encounters and interests, so I chafe at the suggestion that knowing where I am from can tell a stranger who I am, and I smile at the notion that a look through my library would provide a much clearer picture.

I cannot argue that Vance’s experiences are invalid; they are his own, just as my experiences are my own. I would, however, say that his experiences cannot be widely generalized. His views have become well-known because he moves in influential circles as a writer for The National Review and New York Times (2016, Vance, About the author, para. 1) and because influential journalists and pundits, such as David Brooks have proclaimed the importance of Hillbilly Elegy (2016). In addition, Vance is a talented writer who has authored an easy-to-read book. Perhaps most importantly, his book was published at a time when many Americans were seeking to understand why Donald Trump was so popular in rural America.

No one narrative can tell everyone’s story. Vance’s answers provide a rationalization of his own story, but they do not allow for the diversity present in the Appalachians. Differences exist from region to region, town to town, and family to family. As my story shows, these differences present themselves even within a single family. I do not say this as another critique of Vance, but rather as a warning to myself. My own experiences or the experiences of those I interview are no more generalizable than Vance’s. Each person’s story is his or her own, and every person develops his or her preferences in a different way because of diverse influences.
When talking with the students who informed my research, I encouraged each of them to discuss their background. Reflecting on the experience, it becomes apparent that their voice both tells an individual story and becomes part of the Appalachian narrative. Appalachian culture necessarily plays a role in their story, and part of my challenge was to allow them to define how this influence plays out in their lives without having my attitudes modify their narratives. My own aversion to Appalachian stereotypes should not prevent the students from interpreting how geography and culture shape their own lives.

My personal experience necessarily informed the study. While I am self-aware to some extent, having examined my reading and cultural history and thought about how this affects the way I look at the world, I also know that my experiences affect me in deeper ways than I realize. No one can see all the intricacies of the way his or her mind forms. As I attempted to consider others’ reading experiences, I needed more than my own thoughts to form a foundation for the way I interpret what I am told. While I let the students be their own first interpreters, I also filtered their experiences through the research others have conducted as they have attempted to answer similar questions.

Combining my experiences with those of the students and researchers results in a consideration of three concepts: the students’ understanding of their reading experiences, how research helps us understand these experiences, and how my own experience influences the way I hear their stories. In all of this, it becomes too easy to discount the participants’ own words. The way they frame their encounters with stories may reveal who they are and who they hope to be.

Theoretical Framework
I built this study using a student-centered design. Student-centered learning is a type of constructionist theory which holds that tailoring learning opportunities to student proclivities, taking into account educational and life experiences, is a proper, effective way to construct a meaningful educational practice (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). Rather than build a system based on pre-conceived ideas of how students learn, this theory suggests considering the students first and building an educational experience that conforms to the students’ reality (Tangney, 2014). Learning, then, is based on practical considerations as well as knowledge gleaned from previous research (Sandler & Hammond, 2012), an approach that works well in this instance, as I am seeking to understand how students form their attitudes toward reading and how these attitudes affect their reading habits. My central concern then becomes what students are experiencing that causes them to enjoy reading less as they move through middle school (McKenna et al., 2012)?

Constructivism, like much else in American schools, builds on the theories of John Dewey, who encouraged moving learning from being primarily focused on imparting information to a system in which students were able to consider evidence and form conclusions for themselves (Jonas, 2011). Swiss philosopher and scientist Jean Piaget (1953) created theories as to how this construction should and does occur. Piaget’s cognitive theory suggested that children build structures in their minds that allows them to build knowledge based on what they already know (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

Vygotsky’s influence began to be felt in the United States in the 1960s, more than two decades after his death, when most of his published writing appeared in English (Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011). He posited that constructivism was largely a social phenomenon, with children picking up cues from others before individualizing their own ideas (1986). Vygotsky proposed that a “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) should be recognized and
capitalized on through scaffolding, a process in which instructors offer support as needed with the idea of transferring the taught skill to the student (van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010).

Student-centered theory builds on this social-constructivist idea, as the notion that students construct meaning based on knowledge they already possess naturally turns to the students’ prior knowledge (Tangney, 2014). Dewey’s ideas, again, influence modern student-centered theory (Jonas, 2011), as do those of Montessori (n.d.) and others. Theorists such as Nel Noddings (2017) incorporated earlier ideas into their educational philosophy as they attempted to articulate a system of education that laid out practical ways that students’ desires and abilities can become the focus of the classroom.

Dewey (1897) addressed the integration of students into society while stating that “Education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p.78). We often take this statement as an encouragement to help our students become life-long learners, and this is correct, but there is another element to this idea, one that has implications that begin while the student is still in school. Typically, through our language and our actions, we communicate the idea that student’s current state is one of becoming rather than being. Real life begins later, in some other time and place. This can create the impression that, since what happens in school is not part of real life, the present is only important as it affects later actions. It can be difficult to understand the implications of this philosophy. Taking Dewey’s statement more literally reveals a second meaning: what is happening at every stage is a part of “real life,” and the lives of students are no less meaningful than those of adults. The idea that students’ lives matter in the moment leads to the practice of allowing them to have a say in their own education. Educators then no longer simply feed students information but recognize and respect their self-
determination and assist as they take possession of their learning and forge the path of their personal development.

Maria Montessori carried this philosophy forward more than a century ago when she laid out a practical blueprint for student-centered learning in The Montessori Method (1912). Near the beginning of this book, Montessori wrote, “The school must permit the free, natural manifestations of the child if in the school scientific pedagogy is to be born.” As she continued, she compared children in the classroom to butterflies fixed to a card by a series of pins. From this cue, Montessori began writing about the idea of liberating the student, something she indicated was unknown in the schools of her day (1912). She drove this point home by arguing that claiming that the “principle of liberty informs the pedagogy of to-day, would make us smile as at a child who, before the box of mounted butterflies, should insist that they were alive and could fly. The principle of slavery still pervades pedagogy, and, therefore, the same principle pervades the school.” As she continued, Montessori expressed hope that the idea of liberty would prevail in the near future (Montessori, 1912, pp. 15-18).

A more recent theorist whose ideas have influenced student-centered education, Nel Noddings, championed the ethics of care (2012). Noddings suggests that the practice of caring for students should be central to classroom conduct, saying “My contention is, first, that we should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement and, second, that we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others” (1995). This call to move the focus from the curriculum to the individual child serves as a practical demonstration of what student-centered education means. In Noddings’ words, “The student is infinitely more important than the subject matter” (1984, p. 176).
Combining constructivism’s assertion that students create their own knowledge with ideas from Dewey (Jonas, 2011), Montessori (1912), Noddings (1984), and others that champion freedom and democracy in the classroom leads me to a student-centered theoretical framework. This foundation then allows me to explore certain ideas regarding methods of teaching reading that engage students and give them agency, ideas that we will consider in detail when we review the relevant literature. I am led to contemplate the importance of listening to the thoughts of the students themselves, and this is what I have attempted in this study in the hopes that discovering what students have to say about what motivates their reading habits would lead me toward an answer to my questions.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is to understand why students’ reading interest decreases as they move through school. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a more complete understanding of what causes students’ attitudes toward reading to change by listening to the students themselves and observing them in a setting in which they engage with each other while discussing their reading. As part of this process, I attempted to use prior research to identify areas that may be addressed in a middle school reading group setting and discover ways to organize group practices to focus on these issues. I also searched for ways to give students agency within the group and allow them to have a say in what books are read, pacing, reading focuses, and other areas.

This study was conducted in an attempt to address the problem of decreased interest in reading, particularly as this interest has been shown to decrease most drastically in the middle school years, with one study finding that 64.5% of eighth grade students say reading is boring, as opposed to 42.4% of fifth graders and 27% of third grade students (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).
an attempt to reverse this trend, many educators have begun giving students more of a choice in
the material they read (Miller, 2012, Morgan & Wagner, 2013). This movement toward choice
has led to the introduction of previously under-used genres and media, with a movement in
recent years toward science fiction (Roman, 2017), fantasy (Fuxa, 2012), and dystopian fiction
(Mallan, 2017). Graphic novels and comics are being brought into classrooms, with reports of
increased enthusiasm and comprehension (Richardson, 2017). Some teachers are encouraging
students to read electronic books (Brown, 2016) and listen to audiobooks (Hett, 2012). Educators
are limiting the use of whole-class novels (Fisher & Ivey, 2007) and at times doing away with
them completely (Allyn, 2011).

Teachers who are bringing reading choice into the classroom are adopting methods to
help guide student reading. Penny Kittle, for instance, has brought the idea of book talks, in
which students and teachers suggest titles that others might like (2013). Students discuss the
books they are reading with their teachers and in small-group settings. Student preference takes
precedence, while considerations such as reading books written at a certain level are
deephasized (2013).

As new methods are introduced, other approaches are found lacking and are being
rejected. “Round-robin” reading, for example, the practice of members of a class taking turns
reading portions of a selection aloud, has been found to be counterproductive (McLaughlin,
2013). A more effective method involves teachers reading to students and students reading to
each other (McLaughlin, 2013). One important change encompasses shifting instructional focus
from test-preparation, worksheets, and disconnected lessons to the reading itself (Gallagher,
2009). Perhaps most importantly, giving the students a voice in the classroom and seriously
listening to what these students have to say is vital (St. John & Briel, 2017).
As a companion to the research being done concerning student attitudes toward reading, through this qualitative exploration, I approached middle school students themselves and documented their responses to reading.

**Research Questions**

As I sought to gain insight into students’ changing reading attitudes and habits by allowing the students themselves to determine the direction of the conversation, I brought together the questions that would guide the research in a fluid, malleable structure. I used the following questions as a foundation for the research:

1. What factors, such as family attitudes and school reading programs, go into students’ changing attitudes toward reading?
2. How do peer relationships affect reading attitudes and understanding?
3. What factors affect the types of books and other material students specifically choose to read?
4. How do students connect what they read to their own lives and experiences, including how they would or would not act differently in these situations?
5. How does the reading expand a student’s understanding of the world?

The first of these can be considered an overarching question, and the other four questions combine in an attempt to address this concern. As the goal of this study is to encourage students to reveal, perhaps after discovering themselves, the reasons they approach reading as they do, these questions focus on the thoughts of the students as brought forth by the natural functioning of the reading group.

**Definitions**

This study uses the following definitions for the listed terms:
1. Reading Pleasure: Reading undertaken by one’s free choice with an expectation of enjoyment (Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, Wigfield, Nolen, & Baker, 2012).

2. Reading Frequency: How often a student reads unassigned material in a given time period.

3. Reading Choice: A classroom assignment in which a student is given a choice of what to read, either from a selected list of books or from an open selection. This may also refer to the selection of material the student makes either as part of an assignment or for outside reading.

4. Genre Literature: This term refers to categories of literature, such as science fiction, fantasy, or romance, which have often been marginalized in the classroom, either through limited representation, implication that they are of lesser quality, or both (Wilhelm, 2016).

5. Electronic Books: Books designed to be read on a mobile phone, e-reader, or other electronic device.

6. Audiobooks: Recorded readings of published books.

7. Whole-Class Novels: Book-length fiction that is read and studied by everyone in a given class at the same time.

8. Picture Books: Books that combine words and illustrations to construct meaning (Manning, 2004).

9. Graphic Novels: A term, coined by author and artist Will Eisner, for “a complex story told in comic book format in 64 to 179 pages” (Bucher & Manning, 2004).


13. Critical Thinking: A mental process that considers available information in an attempt to reach a logical conclusion (Dwyer, Hogan, Harney, & Kavanagh, C. 2017).

14. Book Club: A group meeting together at set times to discuss members’ reactions to a book that participants are reading.

**Significance of the Study**

Through this study, I sought to better understand the attitudes of middle-school students toward reading. Studies have shown that this is the time when students’ interest in reading particularly declines (Guthrie & Davis, 2003, Kelley & Decker, 2009). In an attempt to understand these numbers, I chose to allow the students themselves to speak. Listening to the voices of those who are currently living through these changes should give me insights into their relationships with books, allowing me to perhaps understand better how to foster middle-school reading habits and encouraging students to encounter books in a positive way. The hope was that these students would encounter books in ways that become natural, integrating books into their lives and allowing the practice of reading to become an ingrained part of who they are.

A key to this study was listening to the students, that is, considering all they say and recognizing that their voice must matter in order for them to willingly embrace reading. They must be taken seriously, and the moment in which they find themselves must be recognized and honored.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Although the trend has slowed somewhat in recent years, adults now read fewer books than has been the case in the past (Milliot, 2018). This trend takes shape while students are attending middle school, grades six through eight (McKenna, et. al 2012), which is the period when students’ social and academic lives become more intense than before (Preckel, Niepel, Schneider, & Brunner, 2013). These numbers caused me to focus on this specific period so I could clarify the reasons for adolescents’ decreased interest in reading. This was the time in my life when my love of reading deepened, so why were so many students falling out of love with books at this same age?

I began by examining the ways the educational system changes as students move through their teens to help discover how schools themselves may contribute to students’ loss of interest in reading. In Kelly Gallagher’s Readicide (2009), he emphasized the most obvious change schools have undergone in recent years, the increased emphasis on summative, high-stakes testing (Gallagher, 2009, The Elephant in the Room, para. 1). When The Every Student Succeeds Act replaced No Child Left Behind, many hoped the standardized testing burden would decrease. However, this has not been the case, as the basic testing framework remained unchanged and few schools took advantage of alternatives (Gewertz, 2019). My experience in the classroom left me with the impression that story itself can be pushed aside in favor of testable reading comprehension, and at least one study suggests that comprehension has less of an effect on motivation than motivation has on comprehension (Schaffner, Phillip, & Schiefele, 2016).
Narrowing this focus further, the largest decrease in reading pleasure occurs while students are in the seventh grade, the middle year of middle school (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). As this is also one of the periods of greatest physical and social change for a child (Wormeli, 2011), I attempted to understand the developmental factors that play into this. To do so, I approached seventh-grade students themselves and asked them to discuss their reading attitudes and habits, with the belief that they may provide beneficial information. This approach, asking those who are directly affected for their impressions and opinion, seems to be under-represented. I chose to take advantage of the freedom a qualitative approach allows and make this the primary focus of this study.

In this review of the literature, I attempt to show the benefits of increased reading, particularly of fiction, and examine current methods that both contribute to and detract from students’ desire to pursue this activity both inside and outside the classroom. I specifically examined the approaches of teachers who have found ways to allow their students to enjoy reading, particularly approaches that involve student reading choice. As my basic theoretical foundation involves student-centered learning that takes the child’s interests into account and allows students to have agency in their learning, the concept of reading choice fits nicely. I also examined classroom structures that allow for this approach, particularly involving book clubs or literature circles in which the book read is chosen by the students themselves.

Overview

The current high-stakes testing reality shapes the context of recent and ongoing research in this area (Stotsky, 2016). Schools find themselves in a system in which technical aspects of reading, along with factual comprehension, take precedence (Severino, Tecce DeCarlo, Sondergeld, Izzetoglu, & Ammar., 2018). The result has been a priority shift that focuses on
effectiveness, sometimes to the detriment of student enjoyment. An example of this is the new emphasis on informational texts in the Every Student Succeeds Act, a mandate that many fear reduces the opportunities for reading fiction (Gewertz, 2013).

Responding to this shift, researchers have investigated new classroom methods which seek ways to improve student reading habits (O’Donnell, 2017; Castek, 2018), as well as teaching methods (Morgan & Wagner, 2011), the effect of bringing underused genres into the classroom (Fuxa, 2012), uses of technology (Moon, Wold, & Francom, 2017) and giving students more say as to what they read (Brown, 2016). Most often, these studies have reported on analyses of activities and surveys. What I attempted in this study is seen less often: while participating in a book club, I sought to glean information about students’ reading journeys through their own words. I searched for ways to connect student reaction to this specific reading, which they took part in selecting, to the ways their attitudes about reading have changed and what factors have led to their current attitudes about reading.

I built this research upon a number of studies that have been conducted in recent years, using these to inform my activities and questioning. Examining prior research gave me an understanding of where to begin and pointed to touchstones I encountered along the way.

Benefits of Reading

**Critical thinking.** Seeking to correct what they see as an overemphasis on lower-level skills engendered by reliance on standardized testing results, researchers have sought ways to improve critical thinking skills (Smith & Szymanski, 2013). Working in an academic atmosphere that has produced multiple definitions of the term (Moore, 2013), Warnick and Inch created a statement of what is involved in the concept that appears both concise and informative when they wrote that critical thinking consists of “the ability to explore a problem, question, or situation:
integrate all the available information about it; arrive at a solution or hypothesis; and justify one’s position” (1994, p. 11).

While some suggest that teaching critical thinking may have undesired results, such as creating overly negative attitudes (Roth, 2014) or causing students to question even parental authority (Strauss, 2012, p. 9), this remains a minority view, as most agree that critical thinking is a vital skill. In an age in which the internet makes information available to students to a point that it becomes hard to sort the accurate from the inaccurate, the ability to integrate available information accurately becomes vital, and this has been recognized since the early days of mass internet access (Browne, Freeman, & Williamson, 2000). Reacting to the current political climate, William Badke points out that in the “post-truth” era, internet literacy, that is, the ability to judge the accuracy of digital information, has become a necessity (2017). Dunne had previously noted that on into adulthood, critical thinking skills allow a person to find truth among competing claims (2015).

The link between reading and developing critical thinking skills is symbiotic, as reading helps the student develop reasoning skills, and these same reasoning skills help the student read for understanding (Thomson & Nixey, 2005). Establishing a causal basis for this benefit, Connell (2008), building on the theories of Louise Rosenblatt, argues that reading provides a “lived-through” experience that deepens the reader’s connection and understanding (p. 103). This experience connects with the findings of Belgian scientists who used brain-imaging to discover how creating narratives helps the student integrate information to form a logical whole (D’Argembeau, Cassol, Phillips, Balteau, Salmon, & Van der Linden, 2014).

**Empathy.** The role reading plays in enhancing student empathy is similar to the role reading plays in developing critical thinking. The process of immersing oneself in a story leads
the reader to become another person, temporarily taking on the thoughts, concerns, and motives of another. Bal and Veltkamp, discussing reading fiction, labelled this process “emotional transportation,” referring to the relationship between the degree of transportation and the tendency toward empathy (2013). In an attempt to clarify what was being measured, Mar, Oatley, and Peterson (2009) examined individual traits, with openness being the most correlative, and found that after these variables were accounted for, reading habits were still predictive of empathy.

Empathy involves feeling emotions from another perspective rather than simply understanding and acknowledging these emotions, differentiating this concept from sympathy (Gerdes, 2011). This attribute of feeling what another is feeling naturally causes one to be less likely to harm another, thus increased empathy means that a student is less likely to take part in bullying (Espelage, Hong, Kim, & Nan, 2018). The person doing the bullying is not the only student affected by increased empathy, but that unaffected students who possess increased levels of empathy are more likely to step in and assist the student being bullied (Stanbury, Bruce, Jain, & Stellern, 2009). Benefits of empathy also include a decreased likelihood of behavior that leads to student suspension (Sparks, 2016).

One recent study examined readers’ brain imaging and discovered that fiction that put protagonists in peril and induced fear activated the brain network that produces empathy more than neutral, less-stressful stories (Hsu, Conrad, & Jacobs, 2014). Examining his research, I am convinced that reading fiction, particularly, leads to increased empathy. McCreary and Marchant (2016) even found a negative correlation between non-fiction reading and empathy. At the same time, the shift in education policy with CCSS has moved much of schools’ reading focus from fiction to informational texts. This shift begins slowly in middle school, as a fourth-grade equal
balance between fiction and non-fiction texts favors non-fiction by 5% with the move to 70% non-fiction only occurring in high school (Gewertz, 2012). Even at this level, middle-school teachers report that in order to meet these standards, they have been forced to cut the amount of fiction they teach (Gewertz, 2013).

With Common Core being declared dead by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos (2018), some may consider this no longer relevant; however, the Every Student Succeeds Act bars the federal government from having a say in what standards individual states use (Klein, 2018). Many states reacted to the ESSA by either keeping Common Core Standards in place or adopting standards that are largely similar, with Louisiana, for instance, keeping around 80% of these standards (Asher-Schapiro, 2016). As of 2019, 45 states still used some form of Common Core (“Common Core”).

**Reading enjoyment.** As enjoying an activity makes a student desire to participate in this activity, I considered the components of reading enjoyment.

**Increasing Enjoyment.** Researchers have focused on a number of methods that may increase student enjoyment, most centered on the idea of focusing on student interest, that is, providing material that stimulates a student’s existing curiosity rather than attempting to move the student’s interest toward traditional material. Reading enjoyment is a necessity if students are to become independent, lifelong learners (Smith, Mann, Georgieva, Curtis, & Schimmel, 2016). Following this line of reasoning, if a student learns to dislike reading in school, he or she is less likely to read as an adult. The challenge becomes presenting books in a way that engages students, encouraging them to look forward to reading. One way to do this effectively is to individualize instruction, honoring student interest (Dickerson, 2015). Student interest returns the research to the foundational concept of student-centered learning. Focusing on the individual
learner’s interests increases the likelihood that the love of books she or he may have developed in elementary school will continue through adolescence and into adulthood (Marchiando, 2013).

In nearly every facet of literature instruction, individualization can be used to improve the student’s ability to access the information. Take the formation of the canon, for instance. The first problem that troubles many about the core essentials that, it is assumed, must be taught is that they represent the established power structure (Robinson & Massing, 2007). The canon remains overwhelmingly western, white, and male (Edelstein, 2005). While it could be argued that this is due to the fact that this is the demographic that has traditionally received the best education, it can also be seen that a lack of approved educational opportunities has never been an absolute impediment to producing worthwhile literature. Although lack of access to the best of society could make the writing path more difficult, it also provided a rich personal background that would be difficult for a wealthier author to replicate. The canon being used in American schools is already filled with such writers, with Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and Harper Lee being examples (Temple, 2012). Literature gains value when it contains something the reader can relate to, even when presenting an unfamiliar context (Stiles, 2013).

Also, the canon acts as a wall of separation between what is perceived to have value and what is perceived to be, at best, a curiosity. Those who have made the decisions over the years have invested importance in the literature that looks the most like them. It is hard to escape the suspicion that the reason that the canon is white, male, and western is that those same words can be used to describe those who selected the canon.

Do these issues make the “essentials” worthless? No, the problem is more subtle. For education to have meaning, a student needs to be moved forward. The concept of progressivism should extend past the idea of new approaches and embrace the idea that teachers move their
students (and themselves) forward, exposing them to concepts and curricula they would not otherwise encounter. There are two sides to this idea: the student encounters literature that challenges him or her, and the teacher encounters the literature and culture of the student. The key is finding value in both of these locales and respecting the individual interests of the students (Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005). Teachers introduce literature, both current and canonical, that speaks to the concerns of the students. What do traditional works address that is relevant today? Or, approaching the issue from the point of view of the student, educators can take an issue that intrigues students and search for literature that provides an insight into the human nature that drives the issue. While making literature relevant can take extra effort, I believe that most teachers would do the work if this helped make their teaching more meaningful. Stimulating student interest has led educators to attempt a number of new approaches.

**Hindrances.** In order for a student to choose to read on her or his own, the student must possess intrinsic motivation to do so (Paige, 2011). A student needs to enjoy reading before they will be motivated to seek out books and stories beyond the classroom (Fisher, 2013). A student whose parents model reading as a pleasurable experience begins school with a better chance of becoming a motivated reader (Baker & Scher, 2002). When parents read aloud, children are more likely to become eager and accomplished readers (Merga & Ledger, 2018). A recent study showed that 54% of parents of children age five to seven read to their child at least five times a week, but this number drops to 34% when the child reaches age six and 17% from ages nine through eleven (Simons, 2015).

Family size may affect a child’s reading, according to an international study covering thirty countries that found that each additional sibling correlates with a significantly lower score
on reading assessments in every country studied except for Iceland (Marks, 2006, p. 9). This effect can be mitigated, however, if older siblings read with younger ones (Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016). The United States and the United Kingdom showed the largest negative correlation between reading scores and single-parent homes (Marks, 2006).

Too often, the classroom experience itself causes students to enjoy reading less, or even to actively dislike the activity (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). As Gallagher (2009) writes, “rather than helping students, many of the reading practices found in today’s classrooms are actually contributing to the death of reading” (Introduction, para. 8). He expands on this idea:

After thirteen years of schooling, many graduates are thankful they may never have to open another book again. A generation of readers is being lost, and it is time for teachers to consider how and why our practices may be contributing to this decline in reading. (para. 4)

As noted earlier, these issues are largely driven by testing culture (Gallagher, 2009, The Elephant in the Room, para. 1). In a culture in which school effectiveness is largely gauged by student performance on standardized tests, reading engagement improves this performance in multiple subject areas (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008). However, this same system of testing has at times stood in the way of student reading engagement (Enriquez, 2013). Often, the standards associated with testing encourage a shallow engagement with the text (Giouroukakis, 2014).

Schools often attempt to prepare students for year-end assessments by increasing emphasis on text complexity, a trend that has increased under Common Core State Standards (CCSS), based on the perhaps-incorrect claim that text complexity has decreased (Allington, McCuiston, & Billen, 2015). Additionally, testing concerns cause schools to focus on material the test is expected to cover. While CCSS include literature concepts related to story
comprehension (Common Core, 2018), the measurable side of this is often emphasized because of the importance of standardized testing (Dodge, 2007). Literary elements such as figurative language, also specified in these standards (Common Core, 2018), sometimes become a focus in a way that detracts from enjoyment of the story itself (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). When students do not perform well on tests, then, they are often given more assignments of the type that initially caused them to lose interest, thus making them dislike reading more than before (Gallagher, 2009).

Given the intrusions on the story’s narrative, it comes as no surprise when students pronounce their classroom reading “boring” (Cockroft & Atkinson, 2017). Thus, instead of learning to enjoy books, teens move through literature assignments finding ways to avoid reading, a practice Penny Kittle calls “fake reading” (2013, p.14). Since many students do not grow up in homes where books are present and reading encouraged, the attitudes they develop in the classroom flow over into the rest of their lives, and non-reading teens become non-reading adults, and the percentage of adults who read for pleasure goes in decline (Milliot, 2018). Rather than having been introduced to classic novels and stories, as curriculum designers intend, students often spend their time and effort finding ways to avoid reading and are left with a long-term impression that books are boring and reading is not a worthwhile activity (Roberts, 2017).

Teaching the literary canon, that is, the set of material that has been judged to have a lasting value (Howe, 1991), remains an area of disagreement. Some educators, including both Kittle (2013) and Gallagher (2009), argue that the problem is not with the material itself, but rather with the joyless way in which literature is taught. An absence of joy in the presentation, combined with the natural rebellion that comes into a child’s life as he or she enters the teen years, causes students to reject classic literature as irrelevant and boring, as something imposed
on them by adults who seek to make them conform (Fisher & Ivey, 2007). These attitudes, again, carry over to adulthood, draining appreciation for deeper meaning and the history of knowledge while creating a society that only appreciates shallower forms of entertainment, at least according to many of those who promote the canon (Howe, 1991), and appreciation of classic literature occurs mostly when students pass over the deeper meaning of these texts and read them as adventure stories (Harrison, 1997).

Kittle, who also advocates for reading choice as well as bringing contemporary books into the classroom, wrote, “The great voices of centuries past are still relevant today, but too often we haven’t convinced most students this is true” (2013, p. xvi). Others take this concept a step further and argue for the supremacy of the canon. These books and stories, they claim, have become classics because of their superior quality (H. Bloom, 1996). Educators, then, are given the impression that some material has been proven worth the time required for students to read and study, while other books, or even genres and formats, do not possess intrinsic value that makes them worth reading (Edmundson, 2011). Hirsch, who has broken with followers of Dewey by proposing a more curriculum-centered approach, has become one of the best-known proponents of this school, largely because of his canon-defining book Cultural Literacy (1988). Rather than selecting material that fits the student’s personal knowledge and interests, Hirsch suggests expanding all students’ background knowledge to help them better understand the canon (2006). This view adds a practical layer to the canon-centric approach by suggesting that when students across the country read the same time-tested works, this creates a common culture of literacy (Hirsch, 2006). Gallagher, also a proponent of reading choice and a critic of current methods, finds this idea compelling: “When every student in the country reads Romeo and Juliet, it means we all acquire a shared cultural literacy, a sharing that is foundational if we, as a culture, are
going to be able to communicate with one another” (2009, “Lousy Classic” is an Oxymoron, para. 3).

Critics of the canon, however, take a more skeptical approach. By propagating a set canon, they argue, we are imposing the values and experiences of past generations on current students who are coming of age in a very different world (Allyn, 2011). Rather than expanding the world view of this generation, we present them with an entry into adult reading which they find difficult to negotiate (Fisher & Ivey, 2007). Students reject these canonical works because they cannot relate to their characters, situations, or language. Additionally, in spite of recent efforts to correct the situation, the canon too often resembles the group who initially proposed, then propped up, the list of standards: it largely consists of works by white males (Pirofski, 2001, Franklin, Huber, & Laurence, 1992). Works by women have traditionally been represented by time-honored selections, such as poetry by Dickinson (Edmundson, 2011) or fiction by Alcott (May, 2009), but the predominant world view put forward in the canon is one that assumes the norm of a society led by men and has historically included few genuine feminist viewpoints (Mihaila, 2011). Minority fiction is now finding its place but was missing from the canon for far longer than many find defensible (Blackwell, 2011). Even now, some marginalization can be seen, as set-aside periods such as Black History Month or Martin Luther King Day can be used as a justification for treating this material as an add-on rather than a part of the mainstream curriculum (King & Brown, 2014). Also, genres such as science fiction, horror, and fantasy are often regarded by the curriculum-makers as being of lesser quality than more literary works (Swanstrom, 2017). At the same time, the young adult market, which barely existed a few decades ago, produces popular, trendy, fiction in these categories (Carstensen, 2018). Books that teens often want to read, and they can be excluded from the traditional canon (Gibbons, Dail, &
Arguments are being made for bringing graphic novels and comic books into schools as well (Bucher & Manning, 2004). Traditionally, students have been actively discouraged from reading comics, even on their own time, as this has been seen as an activity that is engaged in place of reading with undesirable consequences (Cowan, 2011). This view is changing for several reasons, including a recognition of the increased quality of comics and graphic novels. I discuss this in more detail in a later section.

Closely related to the canon is the method used to present this material and create a shared experience, teaching the whole class novel. For many, every student in a class reading the same book at the same time helps create a common foundation, with many of the same arguments made for the canon itself used to promote this tradition (Roberts, 2017). This process provides the benefit of the whole class sharing their views of the meaning of a text as well as asking questions that deepen understanding (Neff & Weimer, 1989, Sacks, 2019). Many suggest holding on to this practice even while expanding choice (Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Others, however, propose eliminating this method, citing the lack of individualization and the tendency to focus on novels in which many class members have little interest (Allyn, 2011). Methods often used, such as popcorn reading and other practices in which students take turns reading aloud while the rest of the class follows, can be detrimental, as these voices can decrease class members understanding of the book, at times seeming to bring the class down to the level of the individual with the lowest point of understanding (García-Rodicio, Melero, & Izquierdo, 2018).

One possible contributor to the middle school reading decline is the physical, emotional, and cultural changes that children experience as they enter their teens. The physical changes lead to an interest in romantic pursuits, which in turn can lead to a change in the types of activities they find appealing (Marks, 2011). The importance of peer group acceptance also increases
during this period, and these two concerns often combine to become the driving force in an adolescent’s life (Marks, 2011). Playing sports, for instance, becomes preferable to solitary activities such as reading because of the higher socialization possibilities and the perception that this is more likely to garner peer acceptance (Kantomaa, Stamatakis, Kankaanpää, Kajantie, Taanila, & Tammelin, 2016).

As with other issues, one answer is individualizing learning and molding curriculum to fit the needs of the student. Rather than stubbornly forging ahead with standardized methods, if a teacher wishes to reach adolescents, a prime consideration must be the adolescent her or himself (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014). Here, I find myself returning to the concept of student-centered learning, my foundation for this study. Presenting material without encouraging the student to take possession of her learning becomes not simply ineffective, but counter to the goal of making the student a lifelong learner (Clark, 2015). Adolescence is the period when the transition to adult personality takes place, and preferences discovered during this period help create the person the adolescent will become (Klimstra, 2013). By giving agency to the student in the curriculum-creating process, schools break down barriers that exist between the student and the subject matter (Biddulph, 2011).

In both research and experience, I have found a common thread running through the elements that hinder middle school students from continuing their love of books and becoming lifelong readers: schools tend to create curriculums and atmospheres with a focus on administrator control rather than student agency. Rigor is confused with rigidity. Toshalis (2010) suggests that school-based practices contrary to the theoretical foundations of teaching are turning new teachers into disciplinarians. Education is taught as an exercise in possibilities but becomes a struggle for control. The accompanying disciplinary concerns, then, stem from a
system that trains teachers to control rather than inspire (Toshalis, 2010). The result is that the struggle for control leads to a discipline-centered frustration that drains the enthusiasm from both teachers and students. An adversarial relationship is established, and this affects everything that is done in the school (Toshalis, 2010). I strongly related to Toshalis’s research and conclusions, as my experience has been that efforts to give agency to students are at times strongly discouraged.

Montessori, more than anyone, advocated for the child’s freedom to direct his or her own learning, saying, “Respect all the reasonable forms of activity in which the child engages and try to understand them” (1912, p.88). A problem arises here. We, as trained educators, define reasonable more narrowly than our students. We take their freedom with the best intentions, and control becomes paramount. Toshalis examined the ways in which the discipline teachers have received shapes the way they themselves discipline (2010). Rather than focus solely on the teachers’ experience as a student, he referenced how teachers continued to receive correction in the area of discipline from supervisors, peers, and even substitutes they were supervising:

Annie’s mentor’s substitute teacher actually interrupts Annie’s lesson to discipline both the students and her into accepting or expressing more supervisory control: There was a sub [i.e. substitute teacher] who just graduated from college who told me I’m not very assertive as a teacher. … The sub stopped one of the classes to be like, ‘Look how you’re treating Miss Lamont!’, like, ‘This is not okay!’ And I felt, like, I’m so, like, losing control. … I mean, I’m young enough as it is, but a kid who … looks even younger than me and is a substitute and has never taught in his life, is … controlling the room and telling them how they should treat me! (Toshalis, 2010, p. 202)
Strict discipline is often associated with effective education in ways that can be misleading. As Black says, “On the theoretical side, reformers miss the opportunity to pit harsh discipline as the enemy of good schools. Instead, they fall victim to the narrative of bad students as the enemy of good ones” (2016). The process of eliminating problem students serves to deny the best educational opportunities to students from less mainstream backgrounds. Such policies, particularly those based on zero tolerance, tend to particularly hurt minorities (Ritter, 2018).

Again, my own experience of being told to focus on students who had achieved in the past while not expending extra effort on those who had not previously succeeded provides an example of schools’ tendencies to focus on preferred students.

The connection between authoritarian school climate and students being less likely to become independent outside readers correlates to the basic link between learning attitudes, reading enjoyment, and increased learning (Ross, 2000). Learning enjoyment increases in middle schools in which students are treated as individuals, a practice less common in highly disciplined schools (Hagenauer & Hascher, 2010). As we have seen, enjoyment is key to becoming a lifelong reader. A school that stifles the instinct to learn independently by tightly regulating student behavior, as well as the methods used to teach these students, in effect discourages learning, although those prescribing these methods often say the opposite (Peguero & Bracy, 2015). A link has been suggested between strict curriculum regulation and teaching using basic, lower-level methods designed to increase test scores (Gallagher, 2009, The Elephant in the Room, para. 3). One study conducted in Texas argued that narrowing curriculum to emphasize heavily tested core classes decreases both students’ interest in learning and their ability to transfer learning from one area to another (Reid, 2012).
Lucy Calkins’ *Units of Study* program has become the third most used set of materials used to teach reading and writing in the United States (Hanford, 2020). This program, with units for both primary and middle school, promotes much of what has been discussed here, including scaffolding, individualized instruction, and expanding the curriculum to include books chosen by the students and has recently been expanded to include expanded instruction in phonics and reading mechanics (“Units of Study for Teaching Reading Grades 6-8,” 2020). In 2014, the project published both large-scale and case-studies showing that users of the program exhibited increased test scores and overall reading growth across demographics (“Teachers College Reading and Writing Project”).

However, in recent years, Calkins has come under criticism, particularly by those promoting the phonic-centric Science of Reading, saying that her program was not supported by research and was, in fact, harmful (Refsnes, 2019). Calkins replied to these criticisms in November in a paper titled *No One Gets to Own the Term “The Science of Reading,”* which included references showing the research base for her program (2019). Her critics then responded by questioning her denials of using cueing systems (Hanford, 2020) and pointing to a newly released study finding that the program does not include phonics and vocabulary instruction recommended by current research (Adams et al., 2020).

As I read studies, commentaries and reports, I am struck that Calkins’ critics do not address the central concern of my research: why students begin school enjoying books and later lose the desire to read. While I could make inferences about what the competing programs do to children’s motivation to read, I can find no research on the subject. Calkins, however, does address the idea of teachers passing a love for reading on to their students (“Units of Study,” 2020).
**Neil Postman’s Foresight.** The criticism that students spend too much of their time on unproductive activities is not new. In 1985, fresh from the year that provided the setting for Orwell’s grim view of the future, Neil Postman wrote *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, suggesting that rather than finding ourselves in Orwell’s dystopia, in which pain was used to keep the populace in line, we had entered Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in which constant appealing distractions prevented the citizenry from rising up against their rulers (p. 11). Postman made the argument of an emerging Huxleyan society at a time when technology had grown to such an extent that the presence of screens seemed to overwhelm our lives. He produced this book more than a decade before the explosion of the current information age, at a time when the ways in which the internet would consume our lives was not yet apparent. Postman certainly made a point that seems more relevant today than it did thirty-four years ago. I wonder whether we have reached a point where we despair of the possibility of avoiding the world he foresaw. It seems possible that we may have come to a place where we need to use the current cultural condition in order to find a possible way to navigate our way through the problems it has engendered.

Postman provided an interesting perspective when viewing the way the education system has responded to these rapid changes. In *The End of Education* (1995), he reacts to the utilitarian philosophy of primarily providing students with marketable skills that will benefit their future careers, a philosophy that undergirded President Clinton’s policy and has continued to infuse the language used to describe desired educational outcomes. Postman wrote, “Of course, this is exactly the wrong solution, since the making of adaptable, curious, open, questioning people has nothing to do with vocational training and everything to do with humanistic and scientific studies” (1995, p. 30). Education was, then, about creating life-long learners.
Later in the same book, he shares his concerns with the move toward multiculturalism, which he distinguishes from pluralism by portraying the former as an effort to reverse rather than modify the way we have considered traditional American culture and other cultures in the past. Postman worries that multiculturalism adopts an approach in which western cultures become wholly bad and innovations are said, without full evidence, to have (in the example he uses) African origins (1995, p. 53). He argues for a better way to hold on to standards:

Diversity does not mean the disintegration of standards, is not an argument against standards, does not lead to a chaotic, irresponsible relativism. It is an argument for the growth and malleability of standards, a growth that takes place across time and space and that is given form by differences of gender, religion, and all the other categories of humanity. (p. 78)

Postman (1995) then explains that books by diverse authors should become part of the curriculum because they possess value, and that through this process books should become part of the curriculum not because they represent a certain culture, but “because they demonstrate how the vitality and creativity of humanity depend on diversity, and because they have set the standards to which civilized people adhere. The law of diversity thus makes intelligent humans of us all” (p. 79).

It strikes me that, as much as my long-held classicist leanings draw me toward Postman’s ideas, a gap exists, and this gap defines the problem I am trying to understand. A classical curriculum may be preferred in the best of all possible worlds, but, for reasons I have outlined elsewhere, our current culture seems to reach toward something else. Students too often have seen a canon consisting of unrelatable works, and this has contributed to reading, and education in general, having little appeal for them. There may have been cultures in the past that had no
problem with this approach (or, honestly, there may not have been outside of our created narratives), but the students we are trying to reach today have too many options, too many sources of information and entertainment available to them, as Postman pointed out in his seminal *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985). In twenty-first century America, students have so many choices that in order for us to reach them, we need to discover where they actually live.

Postman’s philosophy grew from a critical consideration of a problem that he recognized before many others. Rather than criticize him for failing to create a full solution for the exponential growth of the problem he had identified, I would look at his insights and see how they might work in concert with a very different philosophy. The distractions he warned us of were real; however, the perhaps unforeseeable rapid increase in the purposes of screens has made the effort to eliminate such distractions futile. By considering the problem through a student-centered lens, I would attempt to find a way through the problem that grows naturally from the same society that grew up in this electronic setting. Perhaps instead of continuing to couch increased technology in negative terms, a better way forward would be to consider this an immovable feature of the landscape and use these existing features as not just a tool, but an architect of students’ educational experience. Technology already serves this role, and our choice is to either attempt to eliminate the existing or recognize the landscape. What we have thus far considered the problem then becomes simply the setting, something more neutral that can itself contain solutions to the problems we discover.

**Choice.** One specific method of making literature relevant to students is to give the students themselves a choice of what material to read (Little, McCoach, & Reis, 2014). Dickerson recently found that a program including reading choice resulted in students having
more positive attitudes toward silent reading (2015). R.C. Clark suggests that children should be allowed to choose their own reading material as a way to grow their reading enjoyment (2011).

**Current practitioners.** Clark’s research builds on the work of Kelly Gallagher, a previously discussed educator and researcher who laid out his ideas in *Readicide: How Schools are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It* (2009). Gallagher suggests reading an equal number of academic and recreational texts to allow students to both read material they enjoy and approach texts, with assistance, that take more effort to understand (2009, Adopt a 50/50 Approach, para. 1). Gallagher believes the absence of enjoyable reading material to be of particular concern:

> If we want kids to become better readers, they have to read a lot more than they are currently reading. And if we want our students to do a lot more reading than they are currently doing, they need to be immersed in a pool of high-interest reading material.

(2009, There Is a Dearth of Interesting Reading Materials in Our Schools, para. 2)

Although he disagrees with her concerning the importance of classics, Gallagher cites Nancy Atwell’s work as an influence in this area (2009, “Lousy Classic” Is an Oxymoron, para. 2). Atwell bases her philosophy on the idea that finding a book that fits a student’s abilities and interests can turn every child into an enthusiastic reader, and that “The job of adults who care about reading is to move heaven and earth to put that book into a child’s hands” (2007, Choice, para. 6). Atwell recommends a process of teacher and student recommendations she refers to as “booktalks” as a method her students find particularly effective (2007, Booktalks, para. 1).

While Gallagher, Atwood, and others have committed to the idea of reading choice, some educators and researchers have viewed this as an additional program rather than a foundational part of their curriculum. Christopher Wagner, teaching a high school sophomore class in
Gahanna, Ohio, believed it important to teach the accepted canon of literature, and thus his approach was to include reading choice as a supplement to the regular classroom curriculum. Wagner's reading choice program took the form of a three-week add-on in the form of a study assisted by Kent State University researcher Denise Morgan (2013).

Having determined that many of his students had developed an aversion to reading, Wagner devised a plan to make reading more enjoyable by centering the reading on their interests and making the reading assignments themselves less stressful. He approached his students with his plan, which he outlined on the Smart Board. Each day’s lesson would include built-in time for independent reading. The students would choose what they read individually rather than read a single book as a class. They would still learn literary terms and concepts, but there would be no handouts or quizzes, as this learning would be assessed using individual conferences with students. A part of this plan involved students reading thirty minutes each day, in addition to the time they read in class. The students would also be able to put a book down without finishing it and start another if they desired, a practice that stands in opposition to a common classroom trope that says that if a student does not finish a book, this amounts to fake reading. Morgan and Wagner had encountered Penny Kittle’s definition of this term and come to believe that lessening reading restrictions would make reading more authentic (2013). Wagner also determined to connect with his students through the conferences and help move their understanding forward.

He asked the students to respond in their journals, and some responded with “What’s the catch?” They had become used to the push-and-pull, adversarial method, and the idea that reading could be something that they enjoy did not fit their concept of the way school works. Wagner presented a short lesson each day covering a literary concept and then monitored his
students’ reading. He also helped students who could not decide what to read choose a book that went along with their interests. Although students were to bring a book to class (this was part of the assessment), he provided a selection of books in the classroom as well. At first, a few students avoided actually reading, but he was able to catch this through monitoring and questioning. His conferences with students also allowed him to assess whether the students were understanding the concepts he was teaching and to help them along individually if they needed more instruction. Student comments at the end of the study indicated that they were enjoying their reading more than before. Grades also improved, with 49 of Wagner’s 60 students receiving As, 9 Bs, and 2 Cs. Although the authors did not provide the students’ beginning grades, they indicated this was an improvement. Teachers in other subjects also reported that students who had participated in the program had become more enthusiastic readers (2013).

Morgan and Wagner took a conservative approach to a classroom choice program, perhaps because of the comfort level Wagner felt with this approach and perhaps because of district or school requirements. A problem with implementing reading choice in a test-centered environment is that administrations or districts may not feel that the required material is covered in ways that relate to the test. The method used here makes allowances for this. As part of the program, Wagner used mini-lessons and journals that assured a list of literary concepts is taught: point of view, conflict, plot, direct/indirect characterization, mood/tone, flashback/foreshadowing, and irony (2013). In addition, points were deducted for not bringing a book, not reading, and not journaling (2013). The authors present a reading choice program that would be acceptable to those who have not wholly bought into the idea. Whole-class novels can still be taught, and other methods can still be used. Addressing a concern of many choice critics, both parents and teachers were required to approve the students’ choice of reading material.
Reading choice, however, was introduced as a viable alternative to prescribed reading, and the results were evaluated, providing a foundation for future use.

Pernille Ripp, a sixth-grade teacher in the town of Oregon, Wisconsin, has adopted a more complete reading choice program, one that she previously used in a fifth-grade classroom and has now adapted to her middle-school students. Ripp, who also talks about the ways we have encouraged students to fake their reading to get through assignments, has, through experimentation, developed a system designed to empower the reader, one that includes reading choice as part of its foundation. She has eliminated the use of the whole-class novel after growing increasingly frustrated with the concept and has come to believe that the common methods of assigning novels for class reading are detrimental to the student’s reading enjoyment (2015a).

Ripp recently reported that her eighth-grade niece has moved from reading fifty novels in one year to reading ten the next, apparently due to her school’s practice of using whole-class novels as the basis for their literature program, and concluded, “(H)er English class seems to be killing her joy of reading” (2015a). Ripp has tried to see the need for this approach, “Yet I keep returning to the question of why we continue to force students to read certain books when that is the number one thing ALL of my students report kill their love of reading?” (2015a). She then suggested that whole-novel reading could be done aloud or for only a fragment of the year but admits again that she cannot understand the reason we hang on to this tradition (2015a).

In another article, Ripp listed common classroom reading rules that we would not put up with as an adult, including lack of reading choice, limited ability to abandon books, and forced reflection and tracking (Ripp, 2016). She outlined a system in which reading becomes a task to be completed. In doing this, the possibility of enjoyment becomes remote. Ripp wants to return
the classroom to a more natural reading experience, one that takes the enjoyment a student has already found in books and nurtures this joy.

Ripp has developed her own procedures. She has laid out a ten-point program that allows teachers to shift instruction toward the interests of the student (2015b, p. 13-15). She sends a letter home with her students at the beginning of the year introducing the classroom library and familiarizing parents with the freedom students will have in selecting books. She also surveys the students reading habits at the beginning of the year and tracks their practices and reading identities from there on. She also uses a parental permission slip for reading young adult novels (Ripp, 2015c).

The teachers in both of these classrooms refer to Penny Kittle, the high school teacher from North Conway, New Hampshire, as their source for the term fake reading. Kittle, in Book Love, discussed how she discovered that the way she was assigning books to her students was causing them to only pretend to read and to become fake readers (2013, p.14). These early experiences inspired Kittle to develop an in-depth program that included reading choice and was designed to build the skills and stamina to allow students to become readers outside of school who were capable of tackling more difficult texts. This program began by allowing students to read what they were able to read and would read. While students should be able to read Jane Austen eventually, this would more easily occur if students were allowed to begin by reading books they enjoyed, even if this book happened to be something less than a classic, such as Twilight (2013, p. xvi). In doing so, Kittle, unlike Morgan, made choice a foundation of her curriculum. As she wrote in Book Love, “Allowing students to make choices about what they read has been presented in our profession, especially at the secondary level, as enrichment—
something to do once the hard work is over. I believe, instead, that it is at the center of our work” (2013, p. xv).

With a detailed program for moving students along the reading ladder, Kittle disabuses critics of the notion that a program that allows students to read what they would like understimates students’ abilities. In fact, she says, this method rejects the notion that students who have not developed a love of reading at a certain point will never become enthusiastic readers (2013, p. 6). The idea of reading choice argues that determining what students should and should not read instills a false idea of what it means to be a reader. If they are repeatedly provided with books that are beyond their capabilities, they will eventually associate this frustration with the concept of reading itself. By providing students with material that appeals to them, teachers can introduce them to a new way to think about books. They can thus reclaim the joy of story, of narrative, of getting lost in another life.

Where Kittle upends her critics’ expectation most, perhaps, is with her attention to her establishing and tracking goals, particularly involving reading stamina and fluency, which she cites as being particularly important factors in developing as a reader (2013, p. 27-30). Through this process, she is able to help her students increase the complexity of their reading material. Kittle’s program is not simply about reading what students like at the moment; it is also concerned with helping the students become more sophisticated readers.

One of the methods Kittle uses to encourage her students to read more advanced books is the previously mentioned “book talk” (2013, p. 59). After developing a diverse classroom library with care taken to provide books that students can move through as they advance, Kittle becomes a salesperson. She chooses a book from either the classroom or school library that she would like students to read and presents it to the class. She holds the book up so students can see the cover
and general size of the book. She familiarizes herself with the book, so she can give a brief overview of why students may like it. Then, she reads a short passage, walks to the back of the room, and logs the book in on the Book Talks poster. Students, parents, teachers, librarians, and others help choose the books she presents, and she takes care that these books fit in with the direction she would like to take her class. In this way, she can provide input and advise while still allowing the students to choose their own books (2013).

Kittle further guides her students’ reading through individual conferences that fall into categories that serve three purposes: monitoring the student’s reading life, teaching strategic reading, and helping the student plan the complexity and challenge of her writing (2013, p. 79). In these conferences, Kittle asks questions that monitor a student’s reading progress and understanding of and reaction to a particular book. These conferences, built upon the relationship Kittle has developed with a student, provide an opportunity for her to personally guide the student’s progress. In addition, students react to their reading as a part of a community in which they set goals and write mini-reviews (Kittle, 2013, p. 128-129). In this book, Kittle provides a picture of a classroom that takes the idea of reading choice and develops it into a deeper program that not only allows the student to have a say in his or her reading, but also provides attention to student progress as well as encouragement and strategies that help the student along (2013, pp. 27-37).

All of these teachers have recognized a problem: students are not reading, even when they are assigned books in class (Kittle, 2013, pp. 11-12). Fake reading has become so common that many teachers accept this is the way many students will approach assignments (Morgan & Wagner, 2013, p. 659). Each of these teachers has attempted to implement a way to address this problem. All three of these programs have differences. Wagner and Morgan developed a short-
A term program that acted as an addition to the regular classroom process (2013). In their program, choice was limited, as students needed to have their choices approved. Although this approach appears less radical than the others, it came as a surprise to the students, who thought there must be something more. Grading was fairly informal, and assessment took place within a conversational format (Morgan & Wagner, 2013, pp. 663-654). Teachers who were not willing to completely let go of established procedures could find a similar program to be an entry-way into the concept of meaningful reading choice. And, as with the other approaches, these ideas could and likely should be adjusted to fit a particular classroom.

Pernille Ripp’s program seemed a bit more free-wheeling. She was willing to throw the concept of the whole-class novel out completely and expressed doubt there was still a purpose in this practice, which she blamed for destroying most of her students’ love of reading (2016). She provides structure for her students, tracks their progress, and keeps parents informed about her reading program. This provides her with the cachet needed to act as a deconstructionist who is willing to do what works, even if this upsets the powers-that-be. Her classroom provides an opportunity for students to continue to enjoy reading at a point where many students are turning away from books (Ripp, 2015a). Ripp teaches sixth grade, a critical time for students, and one senses that her program may need to be strong to arm her students against discouragement that may soon follow.

Penny Kittle’s program appears the most thorough and detailed. She provides reading choice as part of a structure that monitors students closely and focuses on seeing them progress to the place they need to be. She does not reject the idea of the whole-class novel completely, but instead approaches students where they are and moves them to a place where these novels can be
read and understood. She combines new approaches with organization and planning that should serve to assuage the concerns of more traditional teachers and administrators (2015c).

Perhaps every reading choice program needs to be different from all others, adjusted according to the needs of specific students and schools. Most teachers could implement an appropriate reading choice program, even if they only do this on a limited basis. At the same time, effective choice programs should not be afterthoughts, unmonitored with little follow-through. This closer examination of teachers who have successfully provided choice in their classroom shows the difference between giving students autonomy and leaving them to their own devices.

**Student-centered approaches.** All of the teachers considered here have established programs built on relationships with their students. Providing reading choice is not about turning a student loose in the library; it is about knowing the student and nudging her or him in the right direction, all the while respecting the student’s autonomy. A student does not become a lifelong reader by accepting a canon, perhaps, but by developing her own.

My personal experience as a reader draws me to these programs. I was taught to read at age three, and living in a rural area with no other children my age close by, my books, with their stories of distant adventures, were a lifeline. When I entered school, my reading life moved backward, as I integrated into a system designed for children who had not yet been taught to read and who had not yet learned to love books. Outside reading became my passion, even as the classroom grew less relevant. I found inspiration where I could, most notably from a junior high English teacher who recommended books and authors I had not heard of and from friends who had themselves found a love of reading.
When I read about the choice programs mentioned above, I am certain I would have thrived. Even more, I believe that other students would have found books that made reading meaningful for them. I think of the classroom stories stumbled upon in elementary school that sparked temporary enthusiasm in groups of students, and I can imagine what might have happened if teachers had used these stories to point to similar books that may have introduced new ideas and opened up imaginations. I think of an intellectually curious classmate in junior high who, after being exposed to literary possibilities, moved beyond the world he had come to know. I wonder how many opportunities we have missed.

These benefits that I imagine I and my classmates would have received from guided reading choice are the very ones discovered by researchers. Students who have traditionally not been enthusiastic readers benefit from reading choice. Reading helps students create, or at least discover, their identity as they move through the changes of adolescence (Dollinger, 2016). Often students who are taught only the traditional canon may not find many characters they can relate to, with even veteran, African-American teachers expressing surprise at the amount of literature “about us” available (McNair, 2013). Relatable characters and situations increase African-American students’ understanding of and enthusiasm for books (McCullough, 2013). Adding books addressing minority cultures helps in both of these areas. Also, a study conducted in an urban setting suggested that boys are not naturally less enthusiastic readers, but rather they have often not been provided with reading choices that meet their interests (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Another study found that relevant reading material helps urban youth negotiate their own identities (Francois, 2013).

Minority learners are not the only students who benefit when the curriculum is expanded to include often marginalized voices. Earlier, I discussed ways in which reading increases
empathy by helping the reader put himself in the place of another person (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009; Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). This same empathy has been found to decrease racism, as a person takes time to see another’s perspective (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011).

Boys have consistently lagged behind girls in reading development in measures of both fourth-grade students (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Hooper, 2017), and fifteen-year-olds (Bijou & Liouaeddine, 2018). Individualization, expressly provided by offering reading choice, can help in this area. Boys often prefer reading books that differ from those traditionally offered in the classroom, such as humorous books, books in a series, adventure, science fiction, and fantasy, and aspirational works that provide a picture of whom they would like to become (Moloney, 2000). In Moloney’s words, “A good book for a boy is one he wants to read” (2000). This could be said for any student or group of students. What I come to again is the idea of using the students’ interests as a way to engage them in learning. Student-centered theory continually emerges as a key.

Reading choice, then, becomes a leveler. Students from lower socioeconomic statuses tend to read less, often because they come from families that do not value either reading or education in general (Shahaeian, Wang, Tucker-Drob, Geiger, Bus, & Harrison, 2018). By offering choice, teachers can tailor subject matter to the student, overcoming a lack of interest in or familiarity with books by focusing on a subject that naturally attracts the child (Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Reading teachers have an advantage in this area, since books are not limited to a narrow topic, but rather cover every subject in existence. All that limits the scope of what we bring into the classroom is our curriculum. Student choice can expand this curriculum in ways that fit individual students rather than a generalized typical child.
**Genres.** One way that reading choice reaches students who are otherwise left cold by typical reading assignments is by offering a variety of genres, including many that tend to be underrepresented in the canon. In the past, most books that can be classified as part of a non-literary genre have been judged to not have the intrinsic worth needed to become part of the curriculum (McKinty, 2019). A few genre writers, such as Poe and Hawthorne, have escaped marginalization by virtue of their value having been accepted over time (Liptak, 2017). Discussion of reading choice sometimes begins with children’s and young adult literature. Lerer believes that these types of literature possess a depth we have often overlooked (2015). In recent times, with the advent of genre-heavy young adult literature, schools have begun to bring these books into schools and even assign them in the classroom (Avoli-Miller, 2013). Still, without offering choice, allowing genre reading may not reach its full potential, as genre preference tends to be individualized (Wilhelm & Smith, 2016). Reading *The Hunger Games*, for instance, may pique the interest of most of a class, but some students (and parents) will be put off by the degree of violence in the book or the specter of kids killing kids (Sloan, Sawyer, Warner, & Jones, 2014). By offering genre choice, students are able to zero in on individual preferences.

Each genre not only appeals to a specific subset of students, but each also provides specific benefits. Suspense in general, for instance, provides tension that has been shown to draw in young readers and propel them forward (Lesesne, 2006, p.29). Science fiction tweaks curiosity about the possibilities of other worlds and future advances (Roman, 2017). Dystopian fiction, currently perhaps the most popular genre among students, plays to adolescents’ natural sense of alienation, including the notion that the adults in charge may not always have what is best for society in mind, and can also comment on current situations without being overtly political in a way that becomes excessively controversial (Simmons, 2012). Both high and low fantasy
appealsto adolescents as it provides a means of escaping a condition of powerlessness and imagining a life where they can accomplish great things (Gallo, 2007). Horror provides a frisson that thrills many young readers in a way that realistic narratives cannot, driving them back to the pages of certain books again and again (Richards, Thatcher, Shreeves, Timmons, & Barker, 1999). Humorous books particularly appeal to boys, thus reaching an underserved demographic (“Laughs in the Classroom,” 2016). Romances aimed at young readers can appeal to the part of an adolescent’s inner life that seems to them the most vital (Charles, Mosley, & Bouricious, 1999). Choice can even create an outlet for students to appreciate accepted genres, such as poetry, as it allows them to determine what speaks to them most directly.

**Formats.** Beyond genre, opening up reading formats can also appeal to young readers and give educators help understanding how to reach students where they are. Researchers have suggested that middle school students’ magazine reading habits can offer a clue to their reading choices (Gabriel, Allington, and Billen, 2012). Expanding reading opportunities to include electronic reading has been shown as a way to reach students who do most of their reading from screens (Isero, 2014). Educators can be reluctant to do this, as it can seem to those who have developed their reading habits through tactile means that e-books do not provide as valuable an experience; however, students who are electronic natives do not see this distinction (Grimshaw, Dungworth, McKnight, & Morris, 2007).

This reluctance may be fading. Over the past decade, many schools have been adopting digital textbooks in an attempt to reduce costs and improve access (McMichael, 2011). Proponents point out that electronic text, in addition to naturally appealing to digital natives, provides interactive benefits and can add features such as audio and translations that benefit individual needs (McMichael, 2011). Florida became an early leader in this movement in 2011
by schools to use funds to buy digital texts (Mardis & Everhart, 2011). This is still a work in progress, with some teachers reluctant to move to an all-digital milieu (Wright, 2018). Particular examples of this reluctance show a lack of communication between the decision-makers and educators, leaving teachers feeling that their teaching experience and preferences are being disregarded (Wright, 2018).

Listening to audiobooks provides a doorway into the world of reading for those who may struggle with either the ability to read fluently or whose attention span has not yet developed to the point that sustained reading is a comfortable experience and can also provide a way to “read” while engaging in physical activities or riding in a car (Chang, 2011).

Bringing comic books and graphic novels into the classroom involves both genre and format, with stories often containing science fiction and superhero elements, although subject matter at times includes humor, romance, war stories, and even more specific topics such as the Holocaust (Elmwood, 2004), with the illustrated story adding a visual dimension to fiction that enhances meaning and comprehension (Watts, 2015). These help students feel they are reading material they might choose outside of class (Bucher & Manning, 2004) while providing academic benefits, such as familiarizing adolescents with story structure, bringing story to reluctant readers, and appealing to students who have an affinity for art or are simply visual thinkers (Seyfried, 2008). The picture plus story format becomes particularly relevant in the information age need by helping students interpret this combination in ways that are vital for online reading (Gillenwater, 2009). Although comics became anathema in the nineteen-fifties because of congressional hearings claiming they were corrupting America’s youth (Park, 2002), they are now being increasingly added to schools’ curricula with impressive results (Fisher & Frey, 2018). As an aside, picture books, which are often deemed inappropriate for older students,
are often more advanced than educators know and can be used in classrooms for many of the same reasons as comics (Cutler & Angus, 2018).

These changes are taking place in, and are often driven by, a culture in which young adult literature is no longer an afterthought. Books created for the teen and middle-grade market and movies adapted from these books have become popular in a way that was unforeseen twenty years ago. This trend began with the Harry Potter franchise (Rowling, 1999), and has continued through *Hunger Games* (Collins, 2009), with publishers and studios searching for the next big series. Adults are finding these stories appealing as well, and educators are turning to these novels as a way to reach their students. Middle-grade books depicting future dystopias are currently benefitting from a wave of popularity, as students themselves become the heroes of these stories which match outer adventures with inner turmoil in a way teens relate to (Young, 2011), although more realistic stories, such as those written by John Green, have also garnered a large fan base (Ash, 2012).

**Content objections.** Bringing literature choice into the classroom not only touches the concerns some have with bringing material that has less supposed value into the classroom, but also provokes another common objection to expanding the curriculum. Many parents and community members object to literature that contains certain content, which can vary from one location to another or even among different parents in the same location (Imrich, 2007). Books have been challenged because of content regarding religion, race, sexuality, politics, patriotism, and language, among other concerns (Scales, 2015). Conversely, efforts such as “Banned Books Week” are being made to increase acceptance of challenged reading material (Celebrate Banned Books Week, 2019). Some banned books, such as *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson, address issues (in this case sexual assault) that students need help dealing with (Cullen, 2013), while
some, such as *Huckleberry Finn*, have become part of the accepted canon (“664 book challenges,” 1997).

While the tendency is to automatically argue against content objections, educators point out that parental involvement and feedback is essential to a successful program (Hemmerechts, Agirdag, & Kavadias, D, 2017). Expanding the canon can be done without pushing past the level of parental acceptance. Mackey has suggested methods that can be used to help students make appropriate reading choices (2014). Atwell has pointed out that she has not had a problem with parents objecting to her choice program, because assignments are made individually and parents’ opinions are respected:

I’m a parent, too. The insights and concerns of my students’ parents matter to me. So when a mother or father speaks to me about a child’s book choice, I respond in the context of the particular child. Censorship hasn’t been an issue at CTL or in my previous public school experience. I think this is the case because each child chooses his or her books, because I’m not deciding what anyone has to read, and because I’ve read many of the books. I know what’s in them. In the end, if put to the test, I recognize when I can defend a title’s inclusion in our classroom library, and when I cannot. (2007, Choice, para. 12)

Allowing each student to read on his or her level refers not only to reading ability but also to the content he or she feels comfortable with, and a teacher should try to discover which subjects interest a student and which disturb the same student (Atwell, 2007). Steering students toward appropriate books is an important part of a reading choice program (Kittle, 2013).

Reading through these sources, the importance of school librarians and libraries becomes apparent.
Socialization. Social and physical changes are among the reasons adolescents lose interest in reading (Wormeli, 2011). Often, this involves the social acceptability of reading itself. Peers have been known to mock students who prefer reading over activities such as playing sports or computer games. This can at times be overcome by socializing the reading process (Ivey, 2014). One way to do this is to encourage students to form book clubs, that is, groups of similarly-minded adolescents who would read the same book and meet periodically to talk about what they like and dislike about the book, what they can relate to, and what meaning they find in the book personally (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009).

Socialization combined with choice can lead to the development of student relationships as well as give the reading itself a deeper meaning, as the growth caused by conversation the book engenders becomes entwined in the student’s memory and values with the reading experience (Ivey, 2014). In her research, Ivey found the social component of meaningful student reading to be greater than expected:

Reading for these students was far from a solo act. They talked in and out of school, to friends, peers outside of their social groups, teachers, and family members. They talked during “silent” reading times, at lunch, in math class, on the bus, and via text message and Facebook. In fact, they talked so much that students began to consider it normal, everyday conversation. (2014)

These findings show socialization to be beneficial in a way that causes educators to search for ways to increase the communal factor in classroom reading. Book clubs are one way to accomplish socialization naturally (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009).
Book clubs. Book clubs and literature circles have become a way to encourage students to interact with both their reading material and with each other. As this method has proliferated, research has shown certain benefits.

While the concept of students reading and responding to books in a group was not even then a new one, an early study of school-sanctioned book clubs, alternately known as reading circles (Sanacore, 2013), involving pre-service teachers occurred three decades ago and found that this led to rich discussions among fifth and sixth grade students (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Book clubs are often formed by students who volunteer to read a certain book and to meet regularly and discuss this book (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). There are multiple ways to include the concept of choice while forming these clubs. One is to form these naturally, with students who are reading a selection coming together (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). Another is to form the group first, and then to have the participating students choose what book they will read through a discussion followed by a vote (How to Select, 2019.). This is the method used in this study. A third option allows students to read different books and talk about these books with other students (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). A fourth is to choose a book for the students to read, based on the teacher’s impression of their interests (Tuarze, 2006).

Kittle and Gallagher united to form a multi-school book club using a version of this third option in which students chose from a thematically similar list of books (2018, p.44). They list three benefits they found students garnered from this activity. The first benefit was that it created interaction between the reading, the students’ lives, and wider events, allowing readers to better understand their place in the current climate. The second was this effort brought students to a point where their reading volume increased, and this not only provided the previously discussed benefits but also prepared them for the increased reading volume that will be expected of them in
college. The third benefit was that these interconnected clubs allowed students to communicate with adolescents living in other places and share their experiences and concerns, helping them discover a larger community of readers (Kittle & Gallagher, 2018, p.44).

Another method of forming book clubs is to focus on specific groups that may be underserved in the traditional classroom. Students with disabilities have thrived in book groups (Jocius & Shealy, 2018). With boys reading less than girls, boys’ book clubs can be used to overcome this trend (Nichols-Besel, Scharber, O’Brien, & Dillon, 2018). Minority boys, who have been shown to be particularly at risk, have benefited from book clubs that focus on their interests (Rhames, 2014), as have urban girls (Park, 2012).

Many elements that encourage reading enjoyment can be brought into book clubs. Reading choice, again, can be a component, with one study using rank-order voting to choose the book that was read (Falter Thomas, 2014). I used a version of this selection method. Electronic access to these clubs can overcome problems such as accommodation for students who are too young to drive (Falter Thomas, 2014) and can also create a culturally diverse experience, as the club is not limited to a certain locale or culture. Book clubs can also be specialized, not only in ways that focus on certain students (Nichols-Besel et al., 2018) but in ways that focus on particular interests, such as fantasy (Soltan, 2007).

As with any other classroom methods, difficulties can arise that can lessen a book club’s benefits. Clarke and Holwadel have warned that classroom hostilities can come to the forefront during literature discussions, for instance (2007, p.22). Other researchers have advised that it is necessary to put a structure in place as a way to manage the topics covered and time needed (Almasi, O’Flahavan, & Arya, 2001). These concerns go back to Montessori’s idea that for
freedom to reign in a school, processes should be managed in a way that allows students to actively learn:

If discipline is founded upon liberty, the discipline itself must necessarily be active. We do not consider an individual disciplined only when he has been rendered as artificially silent as a mute and as immovable as a paralytic. He is an individual annihilated, not disciplined. We call an individual disciplined when he is master of himself, and can, therefore, regulate his own conduct when it shall be necessary to follow some rule of life.

(1912, Discipline, para. 2-3)

Conclusion.

Whether or not a child becomes an adult reader often turns on whether reading interest, enjoyment, and relevance survive adolescence. Because each student develops differently, dependent on the person’s physical and emotional development, family makeup, and academic curiosity, among other factors, individualizing instruction becomes key to keeping the love of books alive. With this in mind, I searched for methods that focus on individual students, allowing each one of them to consider their personal reading journey while discovering what types of books might appeal to her or him.

Allowing students to explore their interests and read books that are meaningful to them should be a component of a student-centered reading program. This became a part of my study in two ways: first, the students were given a say in the book they choose, and second, discussion turned on individual preferences, probing the students’ likes and dislikes and helping them find books they might enjoy. Most importantly, I attempted to create an atmosphere that allows students to speak freely, and sought to respect and value their thoughts and opinions. A person’s
likes and dislikes come from their personal experience and predispositions, and any effort to motivate adolescents to read must begin with the students themselves.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

Having identified the problem, the decline in outside reading that occurs during a student’s middle years, I have designed a qualitative study in the hope of shedding light on possible reasons for this loss of interest. Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey have written that “qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning, and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant” (2016). This statement describes a method that fits precisely with the goals of this research. As part of this study, I approached students directly and listened to their voices. Through these conversations, I attempted to discover their conscious reasons for any changes in their reading attitudes, probed possible family, social, and academic contributors to these attitudes, and participated with them in a reading group while recording their experiences as they occur. I couched this research in a participatory design, becoming a member of the book club at the center of the study. Using a participant observation model rather than a focus group allowed the discussion to take place in a more naturalistic setting, thus leading to insights that came as a result of the participants’ natural response to their reading and others’ comments (Morgan, 1997, p.8). Specifically, I used the method described by Kawulich in this way:

In the participant as observer stance, the researcher is a member of the group being studied, and the group is aware of the research activity. In this stance, the researcher is a participant in the group who is observing others and who is interested more in observing than in participating, as his/her participation is a given, since he/she is a member of the group. This role also has disadvantages, in that there is a tradeoff between the depth of
the data revealed to the researcher and the level of confidentiality provided to the group
for the information they provide. (2005)

I conducted both pre and post-group interviews with the students, which time and space
necessitated be conducted as group interviews, as well as informal conversations with the
students’ reading teacher to compare her observations, particularly regarding prior classroom
reading experiences, with those of the participants. These interviews were used not as the
primary means of conducting data, but as a method of discovering information that helped in
understanding the data (Bogdan & Biklin, 2014, p. 103).

**Research Questions**

I anchored the study in five research questions that addressed whether the problem
existed in this particular group, how the problem developed, the effect of both external and
internal influences, possible ways the students’ interest in reading could increase, and the overall
arc of the participants’ reading lives. Keeping the focus on the students’ own experiences and the
way they interpret these experiences helped guide my experiences with them and formulate
meaningful follow-up questions that would add depth to my understanding. What was most
important is opening myself to student voices and valuing what I hear.

**RQ1: What factors go into students’ changing attitudes toward reading?** Since I
have identified the specific time this change happens, I explored what other changes are taking
place and how these may affect the students’ reading attitudes. This covered academic, social,
and developmental factors. Did they remember specific incidents that caused their attitudes
toward reading to change? Had reading enjoyment slipped away as it was displaced by other
activities?
RQ2: How do peer relationships affect reading attitudes and understanding? This could be seen as a subset of the first question. Do the students’ friends read? How do peer groups feel about students who read? How does reading fit in with other activities? What has changed in this area? The goal here was to discover how reading fits in with students’ life context.

RQ3: What factors affect the types of books and other material students specifically choose to read? My purpose here was to go beyond discovering what students read while searching for reasons they had developed these habits. How have tastes changed since elementary school? Are these the same types of stories as television programs and movies they enjoy? Do books that are assigned in school appeal to the students’ interests? Two possible reasons students reject school reading were gently explored here: that school assignments do not appeal to students because they are not what they enjoy reading, and that school assignments do not appeal because the students have a natural aversion to assigned reading.

RQ4: How do students connect what they read to their own lives and experiences? Here, I searched for personal connections to reading as well as to adolescents’ development of empathy and imagination through fiction. Could students imagine themselves as characters in the books they read both inside and outside of class? Are the characters like them? Do they prefer reading about familiar or unfamiliar experiences? Student thoughts in this area possibly revealed something of their basic attitudes toward life.

RQ5: How does the reading expand a student’s understanding of the world? This dealt with both the expansion of student knowledge and the ability to think critically and deeply. What had they discovered through their reading? Has anything they have read given them new dreams, goals, or sympathies?
The first of these can be considered to be an over-arching question, while the other four attempted to address specific causes for this phenomenon. As my goal was to encourage students to reveal, perhaps after discovering themselves, the reasons they approach reading as they do, these questions focus on the thoughts of the students as brought forth by the natural functioning of the reading group.

These questions were informed by what I have discovered through my research. Reading benefits students through helping them develop critical thinking (D’Argembeau et al., 2014), empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013), and imagination (Roman, 2017). Student reading interest begins to fade in the middle grades, with seventh grade being a particularly dangerous time (Guthrie & Davis, 2003) because of academic, social, and developmental factors (Wormeli, 2011). The high-stakes testing system our schools have adopted helps sap reading enjoyment by focusing on facts to be remembered (Dodge, 2007). Reading enjoyment, which leads to more voluminous reading, hangs on reading interest (Marchiando, 2013). Students often are not interested in school reading assignments (Allyn, 2011). This can be overcome by offering students a choice in what they read (Little et al., 2014). Positive socialization contributes to a more meaningful adolescent reading experience (Ivey, 2014). Book clubs can be an effective way to encourage this socialization (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009).

**Participants and Research Design**

In an attempt to find teachers and administrators who were willing to work with me on this project, I contacted several people associated with the Marshall University Graduate School. Robert Smith, the principal at Sissonville Middle School in Kanawha County, was willing to help. He set up a meeting for me with Cassandra Allara, the seventh-grade reading specialist.
Allara selected a variety of students with diverse reading backgrounds and abilities and provided permission slips, complying with IRB guidelines.

I used a participatory design (Campbell & Lassiter, 2014, p.44), in which I, after helping Allara form and introduce a weekly book club, attempted to transfer control of the project to the participants while taking part in the group’s activities as a member. As it became necessary, I attempted to guide the group in directions that produced revealing discussion, but the goal was to allow the students to determine the direction of the discussion.

The book club met for six consecutive Mondays, with dates adjusted for student availability, discussing a book that was selected by the students themselves from among the class sets the school owns and books suggested by the students. The effect of reading choice is a large part of my research and needed to be integrated into the study. As discussed previously, this study incorporated choice by allowing students to vote on the book that was discussed, using rank-choice voting (Emerson, 2013). I chose this method for three major reasons. First, because if all students are reading the same book, this would make it possible for their comments and opinions to build off of each other. Second, using an available selection is a matter of convenience, as this would allow us to move directly into reading and discussing the selection after the first meeting, as the books would immediately be available. Third, ranked-choice voting helped prevent an enthusiastic minority from choosing a book that other members did not want to read. Using ranked-choice, specifically the Borda count method in which the rankings translate into an inverse point scale, as explained by Emerson (2013), the degree a student is interested in a book was reflected in the outcome, and a book in which multiple students have no interest is not likely to be chosen. This helped the chances that each student would have a voice in the selection.
I intended to conduct brief interviews with the participants concerning their reading habits at the beginning of the meetings. Since this is a qualitative study, I transcribed these with an eye toward commonalities and differences. During what became a group interview, I asked questions about the students’ background that shed light on his or her reading habits. How much reading have they done outside of school? Does anyone else in the family read? Does the student have siblings around the same age, or did they grow up without other children around? I also questioned Allara regarding methods of instruction currently used in the school and student attitudes toward reading.

Participant interviews included questions similar to the following:

- How much do you enjoy reading?
- Do you read outside of school?
- Did you enjoy reading when you were younger?
- Has this changed?
- Why do you think this has changed?
- What do you like to do in your free time?
- Do you have brothers or sisters?
- Do you live near other young people?
- Does your family like to read?
- What are your favorite books or types of books?
- What do you read besides books?
- Do you like reading in school?
- What do you read in school?
- How is this taught?
• Are you ever given a choice of what to read in school?

This list is long, but I included versions of all of these questions, as they seemed relevant to the individual student. A qualitative study allowed a variance in questions that helped discover each student’s individual story.

The first meeting was dedicated to choosing a book, as student reading choice is a factor in the foundational research. After the vote, I introduced the chosen book along with needed background information. The group chose a reading target for the period before the second meeting, although the students’ different levels were respected. Subsequent meetings were driven by the students’ reactions to the reading. I asked them to bring discussion questions to the meeting as well as observations and other comments. Strict requirements were less important than fomenting participation. As a facilitator, I prepared questions to drive the discussion, but the goal was for the students themselves to determine the direction of the meetings. During these meetings, we not only discussed the chosen books but also probed the students’ reading histories and attitudes. I guided the group with an interest in whether, how, and why these attitudes may have changed during their time in middle school. The final meeting focused on overall impressions of the book as well as questioning involving matters that emerged during previous meetings.

This research was written as a narrative, mining both my experience and student experiences for insights. Narrative inquiry allows individual stories to tell themselves as they blend together to tell their community’s story (Riessman, 1993, p. 4). This is the goal of this research, to allow participants to give voice to individual experiences that form a larger narrative. Three major sources were used to obtain information about how students think and feel as they read: comments and reactions they volunteer, insights given during discussions with other
students, at times prompted by their classmates’ questions, and informal (as part of the
discussion) responses to prompts that I suggest, in a naturalistic manner, as both a facilitator and
a participant. During these discussions, I tried to listen not only to their reactions to the text, but
for clues to answers they may, at times unknowingly, possess concerning their reading journey.
What has happened in their lives, both in and out of school, to shape their current attitudes?
What could educators have done to make a difference? How do these students feel about books,
about reading, and about the opportunities they are given?

As this research unfolded, I mined student discussions for insight into the experiences
and thought processes that come together to form the attitudes that have been uncovered by prior
research. Using the student-centered theory discussed above, I let the participants themselves
articulate their experiences in the hope that their unfiltered words would lead to a deeper
understanding.

As this study sought to gain insight into students’ changing reading attitudes and habits
by allowing the students themselves to determine the direction of the conversation, with loose
guidance by the researcher, the actual questions that guided the research were couched in a fluid,
malleable structure. The stated research questions served as a framework, and the operational
questions were asked in a conversational manner, with an attempt to allow them to flow naturally
from the reading. Some of these are:

• How does what you’ve read remind you of your own experiences?
• How are the characters in this book like people in your life?
• What surprises you about the way the character thinks or acts?
• What would you do in this situation?
• Do you think the character did the right thing?
• Have you read other books that this one reminds you of?

• Would you read this on your own?

These led to questions about their personal reading habits, how much they have enjoyed reading in the past, how much they enjoy reading now, and why this has or has not changed. Many of these questions were also appropriate, perhaps, in the pre-reading and post-reading discussion. The goal of the book club experience was to allow students to have a natural discussion that shed light on their reading experiences. As this discussion was to be student-centered, questions were added and adjusted as the conversation dictated.

Student discussions were recorded and analyzed, as I searched for common themes and individual insights. This process began during the research itself and helped guide the direction of the questioning, as did the students’ responses. Transcriptions were mined for connections, both to current research and to themes that emerged during the discussions. These themes were then examined in an effort to organize student discussions in a meaningful way that helped gain insight (Belotto, 2018). The extent to which the conversations confirm or counter assumptions became a focus of the study’s conclusions. As these meetings were conducted, then analyzed, an attempt was made to recognize the individuality and agency of the students involved. One of the chief aims of this research was to find ways to help teachers recognize the different ways that students approach and appreciate reading and to identify what hindrances to reading enjoyment exist.

The last session also served as an exit interview with the students, as time and space did not allow individual interviews. The questions asked were guided by the following:

• Did you enjoy the book we read?

• Did you like it more or less than you expected?
• What were your favorite and least favorite things about the book?
• Could you relate to the characters?
• Did you enjoy our discussions?
• Did they add to your enjoyment of the book?
• Did this experience make you want to read more or less in the future?
• Would you like to participate in more book clubs in the future?

I then attempted to interview the school librarian, an attempt that resulted in an email exchange. Finally, all transcriptions were compared and carefully considered, and I used them to attempt to answer the initial research questions.

Throughout the research, I compiled a narrative of my experiences and impressions, focusing on the individual reactions and being aware of responses that may illuminate the details of the development of these students’ reading lives. The final report consists of these observations blended with what the transcripts and interviews revealed.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Notes about the group makeup and formation

As the time for the book club grew closer, a few matters of logistics reshaped the activity, although not dramatically. Cassandra Allara, the teacher who assisted me, asked if 30-minute sessions would work, as the school had begun the year with a twice-weekly after-homeroom specialization period of this length. I told her this would be good, and I was open to whatever would work best with the school. We scheduled six half-hour sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays, beginning September 6, to match the school schedule. The day before the sessions were to begin she contacted me again and said we would need to postpone until the following Tuesday, September 10, because no students had turned in permission slips. The following Monday, Allara informed me that four students had turned in their permissions, and she thought she could persuade others to join. When I arrived on Tuesday one additional student had complied, raising the number to five. Two others would join us at the next meeting. Following are brief narratives of each meeting, searching for insights into what the students were disclosing, including a few important revelations I was not ready to hear. Meeting transcripts are included as Appendix B.

Meeting Narratives

First meeting. I arrived at Sissonville Middle School early on Tuesday, September 10. Cassandra Allara was in her classroom and had permission slips from five students. The first meeting had been delayed from the previous Thursday because no one had brought in a permission slip, and she told me that she thought she would get a couple more soon. She had approached students who owed her work and told them they could take part in this group as an
alternate assignment. I checked the names and saw there were three girls and two boys. These demographics would change by the end of the sessions, and the boys would end up having a more prominent voice than the girls for three reasons. First, both of the later additions were boys. Second, one of the three girls was almost completely silent, both in the meetings and in her classes. Third, one of the two remaining girls would disappear, not just from the book club, but from school, after three meetings. Her absence seriously affected the tone of the group, given that one of the additions was a boy who tended to talk until interrupted.

As I waited for students to arrive, I removed a book from each of the available class sets, except for those Allara told me would be used for whole-class reading, and placed them on a table in the front of the room. I placed the list of books I had prepared in front of me. A list of all books considered by the class will be included as Appendix C. Then I prepared the book ballots we would use (see Appendix C). The five students entered the room, and I introduced myself to them, and they reciprocated. I had planned to interview each member of the group individually, but time and space restraints made this impractical. Since there were only five in the beginning, I chose the questions that seemed important and asked them while in the whole-group session.

This group interview would provide an important clue about the makeup of the book club. Allara said she had filled the group by telling students that had missing work this would serve as a stand-in. Few of the students would have open enthusiasm for the idea of reading, and few reported having much of a reading life or history, although most mentioned a book or magazine they had read. When the students voted on what book to read later in this session, they revealed a surprising breadth of interest that they had not otherwise acknowledged. In this initial conversation, reading seemed less important. Doug said that he liked to read hunting magazines, but he did not hunt. Books, television, and movies seemed to be an afterthought for them, not
something they thought of negatively but simply something in the background they hardly thought about. Discovering why this was the case revealed some unexpected details (unexpected to me, at least) and led to my reconsidering an important activity that I had given little thought.

Although the students gave permission to use their real names in my report, I feel more comfortable representing them by using aliases. The beginning five included Stuart, a boy whose name I repeatedly misstated, calling him Charles for no discernable reason, Emily, a girl who seemed to have read more than most, Holly, an outgoing girl who would participate enthusiastically until she disappeared from the group and school, Doug, who participated in an eager-to-please way, always answering questions (this congenial nature disappearing during the fourth session when he clashed with another student), and Lily, who remained almost entirely silent, only speaking aloud twice. When asked a question directly during the first meeting, she whispered in Doug’s ear, and he repeated what she had said. She also used this method in the last meeting to tell me she had left her book at home. Allara told me later that she was one of four students in her classes who chose to remain voluntarily mute, something I had previously encountered in a seventh-grade classroom.

Two male students would join on Thursday: James, who was mostly quiet but sometimes volunteered information about himself (when he spoke, his words ran together and were easier to understand on the recording than in person), and William, who proved to be extremely talkative, often having to be interrupted so others could comment. William provided some comments that sometimes showed there was more to the students’ lack of enthusiasm for reading than they revealed, such as his comment that reading in school was hindered by “all the assignments” and that these interruptions “got frustrating” as they interrupted the flow of the story and kept him
from enjoying what he was reading. William’s incessant talking led to a short confrontation with Doug at one point.

Our first session was devoted to choosing a book. I had made my own list of books that seemed both popular and available for quick purchase and distribution, and I added to this with a list of Allara’s available classroom sets. I laid these books out on a table in the room for the students to look over and listed them, along with my suggestions, on the board. I then asked students for suggestions and they provided enough that I did not feel the need to add mine. This surprised me, given their previous reluctance to talk about their reading. The discussion concerning adding books itself provided me with a glimpse into the students’ personalities. Doug, for instance, suggested books that he thought adults would like, such as *The Bible*, which he had previously mentioned family members read, and a book he said he “had heard of,” *The Catcher in the Rye*. My impression was that he was choosing books that he thought would impress me. Before the vote I would, gently as I could, mention that both of these were too long and involved for us to cover. I also said this when Stuart suggested reading something by Stephen King.

Both Doug and Stuart made suggestions that resonated with the other students as well. Stuart mentioned the warrior cats books, which I was familiar with as the *Warrior* series. In real time, I had thought that Emily had suggested this, as she enthusiastically agreed. Doug mentioned the *I Survived* series of books, and Stuart seconded the suggestion immediately. Several of the students were familiar with these books. Other suggestions included *The Wizard of Oz* and young adult books such as *Dark Rising*, which received some support, *Kissed*, and *Took*. Allara, sitting at her desk, brought up the *I Survived* books on her computer and showed me they
were a series about young people in the midst of historical events. Even before the vote, it became clear these books were the frontrunners.

All five of the students voted, with four filling out all five of the spaces on their ballots. The “I Survived” series received a total of ten points and appeared on three of the ballots. The only other title that received votes from more than two students was the Warrior series. Since the winning book involved a series, we moved into a second discussion, with Doug pulling up the books on his school IPad and going over the titles. By a surprisingly easy consensus, the students agreed to read *I Survived the Battle of D-Day, 1944* (Tarshis & Dawson, 2019). By purchasing what I could find and ordering the others overnight, I was able to obtain enough books for everyone. The books became the students’ property.

**Second meeting.** On Thursday, September 12, two additional students, James and William, would join us for the second meeting, and the second of these would have a major impact on the group. While many of William’s observations were appreciated, and he kept the group from falling into awkward silences, it may have been interesting to see what some of the other students would have revealed if he had not dominated the discussions. I attempted to reduce his dominance throughout the meetings but was largely unsuccessful. My intent was to be a group member rather than a teacher, and although I was not entirely successful in this area either, this kept me from telling students what to do rather than guiding them. In the end I often ended up in the ineffective middle of the two positions.

This meeting began with me talking to fill in silences and ended with William, after taking some time to become comfortable in this configuration, dominating the conversation with a long story. This showed that, contrary to what I felt at other times, story did hold a place in these students’ lives. After giving the students the newly-arrived books, I previewed the plot for
the newer students and asked them the questions I had asked the other students in the previous meeting. James said he did read books and mentioned the *Harry Potter* series. Even though the students claimed to have no enthusiasm for books or reading, every individual, at one time or another, mentioned a book he or she liked. Even Lily filled out a nearly complete ballot in the first meeting. This is a clue that some information I could not quite get to exists. I am not even sure the students themselves realize the part books have played in their lives.

When asked what he knew about war, William mentioned that his grandfather had fought in Vietnam. He then produced a long story about his papaw, a sniper, being chased by the enemy, hiding in briars, disappearing for a year, being declared dead, with his wife burying his clothes, then appearing on his wife’s porch, causing her to faint and hit his head. It was hard not to think that this story was being embellished on the spot (the grandparents’ ages at the beginning and the end did not match up, for one instance), but everyone suspended disbelief and nodded. This would not always happen.

I read the book’s first chapter and asked for the students’ reactions. A discussion of what they knew about the Holocaust (quite a bit) led to William reviewing the plot to *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, which they had read the year before. I have not seen the movie, and his plot review made me grateful I had not. I am not sure how I would have reacted to this if I had seen it when I was in the seventh grade, but trauma would have been involved.

After talking about the effect stories can have, William talked about visiting Matewan and seeing the pictures of people who had been killed in the coal mine wars. I asked if anyone had ever visited a Civil War battlesite, and he said no. Doug mentioned he had been to Gettysburg, and William said that yeah, he had been to Gettysburg with his grandparents. At this
point I should have realized that I would need to make an effort to keep William from
dominating, but a more balanced third session lulled me into a false peace.

My reaction at that moment was to turn to the the three girls and ask what their reactions
had been to the book. Emily, who was hoarse because of a sore throat, called this a tragedy.
Holly then mentioned the emotions the main character, Paul, felt when he was not able to sell his
soccer ball. After confused looks from the rest of the group, she said that she had read ahead
while I was reading out loud.

**Third meeting.** The third club meeting on Monday, September 16, provided less drama
and more balanced input than any of the others. I wish that I had known at the time this would be
the high water mark, but I did not foresee the direction a comment in the fourth meeting would
take the conversation.

Discovering that while most of the class had read further, the latest chapter that had been
read by everyone was the second, I read chapter three out loud. This led into a discussion of the
Resistance and how the students’ family and neighbors would react in a similar circumstance.
James stated bluntly that they would take it (the area) back from invaders. I asked if they thought
this could happen if it was just a few people against an army, and Doug said it was possible.
James was particularly engaged in this meeting, making predictions about what might happen
next, some accurate, some inaccurate but creative (he thought that the cookies Paul got from the
bakery might be poisoned and kill his mom). Emily and Doug simultaneously predicted that the
castle would be the Resistance’s hideout. All of the students except Lily participated in the
discussion. William’s most vocal moment came when he reacted to the townspeople’s story of a
dragon at the castle by insisting it could be true.
Holly asked if she could read a chapter and did so. Afterward, the students talked about the way they usually read in class. Everything seemed typical, with a mix of popcorn and silent reading. Asked if they were ever able to choose the books they read, only William said they were, but he then described independent reading during disruptions such as disciplinary actions, slipping a story about a student running out of the class and taunting them from outside the window. Attempts at probing into what television programs they watched came up empty, with no one showing any interest in a particular show. When asked about movies, Emily said the last one she had seen was Zootopia and Stuart said, “I’m more a Ted 2 kind of guy.” In the end, they all said they hardly ever watched movies except for the ones they were shown at school. They could all name the three they had seen before, one of which was a documentary about Martin Luther King Jr.’s Birmingham march with the others being the film of The Giver, which they had read, and The Boy in the Striped Pajamas. This was when I began to seriously wonder what part story played in their lives. I began to wonder what practical effect a life without story would have on the participants’ development.

Of course William did show an affinity for story, something that would nearly prove disruptive during the fourth meeting.

Fourth meeting. On Thursday, September 19, the book club met again, with one significant change: Holly was not there and would not return. There was some word that she and her mother had moved suddenly, but something about what had happened seemed to not be for public consumption. Her absence not only took away our volunteer reader but deprived us of one of the two voices most likely to be able to wrest control of the conversation from William. The other belonged to Doug, and by the end of the meeting, this had created a good amount of
tension. The transcript of this meeting, which included no reading, was by far the longest of the six. The conversation contained little variance, however, and can be summed up briefly.

We began by expanding on what had been said the time before about their in-school reading. Once again, individual questions showed that the participants remembered far more than they had initially claimed. The books they had read the year before left an impression, with *Esperanza Rising*, about a young girl and her mother immigrating from Mexico to America staying strongly with most of them. I asked them about going to the library, and they provided few specifics. Later in the paper, I will include what the librarian told me about the nature of these visits. Perhaps the most significant part of this discussion was when I asked whether they would pick up the book they were reading if they saw it in the library, and normally silent Lily said, “Yeah.”

Then I volunteered my own information, and the meeting jumped the tracks. I told them that the one thing I look for first when selecting a title was the word “ghost.” I should have realized the type of discussion this could begin; I had seen it happen before. I was relieved, at least, when I listened to the recording and saw that I had tried to turn the conversation in another direction several times, but William would not be deterred.

He began by talking about a YouTube video he had watched in which a face appeared in the shadows, and I mentioned casually that it was easy to see faces in everyday objects. He then said, “Can I tell another one?” and began a series of stories about ghosts that appeared in the house where he lives. With no pause between episodes, my attempts at gaining control of the conversation failed, and I wondered whether this was what letting the participants guide the group really meant. When the moment came, I was concentrating too much on William and failed to hear what was happening. Although his voice was not clear on the recording, Doug
began talking low to someone near him, and his tone made it clear that he was tiring of listening to William. A moment later, while William told a fairly innocuous tale of a shelf over the washer falling down, Doug scoffed loudly.

William stopped talking and turned to him sharply. When he spoke, his voice had become angry and challenging.

“What’s so funny about it? It actually, really happened.”

As I tried to mediate, Doug interrupted. “I don’t believe it.”

A nervous silence followed, and I was able to take control, suggesting that whether or not people believed such stories depended on whether they had grown up hearing them from their families. I mentioned that my family had told ghost stories and began to turn the conversation back to the book. William, however, was having none of it.

“I’ve seen my dead papaw. Many, many times.”

I was taken back to the many times in middle school classes where I had tried to calm down a situation only to have one student make a fresh push just as the other student backed down. I was considering the possibility of an actual fight. I quickly tried to turn the conversation by mentioning that I watch scary movies because I like scary stories. Emily picked up on the theme, talking about watching *Ghost Hunters*, and the situation was diffused.

I then asked the students, once again, whether their parents read, which led William to tell a story about his papaw reading the *Bible* while talking on the phone. Doug challenged the truthfulness of this story too, and Emily again tried to alleviate the tension by saying, “It’s probably true.”

This time, I was able to turn the conversation by talking about books they might not be allowed to read. Remnants of the previous conversation led to a discussion of chasing a lost pig,
raising chickens, and finding discarded needles in many places. While I was not sure how productive this conversation was, William’s excursions had led to a desired place: the participants were telling stories.

The conversation about needles revealed a major theme that I will discuss later in this paper.

Fifth meeting. I had been troubled by how out of control the fourth meeting felt and searched for some way to gain control of the fifth. Whether this was a good idea also bothered me. This was not intended to be a class but rather an opportunity for the students to have a voice. What I needed was to find a way for the students to naturally conduct a smooth meeting. This was hindered by the chemistry of this particular blend of students, where several were content to keep to the background while one student seemed to crave the stage. Allara had told me after the fourth meeting this was William’s usual state rather than something he was bringing out for a special occasion.

When the next meeting came on Monday, September 23, I had decided on three strategies. First, I would move from the head of the table to a center seat. Second, I would direct my comments to some of the students who seemed willing to speak, giving them an opportunity while limiting William. Third, I would intentionally slow my own speaking pace and see if this affected the others. This tact seemed to influence everyone but William to speak more slowly, and it may have actually helped the meeting to operate more deliberately. I had not realized how much more slowly until I listened to the recording of the meeting and checked to be sure that I had not accidentally slowed the playback speed. I was only convinced that I had not when William began talking.
As I still did not feel that I had answered my most important questions, I probed the same areas as before, hoping for deeper answers. The answers were broader, if not deeper. By the end of the session, I had begun to believe that I had received the answer I was looking for without grasping its importance. Some of the students volunteered more information. A couple played basketball, and one was in the band. Emily rode her bike up and down the road. When asked, relative to the book whose main character was a regular person, everyone who responded agreed they would rather watch a movie about a person with exceptional abilities. No one seemed enthused about any of this. Their interest only seemed to pick up when William talked about playing computer games with a boy in England. This was when the possibilities of this road struck me, something that should have happened earlier.

I made a note to begin the final session there, and, after Emily said that her younger sister “still believes in ghosts,” and William showed signs of taking offense, I read from the book. Those were tensions I did not want to re-tweak.

**Sixth meeting.** On Thursday, September 26, we met for the final time. The same group of six who had been present for the two previous meetings were there, and, after saying a few words about how absorbed I was in my present meeting, I asked what video games they played. William talked about a game I had not heard of, Farming Simulator, and talked about the reading he had to do before playing in order to prepare for in-game decisions. I then passed out paper and asked the group to list games they played. The ballots, included as Appendix D, included at least one response from every student, and the implications of this will be discussed later in this paper. At this point I discovered the students were being exposed to story in more ways than I understood.
There were other significant moments during this final meeting. We talked about fake reading with Emily admitting she finds ways around reading the text sometimes and other students quickly explaining that it only looks as if they do this because they lay their heads down to read. That these explanations came immediately after Ms. Allara jokingly expressed disappointment with Emily may be relevant. Several participants volunteered how they picture the characters and action while they read and how different a movie looks after you have read the book, in reference to their reading and watching in class the previous year.

This last meeting moved along smoothly, and I felt that I had finally reached a place where I understood the students well enough to help direct their conversations without slipping into irrelevant pathways. I will include examples from these sessions in the next section as well.

Recurring Themes

Overview. Overcoming the students’ reluctance to talk about their reading life involved searching for clues as to why they rarely addressed their experiences concretely. With often only the barest details given, I searched for clues in what they did say. Their reluctance was not truculence or unwillingness, rather it revealed that most of the students lacked the personal context needed to give reading value. The short reading conversations gave the impression that the students did not read outside of class, but when I listened to the recordings, I realized that most of them did, and this reading left an impression.

I had hoped that the students would take the discussion in a revealing direction, but until the next-to-last meeting this did not happen. Then the students answered a question I had asked twice before, and, at last, I had learned enough to listen. Before discussing this late revelation, I will look at the other, expected, themes.
**Family and cultural background.** Because of the nature of the short, set-aside period, the pre-study questioning took place in a group rather than an individual setting. I may have discovered more information about the students if I had talked to them individually. Four of the final group of seven students said they had seen their parents read. Doug gave specifics, saying his mother read the *Bible* sometimes. William, who had not been present when Doug said this, shared that his grandfather read the *Bible* through, then started again immediately, even reading while he talked on the telephone. Although the book survey votes were anonymous, Doug was almost certainly the student who listed the *Bible*, which he had suggested during the discussion, along with *The Catcher in the Rye*, which had not been previously mentioned, on his ballot. Four of the original five students said that yes, they did enjoy reading in elementary school, and William said he enjoyed scary stories. This may have explained why ballots included *Hill House*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, and *Stephen King* as well as *Dark Rising*.

None of the students said they were an only child. Emily said there was an age gap between her and her younger siblings, then said they were ten and eleven, only two or three years younger. She also said, when discussing the difference between Sissonville and the settings of books they read in class, that her father was in prison on drug-related charges. This was done quietly, while other students talked about how their families lived in fear of their drug-addicted neighbors. When I brought up an incident when my mother and grandmother had embarrassed me by returning a book I had checked out to the library and complaining about the language, Emily said her mother had told her there were some books that were not appropriate for children to read, but no one else shared this experience.

Whenever the discussion turned to the culture of the place they lived, one or another of the students brought up the drug problem, and the prevalence of discarded needles sometimes
became a part of the conversation. Discussion of whether local people would react in the way the townspeople in the book, who had joined the French Resistance, had, a couple of students agreed they would, and James, who talked more than I realized he had in real time, said they would get their guns and drive them away. The characters in the book had thought the invading army had too much firepower to fight directly and found other ways of assisting the allies, and I mentioned this.

When I mentioned in the last discussion Appalachia was rarely portrayed accurately in books and movies, James shared a West Virginia tourism ad he had seen in North Carolina and said, “They made it look like it was all mountains and trees.” Several of the students said West Virginia was portrayed too positively, an opinion I am not sure I had heard before. This tied in with earlier comments revealing drug-related issues came to mind quickly when the students thought about the area where they lived. William said he would not be surprised if a sort-of-war arose between those who did and did not abuse drugs. This was his first thought when wondering whether war-like situations could arise here in the way they had in occupied France. Emily said this was wrong, if there was a war it would be between those who brought drugs in and those who wanted to keep them out. This remark took on new significance when I heard her low comment on the recording that her father had abused drugs and was now in jail.

**What the students do in their free time.** This was an area where I at first thought the students were not forthcoming. They all agreed they did not do much homework. Doug said he liked to play basketball. None of them would name a favorite movie or television show, although Emily later mentioned watching ghost videos on YouTube and wondered whether *A Dog’s Purpose* was available as a book. The most common activity the participants reported was playing video games, which every student in the group said he or she did. At the time, I did not
pay enough attention to this, although revisiting the question made the importance of gaming clear. This, more than books or television or movies, was the most common way these students encountered story.

**An unexpected factor: video games.** To many of my generation and the ones before, the relative worth of video games and other activities that we label preoccupations seems obvious. When I watch games unfold over the player’s shoulder, I do not see an in-depth narrative worth the necessary engagement; I see a shallow, violent submersion into a world-of-least-resistance. What I have come, with some difficulty, to see is this impression is itself shallow and is built on a foundation of cultural assumptions including the idea that what I have experienced contains universal value, and what later generations have embraced contains less worth and is mostly a symptom of a dissipating culture. These assumptions come from my preferences and are no more valuable than my parents’ assigning worth to easy listening strings rather than progressive rock. I have been slow to understand how preferences have solidified as personal fact, and my lack of self-awareness has kept me from adequately considering the value to be found in newer types of entertainment. I am being forced to consider that what I avoid could be a rich source of story, one more accessible to today’s students than any I would put before them. Research has indeed uncovered specific benefits students obtain from playing video games.

**Social benefits.** This is the area where the benefits of video games should be the most obvious, but it is also, as I mentioned earlier, one that remains counterintuitive to me. Because my limited experience with gaming involves sitting in a room with, at most, one or two others, this activity seems a way to avoid contact with others. But the gaming environment has changed to the point that this opens up a world of relationships with a more diverse crowd than previous generations could have imagined.
As noted earlier, the need for socialization as a student matures contributes to reading, a solo activity, becoming less desirable (Kantomaa et al., 2016). Gaming moves to an environment of communication, cooperation, and engagement with peers at a time when such things reach peak importance. As video gaming has become an internet-based activity, socialization becomes not only desirable in a casual way, but a vital ingredient of reaching the player’s goals, particularly in a massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) environment (Fuster, Chamarro, Carbonell, & Vallerand, 2014).

**Problem-solving and critical thinking skills.** As has been established, critical-thinking skills are particularly important as the speed of information increases in ways we have not before seen (Berube, 2004). Problem-solving skills, particularly those involving finding creative solutions, are a strong component of critical thinking (Özgenel, 2018). If a student-centered classroom approach is to be taken seriously, then these skills are best taught in an environment familiar to the student, preferably one they find enjoyable. Gaming would seem to create a near-perfect environment. Dickey (2006) points out video games require players to synthesize information to form creative solutions. This is likely the least controversial of all the possible reasons video games should be valued. Critical thinking is a valued skill across the curriculum, one tied not only to literacy but also to the increased emphasis on STEAM skills (Jones, 2016). Not everyone is eager to embrace the educational benefits of gaming, perhaps because of possible negative factors in gaming itself, which I will discuss in a moment.

**Story and empathy.** This is the consideration that led me to consider the possible benefits of video games. Story is central to my life, as I have described from the beginning of this study. The benefits of story have been documented here as well, such as Bal and Veltkamp’s “emotional transportation,” in which immersion in a story moves the reader into a different
perspective in which she is able to place herself in another’s life and develop empathy (2017). This transportation moves the reader from sympathy, in which she understands another’s emotions, to empathy itself, in which the student, or a reader of any age, experiences these emotions as if the story’s events were happening to her (Gerdes, 2011).

This is the point where anti-gaming arguments move the conversation in a troubling direction. There have been concerns expressed about video game violence from almost the beginning when a basic model called “Death Race” with pong-like graphics was pulled from the shelves following complaints about cries of pain and pop-up tombstones that accompanied the destruction of “gremlins” (NCAC, 2019). From the beginning of the increased popularity of more realistic video games, particularly the First Person Shooter variety, many have linked the virtual violence with real-world violence, and have attempted to stem the perceived problem through lawsuits and legislation (NCAC, 2019). Both presidents Obama (Tassi, 2013) and Trump (Voytko, 2019) have linked mass shootings to video game play, with Obama calling for new research into the perceived problem. These proclamations found an audience willing to accept the possibility. The results of the new research, however, did not line up with expectations.

Much of the research found no link between virtual and real violence (Ferguson, 2007). Research published in 2018 by the University of York, for instance, found no behavior link between playing violent video games and violent tendencies. In this particular study, more than 3,000 participants were placed in conditions thought to increase a tendency to act in a certain way, yet no significant evidence emerged that these games changed real-world behavior (Zendle, Cairns, P, & Kudenko, 2018). In the same month, a brain imaging study showed no physical effects were caused by playing violent games (Wei et al., 2017). While some studies, including
at least one major project published in 2019, have found that video game violence does decrease empathetic response (Lai et al., 2019), most recent studies seem to disagree.

While these results may seem to support using video games as a way to get story into the hands (and heads) of students who do not gravitate toward books or even film or television, this last finding issues a challenge. If one of the primary benefits of story is it builds student empathy by helping them experience life through the eyes of others (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013), then what do findings that suggest video games have little or no effect on student empathy do to the idea that games are a sort of a story substitute? Perhaps answering this question may help us find a path toward using gaming in ways that best benefit students.

First, saying there is no link between gaming and empathy is misstating, or perhaps misusing these studies’ findings. The specific purpose of this research was to determine whether video game violence led to real-world violence (Zendle et al., 2018). When the larger issue of empathy is examined, gamers have been found to feel guilt when perpetrating virtual acts of unjustified violence (Hartmann, Toz, & Brandon, 2010). In addition, efforts are being made to build empathy into video games, particularly those aimed at middle-school students, for whom neural efforts to increase empathy have been productive (Kral et al., 2018). Through all this, given contradicting findings with political underpinnings, the responsibility of the educator remains essential. Effective teachers develop relationships with their students, ones built on mutual respect, knowledge, and trust, and these relationships allow them to help students move in a beneficial direction.

Believing that teachers can guide their students in a gaming direction that is counter to that of their peers, particularly given the global nature of gaming, is naïve. This is where gaming
connects with one of the primary tenets of my philosophy, and considering these together could help educators think about the problem more productively.

**Gaming and Choice.** With this, I return to the ideas that caused me to begin this project. When I first heard Pernille Ripp speak about her reading choice program and read how she (2015), Kelly Gallagher and Kittle (2018), and others were implementing programs that allowed students to read what they want, I was intrigued. Now, at the close of this project, I consider a different type of story, one that students create as they play. I do not see this in any way as a replacement for reading. I would hope that teachers would not only guide their students in a productive direction where gaming is concerned but that they also would allow their knowledge of student gaming choices to help these students find books that would complement these interests. As I mentioned early on, I see reading not as a single interest, but as an activity that enriches interests students already possess.

Of course, students will make choices other than the ones we prefer. This will happen in every area. It is a fundamental component of a child’s maturing into a self-realized adult. As we seek to influence our students, we allow them agency. We create a space where they can grow and develop interests that form the person they are becoming. Perhaps gaming is one more way that we can help usher story, and through story the act of reading, into their lives.

**Personal relevance.** Many of my other attempts to find ways to integrate student background and preferences into the book club fell flat. They did reveal some personal preferences, with mystery and horror being mentioned the most frequently, and stories involving cats emerging as an interest of two of the participants, but these interests seemed shallow. In an attempt to enliven the conversation, I mentioned my preference for supernatural literature in general and ghost stories in particular, and student responses may have played off these
suggestions rather than come to the surface naturally. One student’s telling of personal ghost stories repeated a common classroom occurrence, as did the dismissal of these stories by another group member.

A troubling trend developed from these discussions, one I was not prepared to counter: students expressed mostly negative views of their communities and the circumstances of their lives. The prevalence of drugs became an ever-present background reality, and one student, perhaps the one I would have least suspected, reported that her father was in jail on drug charges. The student’s reactions to community drug use revealed a lack of judgment on my part, a surrender to stereotypes that likely never held true. The oppressive reality of a community living with opioids and meth revealed a drug issue that seemed indistinguishable from the reality of the area’s poverty. While I realize that wealthier areas also have issues with these drugs, their presence in poorer areas seems less like an issue that can be solved than a part of the climate. Perhaps drug use can no more be separated from the present poverty than frost can be separated from winter.

The extent of the effect drug use has on the culture creates a different set of challenges than I considered as part of this experiment, although the challenge itself remains familiar. For decades, area schools have attempted to convince students that the possibility of rising above socioeconomic circumstances exists, yet as income inequality has increased, the educational achievement gap has continued to increase (Reardon, 2019). With exceptions, this effort has proven less successful than most would like, and a few schools have responded by focusing on students they judge as having the best chance of success and even at times inflating preferred students’ grades (Daly, 2018). The problem of attention and opportunity being given more freely to students of a preferred socioeconomic background has not only been noted by educators but
has also been one I have encountered directly, having been told to focus on students from better families that have the will to succeed and worry less about others.

The resulting inequity thickens the weeds that have to be cut through to reach a certain subset of students. Reaching them earlier is, of course, preferable, as studies that show that most elementary students enjoy reading tell us (Adelson et al, 2019). We are left with the challenge of reaching students as they become more aware of the world around them and, in this case, of the atmosphere of resignation that affects their community. While engaging parents would help tremendously, reality shows this often does not work. If adults do not themselves value reading or even believe rising above is possible, they are unlikely to be allies. The reality of uninvolved parents leaves educators with a more difficult task as they attempt to keep the passion alive in students as they grow older and, perhaps, become disillusioned. The resulting apathy cannot be overcome by following set programs or a depersonalized pattern of instruction. Personalized reading instruction, designed to discover students’ personal interests and use these to lead them into a passion for discovery, becomes vital. Students who have begun to accept malaise as the norm cannot renew their hope for better lives by following the same worn path.

Programs such as reading choice can provide hope for students. Rather than present reading as something that must be done to progress through school, find their passions and show them that books can help them grow and deepen the interests they already have. Make not only reading but education as a whole a way to allow them to become what they feel they are inside.

**Classroom experiences.** As a whole, the students liked the reading assignments they had been given but found few to be memorable. They said their current book, *The Hunger Games*, was enjoyable but did not express any specific enthusiasm and seemed unaffected by scenes that I brought up, such as Katniss agreeing to be tribute in place of her younger sister. They had not
been given any choice as to what to read in class that they remembered. They had not previously
taken part in a reading circle or book club. Allara, sitting near the group and listening, said that
the discussion caused her to consider incorporating this type of group into her class. Emily was
the only participant who admitted fake reading an assignment. Allara mockingly chided her for
this, and the student seemed embarrassed. This exchange was followed immediately by William
insisting that he did not do that, no matter how it looked.

None of the participants related specific memories of what they did when they visited the
school library as a class, something that had not yet happened this school year, saying only that
they went into the library, checked out books using a library card, and left. They agreed they had
not received guidance as to what to read from the librarian, Elizabeth Sirbaugh. After being
unable to get together with the librarian at the school, I sent an email asking her about the
procedure. Her response follows.

Students are allowed to freely browse. If they have a particular topic or interest area, I
will help them find books. We have popular series baskets on top of the bookshelves for
high-interest books (those are usually a first place most go). I am currently trying to
expand the library and branch out into a Makerspace options, as well as, provide
greenscreen availabilities for student use. Students also may attend the book fair held
twice a year and participate in contests to win items from the library like books, posters,
etc. We were involved with the Accelerated Reader program but due to high costs, we
have branched out into a new area and are waiting for vendor feedback. Eighth-grade
students also may be involved in the yearbook through the library (personal
communication, Sep 30, 2019).
One item of note was that the school had formerly taken part in the Accelerated Reader program, which some students past elementary school view negatively, but are moving on to another program. The popularity of series books was also notable, as was the move toward a technological focus. Greenscreen and Makerspace options may sync well with the students’ game-playing mentality.

Research Questions and Answers

RQ1: What factors, such as family Attitudes and school reading programs, go into students’ changing attitudes toward reading? Although this question is listed first, I am going to address the matter at the end of this section, as this is the over-arching question. The purpose of this study was to discover what is really going on, at least among this group of students. I believe some answers emerged, although all was not clarified.

RQ2: How do peer relationships affect reading attitudes and understanding? Taking the students’ comments at face value, the answer would be that peers do not affect their reading at all. Nothing the participants said about their reading life referred to their friends or peers at all. When asked directly whether they had ever talked about books with their friends, the responses varied from a direct “No” to complete silence, another indication that the students thought little about books when they were not directly engaged in reading.

If the word “books” is changed to “stories,” the answer changes. Although even movies and television made little conscious impact, gentle probing revealed that the activity that took up the largest chunk of the participants’ free time, gaming, involved both story and friends. My lack of familiarity with video games caused me to be slow to recognize the importance of what the students were saying. Coming from the generation when games such as Pong first appeared, I did not think of these as a social activity or, for that matter, one involving much story beyond
fighting back the lines of invaders threatening Earth or, later, saving the princess at the end of a series of castles. As a teen, I had experienced playing games socially gathering around early Space Invaders machines at Pizza Hut and listening to a veteran explain exactly how to guarantee a win every time or stopping by a friend’s house to play Atari with him and his younger brother, but that was the limit of my experience. First-person shooter games did not appeal to me, at least beyond Duck Hunt, and Tetris was for me a solo activity, so when games progressed, I stayed behind.

I have underestimated the sophistication and the effect of the gaming experience. Although I had heard of plots and characters that populated Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPG) (Mikhailova, 2019), the concept meant little to me. My brief exposure left me believing they were overdone, loud spectacles with little depth and less value. I was wrong.

When asked what games they play, William replied first, and his answer confused me. He said he played Farming Simulator, and I wondered whether he was talking about Farmville (2009) or a similar lower-level social media game. He then talked about the online reading and problem-solving necessary to play, and I was intrigued. What he described involved higher-order learning. I checked out the game’s website and found that it not only includes problem-solving, but it also encourages social learning and creativity (Farming Simulator, 2019). The game’s website included team challenges with prizes worth 250,000 Euros, social forums, and module and map-making contests (Farming Simulator, 2019).

After listening to William’s description, I asked the others to share their favorite games. When the answers did not come quickly, I passed around a sheet of paper, and all six of the remaining students (one, Holly, was absent) quickly wrote the name of a game. Most were games
I had heard of, although I had to look a few up online. The one I was unfamiliar with, *Castle Cats*, seemed possibly related to the *Warrior Cats* books that had been suggested in our first meeting, so I began my research there. While these two properties were not strictly connected, the idea that they would share the same audience seemed natural. A blurb on the front page of the game’s website.

Build your very own guild of feline warriors in Castle Cats! Recruit legendary heroes and daring adventurers - help the cats manage their guild and send them off on epic quests to collect sweet rewards! But beware – you’re not alone, the Evil Pugomancer’s reign is spreading like a wild disease and you have to stop her! Save Catania Now! (Castle Cats, 2019).

So again, this game features both a social element and story. Could it be possible that these students, rather than not placing value on story, were instead getting narratives in a place I had hardly considered? I continued through the other participants’ picks.

*Overwatch* describes itself as “a colorful team-based shooter game starring a diverse cast of powerful heroes. Travel the world, build a team, and contest objectives in exhilarating 6v6 combat” (Welcome to Overwatch, 2019). The game’s About page emphasizes both the social nature of the game and inherent creative possibilities.

When you enter a game of Overwatch, you’ll need to choose a hero to play. Maybe a cannon-toting ape from the moon appeals to you. Perhaps you prefer a time-traveling freedom fighter. Or is a beat-dropping battlefield DJ more your style? Whoever you want to be, there’s an Overwatch hero for you” (Welcome to Overwatch, 2019).

Two of the participants indicated they play versions of the popular *Call of Duty* series, and another listed *Grand Theft Auto*, one of the more controversial games of recent times, with
protests peaking in 2013 with the release of the fifth incarnation of the game provoking accusations of promoting torture and violence against women (Hern, 2013). This same student said he plays the ubiquitous Fortnite, the social game that has recently prompted a lawsuit because of its addictive quality, “sometimes.” One other game mentioned, “March through Birmingham,” has proven difficult to locate, but a book on this subject had been mentioned during the previous sessions, and there was likely some connection.

The diversity of the game topics and the range of possibilities within a single game surprised me. When asking people why students read less than before, many adults and some students have mentioned video games as the primary reason. As I listened to the students I began to wonder whether I had been considering the effect of these games too narrowly. While an argument that games can produce negative results would get little argument, the converse, that games can also have a positive effect, may be more true than I had considered. I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

RQ3: What factors affect the types of books and other materials students specifically choose to read? While the students said they would prefer reading books set in areas like the one where they live, they also said they were not aware of such books. At the first meeting, students shared that they liked to read mysteries and “scary” books. At a later meeting, most agreed that they preferred reading about characters who had a special ability, such as a superhero, to reading about a normal character, such as the boy in I Survived the Battle of D-Day. Considering the games they preferred playing as exposure to stories, this trend held. Only Farming Simulator featured everyday characters. In the others, the students played as characters (not all human) with special abilities in either fantasy or hyper-real settings. These games featured adventures far beyond what the participants were likely to encounter.
Emily said that a colorful cover would influence her to choose a book, and the others agreed. *I Survived the Battle of D-Day*, like the others in the series, featured a colorful, action-oriented cover. While all the students said they enjoyed the book, few said this was something they would choose to read on their own, even though most of the students included the book on their ballots at the beginning of the group. There did not seem to be a particular thing about the book that they disliked, but it did not appeal to them as much as they had thought it would. The book was written for students who were a bit younger, and while this was not a specific complaint, this was a possible reason their interest flagged and all but one (Emily) failed to finish the book. In the next chapter, I will attempt to use what was said to find more appealing ways to help them choose a book to read.

**RQ4: How do students connect what they read to their own lives and experiences, including how they would or would not act differently in these situations?** The participants verbalized how the story connected with their lives hesitantly and with difficulty. They approached the stories as an escapist experience, although the purpose of the series was to put young readers in dramatic situations and cause them to feel and think like the characters. Perhaps this was connected to their stated preference to read about unusually gifted characters in familiar settings, which is the opposite of what was presented here. With some discussion and more-than-expected prompting, the students agreed their family and neighbors would fight back. Even this, however, seemed rooted more in a belief in the extraordinary qualities of their neighbors and their neighbors’ arsenals than a realistic view of how the community members could use their normal qualities to subvert the invaders. This was a point made directly in the book, but one the participants did not seem to grasp. Points of memory recalled by students that related to the book seemed limited to relatives’ experiences in Vietnam and their reluctance to talk about these.
Their impressions of difficulty and conflict mostly involved the proliferation of drugs in the area. When they talked about this, the students seemed both sad and angry. There was a feeling that this was the one infection that contaminated the life of the community.

The disconnect was brought home by the difficulty the students had imagining themselves in a similar situation. Perhaps this had to do with the participants’ age, on the border of childhood and adolescence. They seemed more struck by individual occurrences in the book than by connections with the characters. The main character’s father and mother were both a part of the story, although the father was off-scene until near the end, and the students showed signs of increased interest in these relationships.

**RQ5: How does students’ reading expand their understanding of the world?** These students had a more expansive understanding of the world than my generation, likely because of the influence of the internet and, in some cases, the video games they play. They all were aware of the basic facts of World War II. A few of the details may have been fuzzy, but the students were informed enough that they contributed to background discussions. Expansion occurred mostly in the micro. We spent time on the individuals in the story and attempted to better understand what living through this experience was like for both children their age and for community members.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, INTERPRETATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Theoretical Framework Versus Research Goals.

Throughout this research, I constantly reminded myself of the student-centered approach I had decided to use. Holding on to this idea became difficult, as participants only showed enthusiasm when the discussion moved into areas that I considered off-topic. Since the purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of the students, I felt an obligation to follow them into these diversions. I was reluctant to do so, but this was my whole purpose, even if it was one that did not always feel right to me. Thus I was faced with the dilemma that I had encountered often in the classroom, but my role was different this time. I had set the time frame and created the goals, and I considered my desires to be important, even though the overall theory I built the research on said otherwise. I had determined that allowing the students to choose the direction of the discussion was important, but, like the principals and curriculum-makes I had at times clashed with, I became focused on my own needs. This only became clear to me during the third session.

Classroom goals remain, and learning must remain on track, although a student-centered philosophy would remind the teacher that the curriculum should not take precedence over the student. This can be a difficult balance. In the case of this study, one more consideration is added: the purpose of the meeting was to give the students the freedom to discuss what was important to them. This last goal worked well with this particular group, which showed no discipline problems and only featured one student who was likely to dominate the conversations. Review of the transcripts showed that the conversation was more balanced than I realized, with only one, non-verbal student contributing significantly less than the others (and even she
contributed when given the opportunity to write suggestions and answers instead of giving them orally; looking back, I wish I had realized the value of this before the final meeting.)

The conflict between the theoretical framework and the goals of my research was not what I feared. I was able to answer each of my questions to some extent, and when I began to trust and seriously listen to the participants, I was able to see something unexpected take shape. Story did have a place in their lives, after all.

If the truth was the students were ready to speak but I was not ready to listen, problems remain. What of the areas where I probed but they did not respond? For instance, I discovered little about their home lives. Three of the participants mentioned what their parents read, and one mentioned, in a voice so quiet I did not hear her until I listened to the recording, that her father was in prison on drug charges. Did these students consider their home lives too private to share, or did they simply consider them irrelevant? Part of the answer may lie in the participants’ ages, which was not exactly as I initially intended.

My first plan was to conduct these meetings near the end of the school year, since much of the movement in reading enthusiasm happens during the seventh-grade year (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Instead, the book club began only three weeks into the school year. The students’ lack of openness could indicate a change in attitude had not fully emerged. Students were not only quiet concerning their parents and families, they also barely mentioned specific friends. Is it possible these relationships were in the process of changing, and the students had not processed what was happening in their lives enough to communicate their thoughts and feelings? If so, then the study could reveal a different moment in the students’ lives than was originally intended. Perhaps by seeing what was happening at the beginning of the school year, clues as to what might happen later can be discovered.
As noted earlier, physical and emotional changes can cause middle school students to value socialization as peer acceptance and romantic interest become more important (Marks, 2011). Research also found this drive for socialization leads to an increased interest in playing sports (Kantomaa et al., 2016). This did not seem to be true for these students, as only three played team sports and none of the three considered this a driving force in their lives, with only Doug saying he played basketball in his spare time. This could change as the participants move through seventh grade, as only football, volleyball, and soccer season had been in session so far (WVSSAC, 2019). Doug and Gina play in the band, but at this point, band was not taking up their after school time. Was this simply a case of a small sample size? This is possible, but there is also a chance there are other reasons for this discrepancy. I will discuss a possible reconciling factor later in this chapter.

What my theoretical framework led me to do was consider the importance of these factors in the students’ minds. Qualitative research forces the researcher to choose a limited point of view. This is not research to be widely generalized, but rather it is a snapshot of a certain group of students in a certain context. The students are participants rather than subjects, because they determine the direction of the research. My initial discomfort with the direction they chose revealed a problem with me letting my preferences get in the way rather than a problem with the research approach. This discrepancy was, in fact, the very purpose of my research; the intention was to listen to the students’ voices rather than the educators’ concerns. Doing so should not be considered a sweeping devaluation of educators or researchers, but rather the addition of an underrepresented voice to the body of knowledge on the subject.
The Students in Their Own Milieu

Considerations in light of Postman. Perhaps unexpectedly, Neal Postman’s (1985) thoughts concerning the flood of information now available connect to my failure to appreciate the worth of video games, which play a central role in these students’ lives. Contemplating Postman’s writing does not lead to a rejection, but rather to a consideration of how his ideas have been redefined by intervening developments. Postman thought deeply on this subject and confronted an emerging problem. Instead, I am thinking about how my own missteps reflect the path we have been taking for decades. Even after advocating for listening to students, I have failed to do so. My cultural blindness caused me to consider activities that had no place in my life to be frivolous. When we consider the impact of this activity, playing video games, we find it has a greater value than I had imagined. Through playing video games, students take possession of story, learn problem-solving skills, and enter a social milieu that in itself creates value and allows them to develop their culturally relevant ways to navigate a difficult time in their lives. If exponential multiplication of noise since Postman has seemed to make his problem unsolvable, perhaps we can forge a way through by discovering what is most important to the students and beginning there.

Video games: the worth of what we dismiss. In real-time, I felt disappointed at the results of the book club, which at times seemed to be about everything except the book we were reading, but afterward, I came to believe the experiment was a success because the results were honest. If what I was searching for was the place reading held in the students’ lives, I discovered it held a small place but was not likely to be a driving force in the way their lives developed. The participants did not dislike reading and even held on to some positive associations, but books no longer held an important place in their lives. They had moved on. The concept of story still
existed mostly because of video games, although it is likely movies and television still play some role in their lives. I had been told by students before that they had grown out of reading, but I am not sure I understood what this meant.

The seeds are still there. We, as educators, need to act differently if we want these seeds to grow. Students are following their natural path, and the fear becomes that we too often follow the path that political realities has set us on. We have fallen into a culture where test scores are rewarded, and qualities that cannot be easily tested, such as reading pleasure, are sometimes set aside. I believe this is short-sighted. Reading pleasure actually increases achievement (Chiu & McBride-Chang, 2006). More than this, reading pleasure creates long-term benefits. Reading enjoyment, and this seems so obvious that the need to say it feels superfluous, creates life-long readers (Adelson et al., 2019). Yet this needs to be said, because our focus on numbers makes us forget what should be most important.

If students are to develop critical thinking skills, reading is vital (Thomson & Nixey, 2005). If students are to become empathetic adults, reading fiction, particularly, is the surest path (Bunce & Stansfield, 2014). Beyond this, even, reading enriches students’ lives by making them unsatisfied with the current condition of the world around them (Wagner, 2012). Reading, like travel, is fatal to prejudice. Reading, then, can create the path out of the often depressing lives that seemed to overwhelm these students. Finding ways to reach these students, to discover their individual interests and use these preferences to spark a love of reading, then, can be the first step toward change and fulfillment.

A personal failing: listening to students

Several times during the research, my failure to comprehend the importance of what students were saying slowed my progress. This problem appeared on the first day when I took
the students’ statements about whether or not they read outside of class at face value. Listening more closely to their explanations would have revealed their actual interests. At this point they had only just met me and were perhaps afraid their answers were not what I wanted, but even then, their suggestions of what we should read revealed they enjoyed animal stories, scary books, and tales about kids living in a heightened reality. Their interests in video games should have struck me as being important immediately, but I did not grasp how central this was to their lives until the third time it was discussed. I made no connection between these games and story until near the end of the research.

Most importantly, I missed what one girl was saying about her life and family, not so much because I dismissed the importance of this as because I literally could not hear what she said. She became quiet when she talked about her father being in jail and, later, her mother checking herself into an abuse rehabilitation center (what the girl called an asylum), possibly because her mother was an abuser, and I did not understand what she had said until I listened to the recordings of these meetings. The girl had shown symptoms of a cold, including a hoarse, rough, voice, since the second meeting. There are ways I can work to alleviate each of these situations, ways that make the idea of student-centered education practical. I am afraid I have not always considered what the students have to say as important as I thought I did. This is true not only in the way I realized, having to do with classroom material and methods, but also regarding what students say about themselves.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Studies involving student learning through video games are currently being conducted, usually by those more familiar with the medium than I am (Arena, 2015). This likely would be a useful area for expanded research. I would also be interested in conducting reading-group
research using other methods, such as students choosing and reading books individually or focusing on a pre-determined genre, such as science fiction or medium such as comics or graphic novels. Both of these methods show promise. Research on different types of reading groups could include possible benefits of students selecting individual books as well. Their talking about their particular book could provide an opportunity to observe further socialization. This study may focus on whether student attitudes toward a certain book would influence their classmates. The opportunity for cross-pollination would itself provide useful information.

A study pairing student video games with related books could also prove useful. Obtain the names of games the students like most, then pair this with a similar book. There was some crossover discovered in this study, with the Castle Cats/Warrior Cats connection being the most obvious. What would happen if the teacher began with the students’ interests and conducted a study from this point, seeing how well similar books connected with the students. Many games have connected books already. Are the students who play these games aware of these books? Have they tried reading them? What would happen if they did? The same could be done with other interests and projects. Adding a reading element to existing activities could provide a rich opportunity for information.

More quantitative research could be done focusing on students’ particular interests at various points in their development and coordinating this with specific methods used to teach reading as well as video game interests. As students age, their tastes change. If an educator respects these changing interests by moving adolescents through a progression of books naturally, will reading itself become more of a natural activity? Such methods would assist in making education truly student-centered, as educators would not simply find a way to connect
activities to student interest but would go as far as to let these interests drive educational activities. Research along these lines could provide a foundation for future methods.

A general survey of teachers’ use of reading choice could also be helpful. Is the choice given limited or open? How do educators react when students choose differently than the teachers think best? Are there changes in student attitude and achievement following choice activity?

**Significance**

When we set up a system of expectations based on our own experiences and values, student outcomes will never match our anticipation, so we need to prepare ourselves to accept the value of what the students produce. We may not consciously create a standard that mirrors our own while considering student values less important, but this is often the natural result of our planning methods, because we put our own desires at the center. We do not do this out of malice but rather out of a concern based on our personal beliefs and experiences.

The basic concept of valuing our students creates a series of obstacles that we find difficult to understand. Those of us who came of age before the internet was available have trouble understanding the mindset of those who have always been wired. This new reality not only creates a concept of personal presence that transcends distances in ways the telephone never could, but it tends to amplify concerns, as dangerous realities build and become large enough to consume an adolescent’s life.

One small instance that solidified this thought for me was when the students not only answered quickly that the internet was an overwhelmingly positive presence but seemed confused that anyone would think otherwise. Without experiencing a world of smaller concerns, such an overwhelming part of life is just there. Even the term normal seems inadequate, since the
word implies there is an abnormal possibility. Having grown up as an information junkie with too few resources, I would not want to surrender the connected life. Still, something pulls at me. My childhood memories are more innocent than theirs will be, and I could hold on to the delusion of a just world much longer than they can. But to cite this as a reason to reject technology would be to declare the inappropriateness of truth and knowledge, which I am not able to do.

All of this is the consequence of adults being forced to deal with a new reality as it is reflected in student voices. The participants in this study are not numbers on a survey; they are seven individual voices, each with a significantly different personality, even though they all inhabit the same demographic. Accepting this reality and using these students to show us where we must go in order to reach them is our obligation. I cannot let my unfamiliarity with and lack of interest in video games cause me to move away from their interests and try to convince them that my own preferences have more value. Instead, my response to this needs to be to try to understand their virtual world and to know this is where they reside, and any growth, any larger interest in reading, and any improvements in critical thinking are more likely to take root and begin to grow in that world. As an educator, it is my part to develop the empathy needed to respect their lives and to find value in their preferences.

Reading reaches out and takes in the world as it is, as we want it to be, and as it never could be, but there is always a beginning point. My own reading is anchored in the stories I was told when I was small. Some of the study’s participants had similar experiences, but a couple of others did not come from storytelling families and thus had no foundation for enjoying stories. How can I help such a student learn to love stories? Perhaps by understanding his world and finding his personal path into reading. I believe, more than ever, that the answer lies in
individualization, and the path forward goes through our students’ personal experiences. Demographics can take us into a general area, but they only allow us to see the forest.

Individualization is difficult. I have heard comments from teachers to this effect, and I have experienced the reality myself. Recently I spent a couple of days in a large high school where the English department had decided that all students in a particular grade should read the same books and stories at the same time. The reasons given had to do with students who might change classes mid-year and making sure all students are on the same level, but I could not help but think about how much lighter this makes the teacher’s work. Such a program stands little chance of reaching the struggling reader or of helping students realize how large the reading world beyond the canon can be. The relatively recent books brought into the classroom are the same for every student, and they create a new canon themselves, one chosen by the teachers and administrators. For many, giving the students a voice in the process seems counterproductive. As an assistant principal once told me, when students talk, they are doing no more than “pooling ignorance.”

Our educational system is moving on, although that movement may be uneven. The mere idea of letting students have a say in their reading instead of telling them what the right books are would have seemed unthinkable not too long ago. At least now there are educators promoting this idea, and they are among us. In the same county as the prescribed curriculum, I saw a middle school teacher with Penny Kittle’s *Book Love* (2013) open on her desk. There is hope, even if needed change sometimes seems far away. The question is whether this change will arrive in time to help this generation.

The participants in this book club were able to demonstrate the reality of the information gleaned from the studies cited above. They chose a book themselves based on their own
interests. Most enjoyed the book, although a couple became bored and would have liked to abandon the book, and for practical purposes did so. Students had no trouble imagining living in a situation similar to the book’s characters and readily formed ideas of how their neighbors and families would have reacted. They moved easily from considering the problems of the book’s setting (German invaders) to seeing similarities to the problems of their own community (pervasive drug use). Several were able to apply these ideas specifically to their own families, even those who might not have acted honorably. I believe that moving this direction, that is, toward the students’ real lives and concerns, would be more engaging and beneficial than working from a set canon and asking the students to conform to our values.

We sacrifice little by making this move. How many students enthusiastically embrace classic literature, the way I did? The answer should be evident. Conversely, how many students, even now, are finding reflections of themselves in young adult series about protagonists whom they can dream of emulating? Is it more important that they gain exposure to the best than that they find something they read voluntarily? There are arguments to be made, but listening to student voices will take us in a definite direction. If we are centering our theories and practice on the students, then we should listen to their voices. Yes, we can still expose them to the canon, but we also need to value their choices. If students are to grow to love reading, then they must read books they will love along the way.

Application for Teachers and Teacher Educators

A student-centered philosophy tends to be more difficult to implement and maintain than it can seem. In order to create an experience that values student preference and input, the teacher must be prepared to give up some control of the classroom. To do this seems unnatural. Yet creating a student-centered classroom does not mean to abandon organization and give in to
chaos. Montessori (1912) formed her system using an intentional process of guiding students onto a disciplined path in which they were able to create an individual learning experience using their own preferences. With Vygotsky’s (1978) system of scaffolding, the teacher provides support for the student, creating the ability and desire for the child to learn on his own. A philosophy that allows the student agency necessarily involves the educator getting to know the individual student in order to provide her with an optimal opportunity to learn, nudging her in a direction that appeals to already existing interests.

Creating book clubs provides a rich opportunity to discover interest and encourage exploration. Since information is shared by students, the teacher becomes a facilitator rather than a lecturer. In this study, the students chose a book to read as a group and, while this can be effective, letting each student choose an individual book would give each participant a very real ownership of the project. Instead of reading a book selected by the teacher or by the class or even by a small group, the student makes his own choice and in doing so learns how to become a self-directed reader. The process of choosing a book is itself a lesson that can develop a lifelong skill. In this way, students learn what types of books may give them joy. Allowing them to abandon a book after a few pages would also help reading be a positive experience, as they would not feel trapped by a choice that turned out differently than expected.

Book clubs enhance at least two of the reading benefits discussed previously. Empathy develops when students become enveloped in the lives of the characters they read about. As they discuss what they have read with others, an opportunity develops for them to talk about the characters as if they were real people and understand the decisions they make by following the fictional thought process. One can see how this can also improve critical thinking skills, as students work through another person’s decisions.
Reading groups also can increase reading enjoyment, as participants discover stories they can make their own. Teachers can continually tweak book club organization and function to make them work best for the participants. They can create genre-centered clubs in which students migrate to individual genre groups that match their interests or they can specify a genre and encourage students to search for something within a possibly unexplored genre that appeals to them. This can create an opportunity for discovery. Different media, such as comics/graphic novels or advanced picture books could also become a focus. Book clubs can function as a way to introduce students to ideas and experiences they would not have otherwise discovered.

The student, however, is never left on her own. The teacher is there to guide the student and suggest possibilities. To do this effectively requires effort, that is, it requires getting to know each student in a real way. While a list of likes and dislikes (something I have used in the classroom) will go so far, such a momentary exercise cannot be as effective as discovering the type of person a child is and is becoming and considering not only present interests but future possibilities. This is the meaning of a student-centered philosophy.

Even as I conducted this study, I was reminded of the shallowness of my own practices. I claimed to be student-centered and designed my research with this idea at the forefront, but there was a difference between my thoughts and my action. I am afraid that my idea of being student-centered focused more on what I wanted than what the student wanted. While I claimed to let the students determine the direction of their learning, I am afraid that what I actually tried to do was convince them to go in the direction I wanted. The realization that being student-centered was a frightening idea surprised me. So did the realization that I wanted to reshape the students into some sort of ideal instead of helping them grow in the direction they preferred.
Discovering real student-centered learning is worth the effort. A classroom driven by student interests increases the fulfillment of the teacher, who moves from a possible focus on controlling the classroom to teaching individual students and watching them find a learning experience they embrace. In addition, the possibility that students will learn to enjoy reading increases. By matching them with books they select and enjoy, the problem of a student automatically hating an assigned book may decrease. Loving reading begins with individual experiences. Perhaps we, as educators, have an opportunity to create enjoyable experiences and begin real change.
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APPENDIX A

APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE MARSHALL UNIVERSITY OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board
One John Marshall Drive
Huntington, WV 25755

July 30, 2019

Eric Lassiter, PhD
Curriculum and Instruction Department

RE: IRBNet ID 1397951-1
At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Lassiter,

Protocol Title: [1397951-1] Using Book Clubs to Encourage Middle School Reading Interest: A Qualitative Case Study

Site Location: MU
Submission Type: New Project APPROVED
Review Type: Expedited Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(6&7), the above study was granted Expedited approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Chair. An annual update will be required on July 30, 2020 for administrative review and approval. The update must include the Annual Update Form and current educational certificates for all investigators involved in the study. All amendments must be submitted for approval by the IRB Chair prior to implementation and a closure request is required upon completion of the study.

This study is for student Marc Shoemaker.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Anne Robinson at (304) 696-2477 or robinsonan1@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, PhD, OIP
Director, Office of Research Integrity
APPENDIX B

TRANSCRIPTS

First Meeting
September 9, 2019
Sissonville Middle School
Sissonville, WV
8:40 to 9:10 AM
Present: Marc Shoemaker, Cassandra Allara (teacher), Emily, Stuart, Doug, Holly, and Gina.

The recorder was not working for the first five minutes.

Transcript:

Me: This is kind of a strange question, but this is because I was doing a presentation, and somebody asked me about this. Do you have brothers or sisters?

Holly: I have brothers and sisters.

Emily: I have a brother and two sisters.

(Hands raise)

Me: Everybody? Are they around the same age you are?

Ev: My brother’s 15, my older sister’s 15.

Emily: My sister’s 10 and my brother’s 11.

Me: So that’s your family. Good morning. You’re Charles, right?

Stuart: Stuart.
Me: Why did I say Charles? You’re Stuart. I don’t know who Charles is. I’ve got a couple of grandparents mentioned, but what about other members of your family. Does your family read?

M: No.

Me: Okay. Charles is a no.

Emily: That’s Stuart.

Me: I do this sometimes. I hang a name on a person and I can’t get it out. There’s absolutely no reason for me to call you Charles. Stuart is a no. What about the rest of you. (to Doug) You said your grandmother does, And,

Stuart: My grandmother.

Me: Your grandmother does.

Emily: My mom reads Alice in Wonderland, and both sisters read.

Me: How about over here? Does anybody’s family like to read?

Holly: An older sister, I think, reads.

(inaudible voices in background)

Me: Okay. We’ve covered this a little, but let me ask again briefly. What types of books do you like. Do you like adventure or science fiction?

Holly: Mystery.

Emily: Scary mysteries.

Doug: the “I Survived” books.

Me: I’m sorry?

Stuart: The “I survived” books.

Emily: I like scary, funny.
Me (to Stuart): What did you say exactly? I can’t hear?

Stuart: Same as him. *I Survived*. Fantasy.

Me: Okay. Now what we’re going to do is choose a book to read. We’re going to do it in a different way. What I’m going to do is give you a bunch of choices and I’ll get some choices from you all. Then I’m going to give you a piece of paper and ask you to rank your top... Few.

Me: Your top choices. I just dropped those papers in the floor a minute ago, picked them up, and put them... behind me. That’s what I meant to do, but I had to be sure. Do any of you have any suggestions of a book you would like to read?

Emily: Scary, maybe.

Me: A scary book. Do you have any specific one, maybe?

Emily: No.

Me: That’s fine. Anybody else?

(Emily says something at the same time as I do, and I cannot make it out.)

Holly: *Wizard of Oz*?

Me: *Wizard of Oz*. Okay.

Doug: I’ve heard of a book called *Catcher in the Rye*.

Me: We’ll probably skip that one for a couple of reasons. One is my personal taste, but that’s just mine. On the whole, it’s just a little bit much. It’s more than we’ll be able to get to in the club.

Holly: There’s a book called *Kissed*.

Me: Called what?

Holly: *Kissed*. 
Me: I apologize; I can’t hear very well. Anybody else?

Doug: *Warrior Cats*.

Me: *Warrior Cats*. I know those books.

Doug: I know a scary one called *Took*.

Me: There’s some to start with. *Wizard of Oz*, *Warrior Cats*, *Kissed*, *Took*, and if you all want to just get up and look on the table, that’s what we have. Otherwise I can go to the book store and get them. It’s fine.

(Students mill around table, talking quietly.)

Me (to Ms. Allara): I don’t think I have ever once started to record anything without a problem. I don’t know what my issue is.

Ms. Allara: Do you know the *I Survived* books? They’ve got a whole series of—

(inaudible because of student unzipping book bag near microphone).

Me: That’s something else to keep in mind. *I Survived* books.

Doug: Do you want me to show you?

Me: Yeah, show me what they’ve got. Now, I probably should have clarified this before I sent you over to the table: We’re all going to read the same book. That’s fine. That was my fault; I should have made that clear. What I’m giving you this paper for, you don’t need to put your name on it, but rank as many books as you might want to read, and whatever gets the most books, we’ll go with that. We mentioned several, you can put those. We’ve got the *Wizard of Oz*, *Kissed*, *Warrior Cats*, *Took*, and the *I Survived* books, which sounds good, it’s historical fiction. I’d jotted a few down, but it looks like you’ve got plenty to choose from. Although I did find one I want to read that I’d never read before, something called *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. I want to read that myself. *I Survived*. I like the looks of that.
Emily: There’s *Junie B. Jones*.

Me: I know what that is, yeah.

Stuart: *Warrior Cats*.

Ms. Allara: I’ve never heard of that before. I don’t know that one.

Me: The *Warrior Cats*?

Ms. Allara: Yeah!

Doug: (inaudible) cats.

Emily: I like cats.

Holly: I have cats.

Stuart: I like cats, but (inaudible).

(Low talking among students as they fill out ballots)

Doug: Do I write these down?

Me: Yeah. (seeing Doug has written *The Bible*) We have three weeks, not a year and a half.

Holly: My mom, I was reading one of the *Wimpy Kid* books, I had to do it for school, and my Mom was seeing me read, and I just sat in the corner by my bed and read it in one day.

Me: Okay.

Stuart: Do you write the *I Survived*?

Me: It’s your choice.

Holly: Books that are your choice, that you want to read.

Me: Yeah. List them how you’d like to read them. If you don’t like any of those books, don’t list them. If you like them, choose a few. We’ll see what you have. Whenever you finish, you can just give me the piece of paper, and we’ll do some tabulations quickly here. Thank you.
(pause) I thought I’d lost it; that’s why I couldn’t find it. We’ll do this very quickly. Y’all go ahead and keep going. It’s fine. (pause) My handwriting is terrible, so if you’re trying to read what I write, most likely you won’t be able to.

(long pause)

I can’t count. Sorry.

Doug: Does all of these have to be filled in?

Me: No, they don’t all have to be. (to myself) *The Haunting of Hill House.* Shirley Jackson. Not a whole lot to do with the recent series. Okay. I’ll get this last couple, and we’ll have an answer. (mumbling). *Fantastic Beasts.* (pause). Good one. I will tell you *The Bible*’s a little bit long. *I Survived* . . . four. . . *Dark* . . . two. . . and another *Survived*. I’m going to put that together. We’re up to five on that, but it doesn’t matter either way, because that’s the high number.

(to class)

Okay. I’ll go ahead and add the numbers, but I can just look down on it right now and tell you the *I Survived* books are winning. Let’s see. We’ve got five points for *Wizard*, four for *Kissed*, twelve points for *I Survived*, Four for *Hatchet*, three for that thing, *Dark Rising*, nine for the *Warrior Cats*, three for *Took*, one for *Dogmen*, five for *A Wrinkle in Time*, four for *Junie B. Jones*, three for . . . something I abbreviated too much, I’ll figure it out, but it’s okay because it’s three points. *Hill House* two, *Rosemary* one, *Fantastic Beasts* four, *Catcher in the Rye*, (inaudible) five, and, again, something I can no longer read gets three. My handwriting’s terrible. Obviously, The number one vote here is the *I Survived* books. Now, there’s a whole bunch of those. Do you have a list of what they are?

Doug: I can pull them up.
Ms. Allara: (inaudible) can pull them up.

Holly: (inaudible).

Me: What I’m basically going to do, I’ll figure out which one; I’ll leave here and try to buy it. Ayy—you went backward!

Doug: (inaudible).

Me: There it is.

Ms. Allara: Do you want me to tell you all? There’s a lot.

Me: A whole bunch of them.


Me: I don’t know.

Ms. Allara: *Shark Attack, Tornado Terror, Destruction of Pompeii, Joplin Tornado*.

Me: Any of them sound particularly good to you?

(Voices together, mostly inaudible)

Stuart: D-Day

Emily: *Children’s Blizzard*.

Me: *Children’s Blizzard*. That’s strange, yeah. A bunch of children falling from the sky.

(laughter)

Me: What about you all. *D-Day*?

Stuart: *Pompeii*.
Me: I’m going to go to Books A Million and see what I can find. If I can get one you mentioned, I’ll get that. If not, I’ll see what they have. These are Scholastic, so they should have them. Is there a particular . . .

Doug: I know they have some at the public library.

Me: That’s true. I want to get five of the same thing. I’m going to try Books A Million and see what happens. These don’t have a particular author, do they?

Doug: Lauren. . .

Me: This one says Lauren Tarshish.

Doug: Yeah, that’s the author of the whole thing.

Me: I’ll put that down. Let me go back here and pull up. . . I know it’s here, but I don’t see D-Day.

Ms. Allara: They all have the same author.

Me: Is that? Oh, that’s Hindenburg there. Oh, there it was. Same author, Lauren Tarshish.

Doug: There’s the D-Day ones.

Me: Okay. Tarshis. T-A-R-S-H-I-S. There is no H on the. Okay. What I’m going to do when I leave here is I’m going to go to Books A Million, see how many of these I can find, and if I can, I’m going to bring them back here and drop them off for you. And, by Thursday—what time does this end? Ten after?

Several voices: Yeah.

Me: You should probably see if you can read, maybe, the first chapter; I’ll see how much I can read, and we can talk about the book. It doesn’t matter if we only read a little bit, we can talk about it a lot, and pick up after that. Really, when I made out my schedule, I had the first reading day as more of a general day than specific reading, but here’s what I want to do. When
we start this, when we start actually reading and talking about it, I want to talk as little as I can and let you all talk. I’ll have a few questions to ask and see what you all have to say. One of my questions, really, the big, over-arching question, if you look at it like that, is, when you look at numbers, end of the fifth grade year, almost every kid likes to read. By the end of the eighth grade, that number’s dropped a whole lot, to a much smaller percentage. I’m trying to figure out what happens between the sixth, in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. What happens in middle school that causes you to not want to read anymore.

Holly: Electronics.

Me: That’s one of the big things I keep hearing. More people say that than anything, but there are other things too. And, to get really specific, seventh grade is where the big drop-off is. That’s what I wanted to check. Seventh grade is also, by the way, what I’ve taught more than any other grade. I don’t know what happens in seventh grade. When I was in seventh grade, (inaud). That’s a rough time. It was for me at least. I don’t know anyone it wasn’t a rough time for that was my age at the time. But we had different things going on. I went to grade school one through six in one building, four five and six changes classes, then we all went to seventh grade; it was a seven through twelve. So, can you imagine what happens to seventh graders when you’re thrown in with seniors?

Emily: Yeah, that would be chaos.

Me: That’s the way it was. That was why my whole seventh grade class was miserable. But that’s not the case anymore, so I don’t know. Seventh grade’s right in the middle now.

Emily: It’s easier being in classes with people you know.

Me: Of course what I used to do, is the hallways were always crowded. . .

Emily: The hallways are always, always crowded.
Me: So I found this senior who was a tight end on the football team, and we were going the same direction when I was going to the next class. I would get behind him so I could get through the crowd. Let him block for me. It worked. Anybody have any questions? Anything? Okay, I’ll get books and drop them off for you. If you can, read—I don’t know what the chapters are going to be like—if you can, read at least the first chapter. Read the introduction. See what the book’s going to be about. I’ll see what I can read, and when we meet on Thursday, we’ll preview the thing. Okay. If that’s all, you’ve got about three minutes.
Second Meeting

September 12, 2019

Sissonville Middle School

Sissonville, WV

8:40 to 9:10 AM

Present: Marc Shoemaker, Cassandra Allara (teacher), Emily, Stuart, Doug, Holly, Gina, William, and James.

Transcript:

Me: Here we go. Okay, I’ve got one sitting there, and I’ll sit one here. And get going. I’m going to start out just by checking to make sure I know who’s who. Doug. Emily. Holly. Stuart. It’s Stuart. You’re not Charles anymore. You never were Charles. There is no Charles. Okay. Gina. William, and, I don’t have your name.

James: James.

Me: James, okay. James. Got the books in. I ordered a bunch overnight from Amazon. I got some at Books A Million. They didn’t have any at Taylor Books. I didn’t try the Town Center. Is the one at the Town Center still open? I’ll try that today and see. Okay. Very quickly, what we’re going to do this morning is, since you all haven’t had time to read in these, since I just gave them to you, I’ll read the first couple of chapters myself, just because it’s something I like to do, and then we’ll talk and see what we know and what we don’t know. Or maybe we’ll do a little bit of that first. When you all read books in class, how do you usually do it?

Emily: We read as a group.

Me: Read as a group. Do you do the popcorn reading?

Doug: Sometimes.
Others: Yeah.

Me: The reader calls on the next person. Does the teacher ever read the thing themselves?
Doug: Yeah.
Emily: Sometimes.

Me: Okay. My own preference, and this is just me, I’m not crazy about the popcorn reading, but that’s a personal experience thing. Just because it can be uneven. Sometimes it’s hard for me to follow along. On the other hand, I have had classes where it went really well with the popcorn reading, and sometimes it doesn’t. I like reading, though. I like reading out loud, reading myself.

Let’s start out just the two of you who weren’t here before. I’m going to ask you a couple of very quick questions. Just, to double check, William and James. Okay. Do you all read outside of school?
William: Sometimes I do.
Me: Okay. What about you, James, do you read outside?
James: Yeah.
Me: Okay. What do you read.
James: Harry Potters.
I’m sorry?
James: Harry Potters.
Me: I have to take notes, even though I’m recording this, because sometimes the recorder doesn’t pick everything up. It helps me to have something to go along with it, and sometimes I do stupid things, like—
Stuart: That one stopped recording.
Me: Okay, this one is recording. That’s what I wanted to check; I didn’t see the lights. That one’s not recording?

Several: No.

Me: Okay. Can you bring up the camera and push record. Here I was thinking this one wasn’t, but it is.

Stuart: There you go.

Me: I have another voice recorder at home if I can figure out what I did with it, I can do all kinds of recording. The more the better, because I’ve had issues. I did a very long interview with someone at Taylor books a couple of years ago, and as I’m walking along I realize I’ve got my finger on the erase button. It was gone. It’s not that I don’t know how to use electronics, it’s more that I continually mess things up. I read a series of books about Harry Dresden, a wizard, and one of the characteristics of wizards in these books was that electronics always mess up when they’re around. So I figure I’m a wizard; I don’t know. Probably not, but it’s a possibility.

Okay. Very quickly, D-Day. World War II. What do you know about World War II in general.

Stuart: Germany has tried to fight America twice already. And D-Day was the time Americans stormed up on Normandy Beach, and Germany’s just (gun noises), but America still went.

Me: That’s it, really. A surprise attack that Germany wasn’t expecting. The Allies—the United States along with England and Russia, and of course other countries like Canada, Australia, I lived in Australia for a while, and they were always getting upset because nobody mentioned them (whisper: There wasn’t very many of them). But the Germans believed we were going to attack a different place, a different time, and they attacked Normandy. Which is kind of
history, because the people who established what is now Great Britain came from Normandy. The Norman invasion, so they invaded back. Okay. 1944. The war had been going on for a while. The United States entered the war at the beginning of 1942, so they hadn’t been there as long as some of the other countries had, but the country was completely committed. I had a grandfather who was at D-Day. He was in the group that invaded. There used to be a lot of people around who remembered, who took part, and, of course, as we get further from the date we’re getting to the point that a lot of the people who left are nineties, even. You do still get veterans speaking here and there, but not nearly to the extent that it used to be. Growing up, I knew all kinds of people who had been there, and now I doubt—anybody here know anyone who fought in World War II?

William: Not World War II, but my papaw, he served in Vietnam.

Me: Okay. We’re getting to the point that’s really the generation. We look at grandparents and think that’s the Vietnam generation.

William: He won’t talk about it. I ask him about it and he says “yeah, that’s all I want to say.”

Me: Even in World War II you find the same thing. A lot of the people who fought didn’t want to talk about it. My grandfather, step-grandfather, really, he would talk about it generally, but he wouldn’t get specific.

William: Back then, when he started killing all those people, he was a sniper. I figured this out from my dad, because my dad’s papaw, he was actually running from them. So what he would do, instead of going down a road, if there was a big briar patch on the side, he would take that briar patch instead of that road. We couldn’t find him—well, they couldn’t find him. Even the people that was on that side, they couldn’t find him for around a year. So the police officer
knocked on my mamaw’s door and gave her his clothes, so my mamaw buried them. The next day—he’s still alive, he’s only seventy-six, seventy-one, seventy-two. Seventy-three.

Me: Okay.

William: Then when he came home, my mamaw went to the door and he was standing on the porch. She fell back and hit her head real hard. But she’s ninety-eight years now, and she’s still driving.

Me: Wow, that’s uh. . . . people don’t ever really get over what they saw in the war.

William: Yeah.

Me: Let me start reading this, and we’ll probably come up with more questions. I just have to borrow somebody’s book. *I Survived the Battle of D-Day, 1944*. That was eighteen years before I was born, and my mother was two. My mother was born in 1942, January 1942, a little more than a month after Pearl Harbor. She had an indentation on her forehead when she was born that looked like a ‘V’. One of the big things was ‘V for Victory,’ one of the slogans. So they put her picture on the front page of the papers, ‘Victory Baby.’ Okay, let’s read this. This boy was involved quite a bit more than that, though. This is a boy who lived in occupied France. (reads chapter heading). And by the way, we’re not always going to do this. After this, you’ll have the books, you can read on your own and we’ll go over what we need. Since this is the first meeting, I’m going to start reading, and we’ll go from there.

(I read chapter 1 of *I Survived D-Day*, as well as context information from the back of the book.)

Me: We’ve been lucky for most of my life. Vietnam ended when I was thirteen years old. Since, when we have been at war we’ve sent people who volunteered (in Vietnam they were drafted). Since then, they’ve volunteered and they go to the Persian Gulf or wherever they’re
fighting. We’ve got to the point that whenever a war’s going on, it doesn’t affect us very much. But can you imagine living in a place where war’s happening? Having your friends (inaud) taken away? What do you all know about the Holocaust, about the way the Jews were (inaud)?

Emily: they put them in the gas chambers and in the camps, (inaud).

Me: Yeah. There was a line in there just now that they worked them. When you would go into the camps, there would be a sign that said “Work makes you free.”. That was their way of saying, “We’re going to take care of you. All you have to do is work for us, and your life will be better. You’ll be free.” That’s not what happened.

William: They’d work them to death, and then they’d put them in gas chambers and kill them.

Me: Yeah.

William: Then they’d burn them, and the ashes . . .

Me: The ashes would come down. Have you read Night at some point?

(no answer.)

Me: I was wondering because that’s one of the strong images.

William: We watched a movie last year called The Boy In the Striped Pajamas, and they showed them in the gas chambers and stuff. What happened was there was this little boy, and this little boy who was inside the fence, and this boy that was outside the fence, they wanted to play with each other, so they dug a hole to help the boy in the gate, to help him find his dad, but he was already dead in the gas chamber. So he got in there to try and find his Dad, and he went into the bunkers, and that bunker they went into was the one that was going into the gas chamber next. So the little boy’s dad, who was outside of the fence, he was the one who was actually
running the gas chambers. So he ended up killing his own son because the little boy wanted to
find his dad, and they put him in the gas chambers.

Me: There are so many things that’s hard for us to imagine. It’s one of the things about
reading, things like this that are based on real events particularly, you really start to feel things
the way that other people might have felt them. The way they did feel them. It’s kind of like, I
mentioned the other day that when I was young I grew up reading. I was taught to read before I
went to school, I spent a lot of time alone because I was isolated way up—I asked this the other
day: Do you all have brothers and sisters?

William: I have two sisters.

Me: Up until I was about—my mother remarried when I was seven, I didn’t have any
brothers and sisters. I also lived about a mile from the nearest neighbor. There was nobody
around, so I read. After that I was (inaud). Because I don’t think there’s any way you can get in
somebody’s head like you can when you’re reading. And I really like, what you did just now,
that you’ve seen and done things before that let you get into people’s heads. Sometimes, you
know, did you ever read anything that overwhelms you so much you have trouble with it?

William: Yeah. Once it gets there I have to quit, ‘cause I can’t pronounce the words.

Me: It’s so real in so many places. And there are so many places right now where it’s still
real. I knew a woman from Lithuania. She was older when I knew her. She had been driven away
when her country had been invaded, and she hadn’t gone back. No matter how much I feel like
I’m being targeted or picked on by anybody, (inaudible).

William: have you seen the Battle of Matewan?

Me: I’m sorry?

William: Have you ever seen the Battle of Matewan?
Me: I’ve seen that.

William: I went up there last weekend with Mamaw and Papaw for the airboat ride, because I’ve never been on an airboat. We went up there and I said, “Can we go look around the war, the history stuff?” I actually got to see a lot of stuff I didn’t know about. And that was the cool part about it.

Me: Yeah. There’s a lot of stuff around here, really.

William: Just knowing that, when you see the pictures of them, just knowing that these people actually died, just to fight, just to get their children and stuff to live like we are now.

Me: Yeah. Ever go to Civil War battlefields?

William: No, I’ve never been to one of them.

Doug: I have. I’ve been to Gettysburg.

Me: I love Gettysburg.

William: Oh yeah, I’ve been to the one in Gettysburg, yeah.

Me: You go there, and you see all the monuments and the numbers of all the people who—

William: Mamaw and Papaw are the travelers. My mamaw works in that building, whatever it’s called; I forget what it’s called.

Doug: What’s the name of it?

Me: How about you all. The girls have been really quiet this morning. What do you all think? What do you think of when you read this? Do you think that if you were in a place, and somebody comes and takes your best friend away—

Emily: (hoarse) I would have a tragedy.
Me: They’re still in the country, still right there, the people who took your friend and might have killed them, you don’t know what they’re going to do next.

Emily: It’s really sad to see that your mom or dad’s dead.

Me: I’m sorry?

Emily: It’s really sad to see that your mom or dad’s dead.

Me: You get to the point where you’re selling your soccer ball. You’re selling your soccer ball so they can make something of it.

Holly: The disappointment. I read that. If you read the first page, chapter three, it says that the boy, he went down to the shop, and the guy wouldn’t let him sell it. The guy wouldn’t even take it.

Ms. Allara: We’re getting ready for the break.

Me: If you all can try to read at least a couple of chapters, and if you want to read more, Tuesday, we’ll

Holly: Talk about it.

Several voices together.

William: Do you want us to give these to you?

Stuart: Read a couple of chapters

Doug: I’ll go to your house.

Emily: Do we give this back to you?

Me: No, it’s your book. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Ms. Allara: You’re welcome.
Third Meeting
September 16, 2019
Sissonville Middle School
Sissonville, WV
8:40 to 9:10 AM
Present: Marc Shoemaker, Cassandra Allara (teacher), Emily, Stuart, Doug, Holly, Gina, William, and James.

Transcript:

Me: Is everybody here: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. We’re all here.

Emily: Can I go get my book?

(Kids talking, whispering all together)

Me: Go ahead. I literally am not hearing hardly anything this morning. I don’t know why.

Three, four, five, six, seven. Okay. That’s right. For some reason I thought there were six of you, but the people I have match the seven names, so that makes sense. Let me just double check and make sure I know who is who. Doug. Oh you’re here. Okay. Emily,

Holly: Can I go get a book?


Doug: I didn’t. I tried to, but I couldn’t.

Me: That’s all right.

Sp: I forgot it in my locker.

Me: That’s all right.

Stuart (inaudible)

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Emily: Chapter six.

Stuart: Chapter four.

Me: Chapter four, chapter six.

Me (turning to others): How much did you all get read?

Holly: Two chapters.

Emily: How much did you read by yourself?

Holly: Two chapters.

Emily: So you read through chapter four?

Me: How many people did not read chapter three yet? Okay. In that case, very quickly, I’ll read that out loud, and then we’ll go from there. There’s some stuff going on here that I wanted to see what you all thought about it, but I’m not sure it comes up until about chapter six. So that’s probably a little bit ahead; we’ll talk about it Thursday instead of today. There’s some stuff going on in here that struck something with me and made me wonder a few things. What we have going on right here is we have the occupied area. Occupied by a foreign country. Think what will happen when Canada comes down and takes the country over and occupies us, because Canada’s so aggressive and warlike. Okay, maybe not. But what do you do? If another country comes down and takes over where you are, what do you do about it?

James: Take it back.

Me: How?

James: I dunno.

Me: I mean, you’ve got this big army out there against you, and there’s only a few of you.

(James and Doug talk at once, and neither is audible.)
Doug: It’s possible.

Me: Do you just kinda try to go on about your life and people disappear, a few over here and a few over there? You know, all my life, and obviously I’m old, but with all the things that have happened in my life, I don’t think there was ever a time when I really thought somebody’s going to come in here and take the country over. I’ve known people that thought that, but I never did. I lived in Australia when I was young, when I was right out of high school, and I met a woman there who lived right across the street from me. She was older; she was probably about eighty at that point, she was from Lithuania. Lithuania is in eastern Europe, toward the top, northern eastern Europe, very close to Finland and Russia. And after World War Two, when they’re splitting areas up, it ended up under Russian control. And this woman was just absolutely—she left. That was her reaction to it. She ran. She left the country, and she had lived in Australia ever since then. Because of that she was absolutely convinced—this was early eighties—she was absolutely convinced that Russia was going to come to Australia and take that country over too. Because that had happened to her in her life, that was what she knew, she lived the rest of her life in fear of someone coming in and taking over.

I’m thinking that’s what’s going on with this boy here. That’s kind of scary, because you don’t know what you can and you can’t do. You don’t know how your life’s going to change. Do you—let’s read a little bit of this and talk about it. I’ll read this next chapter.

What we’ve got to up to now is this boy’s taking a soccer ball to the market; he’s going to try to sell it so they can cut it up and make gloves out of it so he can buy something for his mother—Maman.

(I read chapter three)
Me: I’m saying Ma-Mahn as the name of his mother. I don’t know if I’m right. How do you all say it?

Doug: Ma-Mahn.

Me: Okay. I have this thing that I’ve decided that when I see anything that’s in a foreign language, No matter how hard I try to get it right and get the accent right, I know that how I’m saying it doesn’t sound anything like what a person who speaks that language would say. I kind of learned that one. I’ve had about eleven hours of German in college, and I can’t speak a word of it. It’s kind of overwhelming sometimes, I think.

Stuart: Do you know “no” in German?

Me: Nein?

Stuart: Yeah.

Me: Nein.

A lot of things happened. A very short chapter, you’ve got a lot of stuff happening. Is there anything you see, do you hear anything that might show up in the book later?

James: Cookies.

Me: What?

James: They ate at their house and the mom died. I don’t remember that. Who died?

James: I’m saying what might happen.

Me: What might happen. That’s why I was confused. You think it’s possible that they take it to their house and the mother dies. Okay. Anything else in here sound like we’re going to keep that in mind and see what happens? Once I looked over a cover and asked the class what they thought might happen, and a kid told me everything that was going to happen in the whole
book. I looked at him and said, “Have you read this?” He said, “Yeah.” So that doesn’t count. Go ahead:

Emily: They don’t have a lot of money at all.

Me: They don’t have a lot of money, have a lot of things. What about the castle with the dragon? What did you think about how suddenly, in the middle of this realistic story, they start talking about a dragon in a ruined castle?

Doug: I feel like the castle is going to (inaudible).

Holly: Is it going to be his hideout place? (inaudible).

Me: Okay, remember that. Remember that. You think that may be where they hide out. The Resistance or the Nazis?

Holly: The Resistance.

Me: The Resistance. Do you think there’s actually a dragon?

Holly: No.

William: There could be! There could be.

Doug: I don’t.

Me: Yeah, this doesn’t seem like the kind of a book where dragons would show up, does it? It would be strange if you were reading along in a realistic book, and suddenly there was a dragon. There are some writers who do that. It’s called Magic Realism, where you can have an ordinary story, and just one big bizarre thing stuck in the middle of it. But this doesn’t seem like that kind of book; it would be confusing. Why do you think that the author gives so many people’s names? Like he doesn’t just say “the guy at the shop,” he says that’s Boris. He doesn’t say, “The girl at the bakery,” he gives her name too. Why?

Doug: So it would be more realistic.
Me: Yeah. And I think he might be telling something important, like, “Pay attention.” Anytime you mention anything specific, it might be important later. Pay attention to what might happen later. I don’t want to do all the talking. Go ahead.

Holly: Can I read chapter four?

Me: Yeah. Let me just ask you all something. No, read chapter four; I’ll ask later.

(Holly reads chapter four.)

Me: Why did he have blood on his face.

Stuart: A soldier—

Me: You read!

Emily: I know why; I know why; I know why!

James. Dead guy. Dead guy.

Me: My first thought when I saw blood on his face was a pigeon got him, but it didn’t. Not the pigeon.

Emily: I know why!

Holly: I know why.

Me: (inaud.) You read, it’s the same chapter. Something I missed completely when I was reading it before, until you were reading it just now. What happens a lot with me is I’ll read something, and something will go past me. It’s stated right there, and I get in this fog, and I lose important details. When I read this before, I did not see what happened to his father. I didn’t remember what happened to his father, that he was taken away by the Nazis. In fact I got to a certain point in the book and thought, “Why haven’t they said anything about his father?” Well they had. It was just me. Do you all ever do that reading or watching? Do you ever watch something on television and get to the end and think, “What’s this?”
Several: Yeah.

Holly: I can be talking to someone in a conversation and go, “How’d this conversation even start?”

Me: Yeah, and it’s bad when that happens in real life, too. You’ve been talking to somebody for a few minutes and you think, “Who are you?” Sometimes I’m reading and I think, “I don’t remember that.” I think my mind isn’t made for all the details. When you all are reading a book, is there anything you skip over automatically?

Holly: A word that I can’t pronounce.

Me: A word you can’t pronounce? Okay. I just kind of make up things when I get to a word I don’t know. I wondered if when there’s a whole lot of description, like when they use two paragraphs to describe something?

Holly: Yeah.

Me: I do that. I’ve always done that. I’ve been told it’s because I’m a guy, and guys don’t read that stuff, but now I think that everybody does it, or a lot of people do. They’ll skip over description. This might seem unrelated, but we’re kind of getting somewhere, so I want to ask you something. What movies and TV shows do you like?

Doug: Hunting ones. Hunting and fishing?

Me: I’m sorry?


Stuart: I don’t know. I don’t watch tv.

Holly: Comedies.

Me: Comedies.

Emily: Scary.
Me: Scary things.

Me: You all, what do you watch on television? What do you like to see when you go to the movies?

Doug: I don’t do any of these. I don’t watch movies either.

Stuart: I’m more of a Ted 2 kind of guy.

Me: I haven’t been to a movie in a while. I think the last movie I was at was—

Emily: The last movie I was at was Zootopia.

(Several talk at once, saying they don’t go to movies.)

Holly: (inaudible) at my house, and my brother screamed when the tiger came out. He was in his room.

(Doug began talking and neither he nor Holly were understandable.)

William: Yeah, why go to movies and spend all that money when you can get two TVs and put them against the wall, beside each other and just watch there, instead of paying sixty-five dollars to get a ticket or something like that?

Stuart: It’s a whole lot better to buy two TVs.

William: Yeah.

(most laugh.)

William: If you already have them in your house, just take them off the wall and put them up there.

James: Mine aren’t that big. Just the size—

William: I’ve got a tv in my living room and a smaller tv in the bedroom.

James: (inaudible).

Me: Do you all read anything that’s like the tv programs you watch?
Stuart: Nope. We had to in sixth grade. We had to last year.

Me: What did you read?

Stuart: *The Giver* and watched the movie.

Doug: We watched *The Giver*.

Several talk at once.

William: And *The Boy in Striped Pajamas*. Really, that’s the only three we watched.

(Other boy, inaudible)

William: We didn’t get to do that, though.

Holly: We did.

James: (inaudible) I never really got to.

Stuart: You got to if you were in Ms. Hall’s.

James: I was in a dumb class.

William: If you were in Ms. Hall’s you got to do *The Boy in Striped Pajamas*.

Emily: *The March on Birmingham*.


(Several talk at once.)

Me: This is some of the stuff I needed to find out anyway. Do you all ever listen to books?

Several: Yeah.

Stuart: I listen to scary stories and play Minecraft.
Me: Since I’ve started back in school and am working on schoolwork I don’t have time to read much, I listen. I have a book on every time I’m in the car. It’s a way I can read without taking the time, without using a lot of time.

William: I like listening to a book I’ve actually read, then turn on the radio and see if you can go over exactly the same words.

James: I do that with the newspaper.

Me: Have you done anything since you’ve been in middle school—I’m thinking last year, since you’ve just started this year, have you done anything where you get to choose the book you read?

Several nos.

Me: What happens when you get to choose the book you read? Who said yes?

(silence)

Me: Do you have any free periods when you can just read?

Doug: Yeah.

William: Sometimes, yeah. Mostly you only get fifteen minutes, because we have break.

Doug: I don’t even have break.

William: Somebody got in trouble last year—I’m not saying their names, but somebody got in trouble and tried running out of the A&P (?) down the hallway, he was supposed to go down the hallway to a different class instead, but he ran out the back door (inaud)

Stuart: Who?

William: BJ.

Stuart: Oh, yeah.

William: He ran outside and looked in the window.
Me: That’s one of the things I’m looking at, it’s why—

William: Run his butt against the window.

(laughter)

James: That was funny.

Me: You all, if you all were allowed to choose any book and just read on your own, not like we do where everybody reads the same, what would you read?

William: *Meat Eaters.*

Holly: *A Dog’s Purpose.*

Me: Have you watched the movies?

Holly: Yeah, I loved it.

Emily: I’d read scary books. (inaudible) books and scary books.

Holly: I haven’t read the book yet.

Me: Okay, you haven’t read the book yet.

Holly: I just watched the movie.

Me: That’s something, a kind of new thing. I heard a teacher talking, she has something where she lets everybody choose their own book, she does it a lot, and she had a kid in her class who the only thing he would ever read was *Diary of a Wimpy Kid.*

William: I like reading some of them.

Me: Every time they did it, he would read the same book. One day, she said, “I’ve been talking to the other kids, and they thought you’d really like this book. Read it.” She gave him a different book, and he read the book through, and she checked when he finished and said, “What did you think about that?” He said, “I really liked it.” She said, “What do you want to read now?” He said, “*I want to read Diary of a Wimpy Kid.*”
Thank you all.

Holly: I’m going to go home and read more chapters.

Me: I wanted to talk with you all about what you like to read. That’s a big part of this, so thank you.
Fourth Meeting

September 19, 2019

Sissonville Middle School

Sissonville, WV

8:40 to 9:10 AM

Present: Marc Shoemaker, Cassandra Allara (teacher), Emily, Stuart, Doug, Gina, William, and James. Holly would not return.

Transcript:

Me: All right. How much did you all read?

William: I didn’t do it; I left it in my locker.

Me: Okay. I did want to ask you a couple of things. I’m trying to map out what I need to know. Something that when I was leaving here Thursday, up on the screen, I’m assuming you all are in class here, and I saw you were reading Hunger Games (nods). How far did you get?

Doug: We’re on chapter . . .

Emily: Chapter (inaudible).

William: Yeah, we’re starting chapter (inaudible).

Me: It’s been a long time since I read Hunger Games, so I don’t know what happens when. I’m just curious about a couple of things. You all are just barely starting?

William: Oh, we’ve started. We’re starting chapter four now. We’re starting today.

Me: I read it. I’m not sure; it’s been a while. The third book was already out, though, at that point. When I started the whole thing. I’m a little fuzzy about what happens where. I was specifically going to ask you about something in it, but that’s fine. I’m assuming this has to be
the first book you’re reading this year, because the year’s just starting. Is that right? I don’t know if there would have been time for another one. What did you read last year?

Doug: What’s that…

William: What’s that about Birmingham?

Doug: What’s that one girl who was always adopted?

Charles: That Esperanza book

James: Yeah, *Esperanza*.

Doug: *Hollis Woods*.

Me: What was it?

Doug: *Hollis Woods*.

Me: Okay.

Charles: (quietly) I didn’t read that.

Me: I was just curious.

William: *The March through Birmingham* and (pause) *The Giver*.

Me: I still haven’t read *The Giver*. I think I have it in two or three different forms. I have a Kindle version and an audio book, and I still haven’t read it. I’ve looked it over and read the plot, but as far as sitting down and reading the thing, I feel like I have, but I haven’t. I don’t know why. Did you all like it?

(mumbling together)

Doug: It was all right.

William: Other than all the—

William talks over Doug, neither can be understood on the recording.

William: Other than all the assignments we had to do, that kind of got frustrating.
Doug: I liked the movie better. It doesn’t get as (inaudible) as the book.

Me: If it seems like I’m writing down what you just said, I am. That’s one of the little things. I’ve read a lot about what people read and what they don’t. What you said just now has come up so much, it’s just like. . . . I’m trying—mostly what I’m in school for the last several year, because I’m working on my own classes, but when I’ve been in classrooms, and when I’ve taught regularly, except for a couple of assignments here and there, I haven’t done anything below sixth grade. I haven’t done any elementary as far as long-term goes. How do you all go about reading in class in elementary school? What do you do?

Charles: Like, Popcorn reading.

Me: Popcorn reading?

William: I don’t even know. It was so long ago.

Me: Did you read any longer books, chapter books?

Several: No.

Me: That’s what I don’t remember much, the few times—

William: In fourth grade, our goal would be 175 pages.

Me: Okay. That’s actually longer than this.

William: Yeah.

Me: I say I haven’t been in grade school much, there was a first grade class at a school in Huntington. That school’s not there anymore.

William: Oh, no. Not these. Not these. These are in the hundreds. Like the big, thick books, that’s what we did. That’s how we would underline our words. Big thick books.

Me: I know in other classes I’ve been in, like the first grade class I subbed in a lot in Huntington because it was a really rough school and a lot of people wouldn’t go to it. Every day,
the teacher would gather everybody around and read to them. (inaudible) They were reading a Ramona/Beezus book. I don’t know. I thought it was good; I liked it. I liked it better than a lot of the older things, honestly.

Okay. That’s really the stuff I wanted to know. A couple of things specifically, and if you want, I’ll read a little more in this. You ever had these mornings when you thought you were awake, and you start talking, and you’re not awake? That’s where I am right now.

We read chapter four. We’re on chapter five. When you’re in grade school and you’re reading mostly assignments and all that, did have a school library? In grade school?

Doug: Yeah.

Me: Did you take your class to it occasionally?

Several: Yeah.

William: One day we would have a different class, like they have CATS. We would have (inaudible) and then library. So Monday you would go to the gym, Tuesday you would go to art, and Thursday—I skipped one day—so Monday you would go to gym and Tuesday you would go to art, and Wednesday you would mostly go to counselling. And, uh. . . .

Doug: Thursday.

William: Yeah, Thursday you would go to library. There was two of them. You could usually have two. There was two counsellors. There was Ms. Harrison, and, what’s his name?

Doug: Mr. Lowe.

William: Mr. Lowe?

Doug: Mm-hmm

William: I don’t remember him.

Doug: It was Mr. Lowe.
William: What was his name?

Me: Did the librarian help you pick out books? One of the teachers who’s on my committee that helps me figure out what to do is a library teacher, a professor. She’s the head of the library department—not the library itself; teaching the library classes, and she’s really interested in the idea of the library helping people with books. I just wondered if the librarian ever found anything for you that you wouldn’t have read otherwise.

Doug: Not really.

Me: I wondered what would you read now if you went into the library—do they have a library here? I’m assuming they do. It’s a middle school. Have you all gone to the library yet this year to pick books out? (silence). Okay. When you went last year, I’m assuming you went last year and got books, how did you pick a book?

William: You would have to have, like a public library card, and they would just scan it. They scanned that, and you went on.

Me: What would make you want to get a book? If you saw a book on the shelf (picks up club book), if you saw this, would you pick it up?

Several: Yeah. (Lily whispers “Yeah”.)

Me: Some of you would. (to Lily) You said you would? (silence). Yes. I said that out loud because I don’t think the recorder picked it up. Some of you would; some of you wouldn’t. What books did you check out? Does anybody remember a book you checked out from the library last year?

Charles: Construction.

Doug: (inaudible) always a comic book.
Me: Comic book. Have you all ever read in class or as part of an assignment, have you ever read a graphic novel or comics?

Charles: hmm-mm.

William: I don’t know.

Me: Some schools are doing that. (turns to girls) What about you all? If you’re in the library and see a book, what makes you want to pick it up?

Emily: The cover looks interesting.

Me: (picking up club book) This one’s bright. I’d say that’s a good cover. You know what the one thing was that always made me want to pick up a book? One word: Ghost. When I’d go to the library, we’d look for supposedly true haunted stories, we’d look for ghost stories; we’d get ‘em; we’d talk about it. Going back into grade school, we had a little club, and we’d tell ghost stories.

William: I like watching those ghost videos on YouTube. Some of them are really catchy. You have to look really hard just to find—one of them, you could tell that was actually true—fake. There was a guy who was passing ball, in the shutters, in an old, old, old, old, old, it was an old school. And in one of the shutters—the shutters was like this, and it had a face, actually a human face, and I was just watching it like this (scared face).

Me: I saw something like that; I don’t know.

William: Sometimes when I do, I sit on the couch and watch ‘em. Me and my mom love ‘em. We’ll sit there, and sometimes we get chills running down our arms.

Me: You all ever watch those things and try to figure out how they’re done? What it really is?

William: Yeah.
Doug: Yeah.

Me: I know you can see faces in about anything. A couple of years ago, I went up to Salem, Massachusetts, where they had all the witch trials and all that. There was a particular house where I had seen one of the best ghost pictures I’d ever seen on television. They don’t talk about it there, though, so I took a couple of pictures from outside. When I went back and looked at a couple of pictures I’d taken, there was a picture on the window that looked like a huge face of a stereotypical witch, which wasn’t what the people who were killed then looked like. You look at it closer, though, and you can see that the whole thing is formed by the reflection of the leaves. So you’re looking at leaf reflections, and your mind is making it into what you’re expecting to see. It’s weird. Anyway, I’m getting off topic a little bit.

Do you all ever talk about books with anybody else?

William: Not really.

Me: I was weird back when I was in school, because a bunch of us did.

William: Oh yeah, certain books, yeah, but not like this, though.

Me: Not like this?

William: Something like this, no.

Me: Let’s read a little bit here. Go to chapter five. I’ll read some of it out loud. Like I said, I don’t necessarily want—what do you all think of the book so far? I know we’ve all got at least the first four chapters; we read them in here.

William: Can I tell you another one? This is what happened to me. I was six, there was a (inaud) beside the door. It’s a cabinet above it, like this one. There’s this old woman (sigh from B4) we know there is, because Mom’s seen her twice. In the bathroom, there’s actually a six-hundred, seven-hundred pound girl that’s a ghost in our house—
Me: Yeah.

William: You can see her—if you sit in the middle of our living room, looking at the TV, you watch. You’ll be there a minute, you look around in the TV reflection, and you’ll start seeing her sitting beside her, behind you in places. It’s creepy.

Me: Okay.

(scoffing and low laughter from another student, not noticed in real time.)

William: One time I went to open the cabinet door, and I opened it up, and I grabbed something, and I forgot to shut it, and I turned back around, and the door slammed shut right behind me. It was creepy.

Me: I grew up in—

William: I think she got mad at me (inaud).

Me: Yeah. I grew up in a family that told ghost stories all the time.

William: This one actually happened.

Me: That’s what I mean. Our grandparents came over from Ireland and moved into a little coal mining town, and that was what you did there. You told ghost stories. Everybody believed in ghosts, and they told these stories. And because of that, that’s why I still read ghost stories. That’s why when I look for a book—searching for a book the other day to read, and I didn’t know what I wanted to read, so I just typed in “ghost.” I love the internet. I grew up with one of this stuff. You had to go to the library physically and try to find things. Man, I have found things that I have looked for for decades.

S: Where my mamaw lives now, there was this old lady, she died right before my mamaw moved in there. And at night, before you sleep, in her bed and her room and stuff, there’s like creaks in the floor and everything. It’s creepy.
William: One evening we had all of our stuff above the washer and dryer, all the soap and stuff, whatever you wash the clothes with, and we’re sitting there on the couch to watch a movie. It was eleven, eleven-thirty, and we’re sitting there, and I just happened to glance at something (unidentified student can be heard talking in background) like all white, beside my ma (other voice intensifies). I looked over, and as soon as I looked over, the whole shelf comes tumbling down. It was scary.

Doug: (Scoffs)

Me: Uh. . .

William: What’s so funny about it? It actually, really happened.

Me: That happens.

Doug: I don’t believe it.

Me: That’s fine.

Doug: (Starts to continue in the same tone.)

Me: That’s fine. Like I said, I grew up hearing ghost stories. It never mattered whether other people believed them or not; we told them. And that’s the thing, if I hadn’t grown up hearing ghost stories all the time, I would have probably sat back and gone (mocking tone) “Yeah. That’s right.” But that’s what I grew up with. That’s what I expect; that’s what I think. And that’s still how I relate to things.

William: I’ve seen my dead papaw.

Me: What?

William: I’ve seen my dead papaw. Many, many times.

Me: And I think all of us, if we start reading, we start reading based on the kinds of stories we hear or what we see on television or other things. What do you all watch on
television? I talked about this the other day. Do you all ever watch any weird stuff on television, really weird things? Does that ever make you think, “I want to know something about this. I want to find a book about the same kind of thing? Same kind of story?”

Emily: I watch something about ghosts and devils and stuff. I don’t know what it’s called.

Doug: *Ghosthunters*.

Emily: Yeah.

Me: If you all don’t mind me asking, do your parents read?

Doug: Yeah.

William: My mom does, yes.

Several voices blend.

William: My papaw, when he gets done reading the *Bible*, he’ll read it again.

Me: Yeah.

William: He’ll read it many times.

Emily: (inaud).

Doug: That’s like my grandmaw.

Me: That’s what Dad used to do. He’s had a stroke and he can’t really focus on things now, but he used to do that all the time.

William: Right before he goes to bed, he’s usually talking to my aunt. He talks to my aunt, and he’s sitting there talking to the phone as he’s reading the *Bible*.

Doug: He has an actual conversation while reading.

William: When they’re not talking for a minute or two, he’ll read a whole paragraph. You’ll just have to come down to the house one day, so that you’ll realize what happens.
Emily: It’s probably true.

Me: I’m going to read a little bit. There’s something in here that, like I said, I really want to get to. It’ll probably be next week before we can talk about it, but, let me just go ahead and read chapter five out loud, since we have a few minutes left. What I really want is for you to talk, for you all to tell me what you think about stories, about reading. To me, it’s more about stories than anything. I read non-fiction, but my favorite non-fiction’s books that tell stories. That’s just the way I grew up, you know? I grew up with a storytelling family, so I like stories.

I was kind of happy when you all chose this book, because it solved a problem we might have, because a lot of times if the students are telling stories, I’m sorry, I mean choosing the books, and this might not be the right age to be a problem, but at times they’ll choose a book, and the parents will get upset about the type of book it is. Y’all ever have anything your parents don’t want you to read?

James: What?

Me: I’m older, so I’d go to the—you did? Why didn’t they want you to read if, if you don’t mind saying?

James: Huh?

Me: If you don’t mind saying, why didn’t they want you to read it?

James: I don’t want to say.

Me: Okay. I was thoroughly embarrassed once when I was in school. I found this—I was a big baseball fan, my family were baseball fans, I found a book at the library about my family’s favorite team, which wasn’t mine by the way, and I started reading it, and I took it home, and I was reading, and my uncle was visiting, and he looked at it, and he gets kind of a shocked look on his face, and he shows it to my grandmother, and she does the same thing. There was
language in the book that they thought shouldn’t be in books—not that I shouldn’t read it, but it shouldn’t be in books.

William: We had a couple of them books last year, too.

Me: My grandmother and mother literally took this book to the library and complained. That was pretty embarrassing.

S: What?

Me: (laughing). Yeah, and they said the library promised they would shelf it where kids couldn’t get to it. Next time I went to the library, it was in the same place. I think that’s what you have to do sometimes. “Yeah, I agree with that; whatever you said.”

William: Couldn’t you just leave it at school?

Me: It wasn’t the school library; it was the public library.

William: Aaaah.

Me: The library was right beside the school, so—

S: My mamaw don’t like me reading certain books, because there’ things in there kids don’t need to see.

Me. Okay, and different people have, you know, and different parents have things they don’t want you to read for different reasons. Sometimes students won’t be comfortable reading something. You never know. Everybody’s different; everybody has their own boundaries. Everybody has their own things that are acceptable and not acceptable.

Charles: Can I tell a story?

Me: Go ahead.
Charles: This little ole (inaud) house, right near mine, we went in there, and we (inaud) didn’t have a key. There was a rattle and I shhhooo. We went, and we broke through a window. And we heard that window go Zshhhh. (inaud) ran to it, and my dog was sitting there on a couch.

William: What?

Charles: Here comes my dog hopping through a window.

William: Where at?

Charles: This is the area that (inaud).

William: Oh. Have you ever been behind your house, down at that house?

Charles: Yes.

William: That old one?

Charles: Yeah.

William: Old wooden one down there?

Charles: Yeah.

William: That one’s creepy.

Charles: I trapped a hog in there before.

Me: You what?

Charles: I trapped a pig in there before.

(inaud blend of voices.)

Me: Was it your pig that got away or what?

Charles: My neighbor’s.

Me: Your neighbor’s pig that got away?

Charles: Yeah.

William: Weird.
Me: My niece raises pigs for the FFA so I was just, okay. She names them, raises them, takes care of them, talks about how pretty they are, kills them.

William: That’s what my aunt does. She has 45 hogs, she has seven cows now, she had to put one down yesterday because it broke its leg,

Me: Huh.

William: I can’t tell you how many chickens. She gets two five-gallon buckets of eggs each day.

Charles: Sounds like an amazing deal.

William: Oh yeah. She has all kinds of them. Thing is, she only sells them for two dollars a dozen, two dollars for two dozen.

Charles: (Half sings) She’s about to have an unlimited supply.

(B1 and B3 talk about this quickly, both speaking at once, the conversation inaudible on the recorder.)

B1; That’s really all she has, but during the wintertime, when it gets real cold and stuff, that’s when we start making bacon.

Charles: It helps.

Me: That’s—when you all read books, when you’re assigned it, read a story in school, or anything, do you ever look at it and think, “That’s not how I live. That’s not me.” When I read books a lot, most of them are set in suburbs or cities or things.

William: Yeah.

Me: We’re rural up here; we’re country. Have you ever found a book where the characters were actually like people who live around here?

Doug: Yep.
Doug: I can’t remember the name of the book, but whatever it was, it was really, really cool.

William: Without the crackheads and stuff like that.

Me: Without the what?

William: Without the crackheads.

Me: That’s what I thought you said.

James: Without the crackheads. Without my neighbors (inaud).

Me: You said you had. When you find something about people like who live around here, would you rather read that than about people who are totally different, or would you rather read about people who are totally different.

James: We had a really bad flood one year, and we had to clean up all the wood that sticks out of the driveway, and in one pile of sticks the size of this table, we found like two needles. It was that bad. Really, the only thing that was up there used to be an old pond, but they filled it back in, and now it’s like needles all over the place, dude.

S: At my aunt’s house, she moved with us, but, at her old apartment, people above her had needles, and they dropped them on her porch, and there were like seven needles when she woke up. One time.

William: Like what?

S: Seven needles on her porch. The people above her dropped them on her porch.

William: Oh.

S: Well, I don’t know what it’s called.

Me: Popcorn reading?

Doug: We found about ten needles at our neighbors, (inaud)
Me: I think what’s kind of striking about this book is this kid’s living in a rural area—I don’t know if it’s a rural area, I picture it being rural, probably because I am—but’s not a big city. You have a little town, you have a bakery, he has a place where he goes and tries to sell his stuff, and you have people in that area, and they’re disrupted. Something comes in, and they’ve already had their lives disrupted once, and now, they’re being invaded, and everything just goes crazy. And it’s like you have the normal setting, the place where they live everyday lives, and a big crisis, a big spur of violence happens right there, where they live. And you get to see how what they’ve always known can be disrupted, how what they’ve always known responds to it, and how what they’ve always did responds to the disruption. Did you all ever imagine what would happen if you were right here, and something big did happen? In your all’s lifetime you probably haven’t needed to do this much. Do you all ever think there’d be a chance of anything like that happening?

William: What?

Me: Do you think there’d ever be a time when Sissonville would be in the middle of a big disaster?

William: Sometimes I do, between the people that want to do the drugs and the people who don’t, because it’s just brewing now. Because it’s just people (inaud) what to do.

Doug: It’s not really the people; it’s the crackheads and themselves.

William: And—

Emily: It’s whoever makes the drugs and whoever doesn’t want them.

William: Yeah.

Emily: It’s just—
William: One of our neighbors, he lives beside us, he died because of them. He was so—where he did it for a really long time, he was like (inaud).

Me: Yeah.

S: My daddy used to do it. He stopped, but he’s in jail now. I don’t get to see him (inaud).

William: Sometimes, during nighttime, about two o’clock in the morning, you would hear people squalling tires running up and down the road, and they pull in the driveway, and my papaw there, he cannot sleep at all. He maybe sleeps an hour each night.

Me: Yeah, that happens when you get older sometimes, and anything’s wrong.

Well, thank you all. We didn’t read any; that’s fine. I had some stuff I wanted to get answered that you all answered. Thank you.
Fifth Meeting

September 23, 2019

Sissonville Middle School

Sissonville, WV

8:40 to 9:10 AM

Marc Shoemaker, Cassandra Allara (teacher), Emily, Stuart, Doug, Gina, William, and James.

Transcript:

Me: Recording. I’m going to put one on each side here. Have you all read any more?

(Nods) How far did you read?

Emily: A chapter.

Me: I’m sorry.

Emily: A chapter.

Me: I’m still at the point where I can’t hear. I’m old. Many years ago, I think it was 1983, I went to a concert and I ended up in front of a gigantic speaker. I couldn’t hear for two days. I still have trouble making sounds out. I mean I can hear very quiet sounds, but I can’t distinguish them. A lot of times It’s just fuzz. Have you all heard those ringtones adults aren’t supposed to hear. Multiple times, I’ve heard them.

Okay. Let’s get going. I want to talk a little bit, and you all can talk some too, about something that’s going to happen in the book that we haven’t got to yet, because this is really, I think it’s really important. Last thing we saw, he’s there, he looks up, and there’s something dripping on Paul’s head. He looks up, and there’s a paratrooper in a dark green army uniform, it says, hanging from a tree. He’s got to get him down. He climbs up the tree and cuts him loose,
and after that he takes him to the old castle that we’ve read about. The soldier’s name’s Victor, and this is going on ahead to chapter seven, somebody comes after him, and there’s a dog there. In chapter seven the Nazis have just showed up, and they’ve got a dog, and he’s hiding from them as they go down the road. The dog’s coming after them, and he sees a pigeon. He’s met this pigeon earlier. Have y’all read anything about the pigeon?

Emily: It’s taking messages.

Me: Yeah, a carrier pigeon, and it’s taking messages. The pigeon attacks the dog. But what I really wanted to get to and mention, because I didn’t know—the dog gets away, and the Nazis chase it. What I really wanted to get to was what happens afterward. We talked about the castle, and somebody said the castle is where the resistance, the people fighting the Nazis, are hiding. And that’s exactly what happens.

Emily: I said that.

Me: Yep. That’s exactly what’s going on there. When he gets there, he finds that everybody that’s been mentioned so far is there waiting. Do you remember the teacher who was running from the Nazis and got shot and fell into the river and drowned? He didn’t really drown. He was working with the resistance; he’s in the castle. The girl that sold him the stuff at the bakery—she’s in the castle. His mother, Maman, she’s there. They’re all waiting because they’re part of the resistance. So that means, basically, that all these people who have been around in the town, who look like they’re just worried, look like they’re afraid of what’s going to happen, they’re all actually doing something. They’re fighting. Of course you do have a few people in the town who are afraid, who want to protect themselves, so they cooperate with the Nazis. That’s the way it always is when places are occupied—some people fighting, and some people cooperating. You all think about people, people you live around, the people you know, what do
you think they would do? Do you think they’d be part of the resistance, or that they’d just go along and hope things go away, or—

William: My papaw would fight back. My papaw and my uncle would both fight back. They were both in the Marines.

Me: What if . . .

William: My papaw fought in Vietnam, and my uncle fought in Iraq.

Me: My parents met in the army, but it was between wars, so neither of them ended up fighting, although my father was stationed in Korea when I was born. What about just the people who run the stores? What about your neighbors? What do you think they would do if somebody invaded?

William: All my neighbors are my family.

Me: Okay. What would they do?

William: My papaw lives right there beside me. My cousin lives below me, and my other papaw lives below me.

Me: Do you think they’d just go along with what’s going on and hope it’s over soon?

William: No, they’d fight back, I know.

Me: They’d fight back. And of course if you’ve got an army coming in, pointing guns at you, no matter what, no matter what you have, even, probably just going out and saying, “I’m going to shoot you,” isn’t doing much good. So a lot of times, what these people did—that’s what happened to these people here—they had to plan. And they’d plan, and they’d come up with things, and they’d get messages. They’d find out what the Nazis were doing, and they’d send those messages to the army. Do you think you’d be tempted to just kind of slink back and wait for things to go away? (silence) I don’t know; I think I would. I shouldn’t, but I think I
would. It’s really when things are going wrong to just fade back and say, “Ah, this will pass.”

It’s easy to do that when you’ve got other things in your life. Say, “Right now I can’t be concerned with these soldiers out on the street from the country that invaded us, I’ve got to get my schoolwork done.” And thing always, sort of come in.

What do you all do when you leave school? What do you do after school?

William: I usually go home and see my brother and Mamaw and Papaw.

Me: What do you do?

Stuart: Play my X-Box and ride my four-wheeler.

Me: Okay, How many people in here play video games, X-Box or whatever? Everybody? Or play on the computer? Anybody not?

William: I don’t play on it every day.

Me: Oh, yeah, but you do it. Everybody does anymore.

William: The longest I think I’ve played on it would be maybe, maybe . . . three hours maybe? There’s one morning I called my friend and said, “Do you want to play Skylanders or something?”

Me: And that’s kind of different—like you said, you get on and you play with your friends. I’m old, and I don’t necessarily understand all this. Does everybody in here play with people in other places? Is that just the normal way it’s done?

William: Mm-hmm.

Me: Okay.

William: There’s this one boy on there who me and Connor play with, his name’s Alfie, or something like that. He plays in England.

Me: I might’ve asked this before, anybody in here play sports?
Doug: Used to.

Me: Okay.

Me: Anybody in the band? (Doug and Gina raise their hands) Okay. I did both on and off in school, but I never stuck with anything. How much time does that take up when you leave school? Does it take up a lot of time?

Doug: Two or three hours, maybe?

Me: Those who were in the band, do you all march?

Doug: It only starts—it will start this year, but it’s mostly eighth grade.

Me: So you’re not marching yet, you’re only playing. What instrument do you play? (inaudible) Ok. (to Gina) I’m going to take it you play a tuba. (She shakes her head.) What is it?

Doug: Flute.

Me: Much lighter than a tuba. Much easier to march carrying a flute than a tuba. Did you ever meet anyone who plays a grand piano in a marching band? It’s not easy. Anyway. So when you’re not in school, you’re practicing stuff like that or you’re playing games or play with other people. Do you have a lot of homework?

Doug: No.

William: No.

Emily: Sometimes.

Me: Not much homework?

William: Sometimes, but not a lot.

Emily: We do whatever we don’t finish in class.
Me: So what do you do in the other times? What do you do when you’re not doing homework, you’re not practicing or doing sports, you’re not playing videogames, what do you do then?

Doug: Shoot basketball.

Stuart: Sleep.

Me: My favorite thing.

Emily: Ride my bike up and down the road.

Me: Ride your bike up and down the road. But you have time. You’re not always doing something. You do have some time on your own. It’s not completely like every moment of every day. Do you ever feel like there’s so much that you can’t decide what to do or you can’t focus? Feel overwhelmed? I don’t know what I would do if I was growing up now with the internet. I’d probably lose my mind.

Do you know anyone—I’m sorry to ask this—do you know anyone at all who talks about reading? Talks about books?

Stuart: My Mom a little bit.

Me: Your mom a little bit.

Emily: My older sister.

Me: Older sister? What’s she read?

Emily: Anime stuff.

Me: I’m sorry?

Emily: Anime stuff, and like scary books.

Me: I’ve had a lot of students in class who read anime, and I don’t know hardly any.

Does anybody else in here read anime?
Doug: (laughing) My dad watches it.

Me: All right, that’s good.

Emily: It depends on what it is, what type it is.

Me: I know people who watch and read it. For whatever reason I never connected, but that’s good.

William: What even is anime?

Stuart: It’s animated (inaud.). Japanese.

Me: Japanese animation.

Emily: It’s annoying. The mouth moves like thirteen seconds after they talk.

(several talk at once)

Me: The expressions are what always got me.

James: Like the old western shows, they have them too, if they want to hit someone, they hit them, and like five seconds later it shows them shooting each other. Then you hear the smack, then you hear the gunshot.

Me: (laughing) They’ve got to put all this stuff together, and it doesn’t always go together smooth.

James: Or it would be the other way around; whenever he hits them, the gun goes off. Whenever he shoots him with a gun, you hear a slap.

Emily: My sister draws them and stuff.

Me: I come from a time when you did not have good comic book movies. You would have them, and they would be so bad you couldn’t watch ‘em. Did you ever see anything people put on YouTube or whatever, it’s an old show, and it’s really terrible. Spiderman looks like he’s wearing pajamas or stuff like that? That’s what they were doing when I was young. And now, of
course, you have all the special effects. I’m assuming that everyone in here at one point or other watches comic book movies? Superhero movies? Because if you don’t, you can’t really watch movies.

William: Me and my papaw and my papaw, we like watching Jeff.

Me: Watching what?

William: Jeff Dunham.

Doug: Ventriloquist.

Emily: Yeah, he has them, uh, he has. . . .

Me: The ventriloquist?

Emily: Yeah.

Me: I honestly believe I asked this before, but I don’t remember, anybody read comics?

(silence)

Me: Now that’s where I was lucky; I grew up in a really good time for comics. Very dark Batman things that I had taken away from me at one point because I was having nightmares. I don’t know why people are afraid of nightmares. I don’t know why people don’t like nightmares. They’re interesting.

Stuart: I had a nightmare last night.

Me: Oh, good. What was it?

Stuart: That I wrote too many checks, and I got ISS.

Doug: Yeah, school does give you nightmares.

James: I wish (inaudible) I don’t have any checks.

Me: Do you all read any scary books, books with ghosts? I hate using the word horror because that’s misused anymore.
James: I like watching the videos. I don’t like reading about them; I like watching the videos because it shows more detail in them.

Emily: My sister, she’s ten, and she still thinks ghosts are real (inaudible) the red and white one.

William: Hey, I believe they’re real. I know they are.

(others, inaudible.)

Me: I tell you what I’m going to do; I’m going to read. I’m going to jump ahead a little bit from where you’ve probably read. I’m going to read chapter [sic] 38. This is where Paul meets the resistance people; they’re at the castle. People think there’s a dragon there. That took me out of the story a little bit. It’s the only thing that did. Now, c’mon, if you were to tell an army there’s a dragon in this castle, this wasn’t so long ago that they’d believe that. I don’t know if somebody told me that, my thoughts would be that they don’t want me to go in there. There must be something going in there for, but that’s just me. Okay, page 38.

(I read from I Survived D-Day.)

Me: If you all get a chance read more of this before Thursday. The ending of this is really effective. It’s good. It’s not just everything you expect; it does some other stuff. One of the interesting things in here is that Paul, the main character, isn’t a soldier; he’s a kid whose mother has kept him away from the danger, he finds his way there anyway. That’s one thing about some of my favorite books, when someone but doesn’t go looking for trouble, they get drawn in. Something happens, and they follow the path, and it eventually leads there. Would you all rather read something about a normal person or an exceptional person?

William: An exceptional person.
Me: What I mean by that, and I wasn’t clear, by an exceptional person I mean someone who’s bigger and stronger and who has more abilities. I guess the difference would be, a story about an exceptional person, the most common would be a superhero story. A normal person would be something like this, a person who is drawn in and does something even though they don’t have the abilities. Which one do you like?

Emily: Someone that’s different.

Me: Someone different. Okay. I read both; I like both. Honestly, my favorite Marvel movie, and I freely admit to being more of a DC person, my favorite Marvel movie was Captain America. And the reason for that is he’s a normal person who isn’t even as strong as everyone around him. But he gets the opportunity to become something else. I really like that. I like the idea behind it.

Anybody have anything else? Read what you can by Thursday, and we’ll wrap everything up. And by this time next week, I’ll be heading to Maine.
Me: Have you read, several of you said you’d read quite a bit of the book? Did you like the book?

Several: Yes, yeah.

Me: Is this the kind of thing you’d want to read or would you choose something else if you were choosing?

BV1: Maybe something else.

BV2: Masters of Old.

Me: I’m sorry, what was that?

BV1: Name something else.

BV2: (inaud).

Me. I’m a little bit out there as far as reading goes. I mentioned on the first day that I’ve been reading instead of reading lately because I’ve got to read so much for my research. I was listening to a book I’d just started on the way in this morning, and I got caught up in it and almost went past the exit on the interstate and kept going. This guy’s wife was getting dragged away by a lion. I’m not sure how. . .
B1; Wait, when was this?

Me: In the book I was listening to.

William: Oh.

Me: This guy had already been mauled by the lion, and it was dragging his wife away. I wanted to see what was happening.

William: What’s the book called?

Me: Good question. It’s in a series. It’s called Fever Dream. Fever Dream. It’s like the seventh or eighth book in a series. And fwiw we already know before the book starts his wife is dead, and this is a flashback, so it might be why she’s dead. Getting dragged off by a lion can do that sometimes.

I had kind of a follow up question to something you all were talking about the other day. You had mentioned, I think, everybody in here about said they spend time playing video games, online games. So, I don’t even have the right words, right vocabulary for it. But what games do you all play.

William: I play farming simulator.

Me: I’m sorry, what?

William: Farming Simulator. I play on my X-Box (inaud).

Me: Farming? I wasn’t sure what that word was. I just want to write these down.

William: Whenever you play, you’ve got trucks and tractors and combines and all that stuff around. And usually, before a game starts, you have to read like three or four paragraphs of stuff just to figure out what you have to do.

Me: Okay.
William: And what’s the point of them, and then every machine you get in you have to read another, like, six paragraphs just to find out what it does and stuff and what the button does.

Me: All right. I’m going to pass this around, and y’all just write down names of games and pass it around.

(Silence while paper circulates)

I know several days ago, I think it was two meetings ago, I’m sorry, since this is the last meeting I’m trying to fill in some blanks, but I remember asking something, but I don’t remember the answer, so there’s a possibility I didn’t actually ask it. When you all are assigned—[referring to Ms. Allara] pretend she can’t hear you. She can’t hear you. When you all are assigned books in class, do you ever not read it and just do things to make it look like you did?

Emily: Sometimes.

Ms. Allara: Emily!

[laughter]

Me: I think everybody does at times.

William: No, usually when I (inaud) I put my head down like this, and I read it in my lap.

Me: Yeah.

William: ‘Cause I like to put it in my lap so I’ll have my hands to rest in. I’ll do like this, because my neck hurts. So, whenever the teacher’s reading, I just do that, and I’ll doze off. I doze off.

Doug: I have a sweater, I was wearing it, and we read Hunger Games on our iPads, and I just put it in my sweater and read it like that.
Me: Okay. Do you ever try to just pass tests by—

William: Guessing?

Me: Guessing.

William: (quickly) No.

Me: Instead of reading.

Doug: Yeah.

William: I try my hardest.

Doug: If there are questions I don’t know, I just pick the best answer.

William: Yeah. (inaud.)

Doug: I guess.

William: The whole test?

Doug: I always have.

Me: I can tell you I’ve never read *Death of a Salesman*. I did, however, get an A on a paper I wrote about it in college. It was assigned. It’s pretty common when you just don’t read it. That’s one of the reasons there’s a movement now to change a lot of books. You’re reading *The Hunger Games* in here. Ten years ago that’s not something you would have read in class if it had been out there. Or at least when I was coming up, most of the things we read were by dead white guys. I’m old. And they’ve tried to change that a bit. What other books have you been assigned to read?

William: *The Hunger Games*.

Me: The Hunger Games. Right. Before that? Like last year what were you assigned?

Doug: *The March on Birmingham*.

Me: I’m sorry?

Doug: Ooh, That one about the Mexicans?

William: Yeah.

Doug: *Esperanza [Rising]?*

William: Yeah, Esperanza.

Me: Have you all read any of the—my head is just gone this morning—have you all read any of the Percy Jackson books? As part of class? [silence] Did anybody in here read the Percy Jackson books?

Doug: I did when I was in the fourth grade.

Me: Okay. I was wondering. I was subbing a couple of years ago in a sixth grade class, and everybody, every single person in that classroom, or at least everybody except maybe two had brought a Percy Jackson book with them, and I asked, “Are you all reading that in class?” and they said, “No, we’re just reading it. So I don’t know if they had got together and talked about it and decided to read it or not. You all said that nobody ever talks about books or anything? Is that what you said? Okay.

Just checking a couple of things. How far did you get in the book?

William: Since the last time we met, I didn’t really get to read it.

Me: Okay. Has anybody finished?

[silence]

Me: Okay. Last time we read up through. . . up through chapter nine, and we talked a little bit about how the people in this community might act if something similar happened here, because one of the big things that’s happening in this book is that he, that Paul was finding out that everyone around him has kind of a deeper life than he knows about. All these people he
thought didn’t care about anything at all, here they are really putting their lives on the line for something, and he had no idea. He just thought, “Everybody goes on with their lives even though the Nazis are here. We’d like them to be out,” but he doesn’t realize the people around him are doing something about it. Do you all ever think that people around you are doing more and are more concerned about things than they let on? Yeah, the internet has changed things so much since I was young, I have trouble keeping up. It’s kind of a weird question.

[B1 begins talking, but Is inaudible because of an announcement on the PA system. He continues to talk through the announcement, and I answer him, with my answer also inaudible on the recording.]

Doug: You’re lucky.

Me: Yeah. It’s just like a couple of years ago, every school around, maybe in the state, wearing maroon on the same day, and they were able to coordinate that. We could have never done that. Word passed around. Out where I live in Lincoln County, we had an incident earlier this week. One of my niece’s friends was killed in a car wreck. Everybody around came to school in blue at Lincoln County High School; they were able to get all that together.

Emily: [inaud]

Me: Yes.

Emily: Had cancer.

Me: It’s really different how you can find out what’s going on in different places immediately. And you can act. Y’all feel like [pause] being online [pause] does it ever hurt anything? Does being online ever get to the point where—does it make your life better or not that you’re online? You might not know how to answer that because you’ve never known
anything else, I guess. But do you think the internet ever makes your life worse? [silence] Okay. Everybody’s pretty much agreed that it’s a good thing.

William: Yeah. We were talking about how my papaw died last year. Sunday evening we were riding around, riding around on the tractor and four-wheeler, like that. He went home that evening; he lives in Ripley. (inaudible) do you know where that lake is?

Me: Oh yeah.

William: It’s up through there. Up to Elkhorn (?). We went up there, so I just went up to my house’ my papaw went to my Dad’s house. I went home and it was like twelve o’clock, one o’clock that morning, my papaw [inaudible] died and had a heart attack. So they ran over there. Before the medic got there he was dead, that fast. That morning I woke up; and my Mom called me and told me not to go to school because my papaw died. So I had to walk all the way down there in this much snow. All the way down there just to go down there.

Charles: How tall were you?

William: He was something like five, five foot. It was last year.

Charles: Five three at least. (inaudible).

Me: I would very much kind of encourage you to finish this book, read a little further into it and see what you think. I just want to do something real quick. You never really—do you ever finish a book you don’t want to finish because you felt like you had to?

Charles: Yeah.

Me: It’s hard for me to give up books too, and that’s one thing that can hurt your reading, if you hate something and you just keep reading it and reading it and reading it because you feel like you have to. It’s what the class is doing; it’s what you’re assigned. Sometimes if you’re
reading on your own, you don’t. You don’t like something; you think “This is silly; I’m going to stop.”

I’m going to read on into the book, so I’m going to spoil the end for you a little bit.

Emily: Where page are you going to read?

Me: I am going to go to chapter seventeen. Now chapter seventeen. . . you can pretty much know, from a lot of what we’ve read, that there’s going to be—you know D-Day’s coming; D-Day’s happening. The soldiers are invading, and they’re getting things ready for the D-Day invasion with Allies coming. And you know that they’re going to run across the Nazis that we’ve already seen on the motorcycles and that there’s going to be a confrontation. Well that’s what’s going on here at this point. I said seventeen, I want to go ahead just a little bit to eighteen. Page ninety-six. Everybody has gone out, all the people gone out to meet the Nazis. The only people left are Paul and his mother, Paul and Ma-Ma.

(Read Chapter seventeen through the end of the book.)

Me: We have about ten minutes, and I just want to get some very, very general ideas here. Did you get anything from the book at all?

Doug: What did you say?

Me: Did you get anything from the book at all? Did you enjoy it?

Doug: Yeah.

Me: Okay. I know we didn’t have time to talk about it all; that’s my fault. That’s because I wanted to talk about things other than the book. So when we got off on other stuff, that was for my benefit. That was things I needed. But it didn’t really help you all. I think it kind of interrupted your reading. If we had just come here and read the whole time, you would have got
more from the book, I think. You would have enjoyed the book more. I won’t be doing it, because I’m leaving, but would you all want to do another reading group?

Doug: Yes.

Me: You all like reading like this?

Doug: Mm-hmm.

Me: Okay. You know, sometimes, reading with other people—did you learn anything from something someone else said?

(Silent nods)

Me: That’s a big part of it. When you’re reading, everybody has something to say. Everybody can contribute. You don’t see things the same way that the other person sees them. I miss so much when I’m reading that I get to a point in a book sometimes where I’m like, “Wait a minute. Where did this come from?” Or I’ll see a character mentioned more than halfway through a book and think, “Why are they talking like this person’s important? I have to go back and search through the book to find the person. Sometimes you get so caught up in a certain part of the book. Y’all ever get caught up in a book? Ever start reading a book and it seems like the people are real?

Charles: (inaudible)

Me: That’s the thing. My youngest sister didn’t read. She did the fake reading stuff in high school, and she said she always hated reading and didn’t want to read. She got in college and they assigned a book to read. *Jane Eyre*. It’s one of the classics. And she gets so caught up in this book that one day she said, really frustrated, “This is why I don’t like reading. These people seem like they’re real, and I can’t stop thinking about it when I’m not reading.”
William: I do that too. Like this book, just now. I can picture like what is actually going on.

Me: Yeah. That’s a big part of it.

William: If you’re reading a book first and then watch the video, I’ll picture something totally different in my head than I do in the story.

Me: That’s something I hear teachers say more and more, telling the kids in the class, “Picture it. Picture what you’re reading.”

William: That’s what I do whenever I’m reading.

Me: Do you all ever read a book and think, “If this was a movie who would be playing this part?” I try not to, but there are times when it happens automatically. I picture this famous person. That’s a part of getting involved in reading, getting so wrapped up in it that it starts to mean more to you than the book does. If that makes any sense. It is not something on paper that you go and you read and you forget about; it is something that lives inside of you, and you become part of the story. I love that. My youngest sister didn’t. I don’t know if she still, if she really, even at this point, she’s working on a Master’s right now, and I still don’t think that she really reads much. My other younger sister, though, reads a lot, and she really enjoyed it. So it all depends. To me, reading is (pause), reading opens things up so much. I love it. And I always had this idea in my head that everybody, no matter what, that everyone could get something out of reading, and there’s a way for everyone to really get into it, no matter what it is. Sometimes you’re just surprised; you never know what you’re going to get into.

A couple of years ago, one of the professors at school wanted me to help her with a project. We went down to a place called Barboursville School. I’ve been around Cabell County all of my life; I didn’t know this place existed. It is a building in the middle of Barboursville Park
that is a residential school. The students are there for their own protection. Some of them are because people tried to harm them. Some of them are there because they tried to harm other people. Some of them are there because they tried to harm themselves.

Emily: My mom said she was going to go to the asylum. They said they let you stay a night in the asylum, and there’s like people who beat and stuff come and change and stuff.

Me: What we were doing down there is we were having a poetry workshop, and my first thought was “Of all the schools everywhere, these people just have really heavy things lying on them. They’re really troubled. They have outside problems that probably come in and crash down everything they do. Are these people going to enjoy poetry? Well, I printed out a whole bunch of different poems, we picked a bunch of different poems, and we hung them up around the room. I put them on big paper. And first day, we said go around and look at these poems and put a sticker on it that said “This is for me,” “This is not for me.” They did that, and everybody in the classroom had something that spoke to them. It wasn’t the same thing. Some of them liked some of my favorite creepy stuff. Some of them liked more flowery poems. And then as the week went along, we had them write poems about their lives. And here we are, in a residential school that’s full of students that have had nothing but problems. And every person in that classroom got enthused and participated and wrote. I have a book still, a book with their poems in it, and I think this stuff’s fantastic. You would’ve thought, “These people aren’t going to,” and they did! These are a lot of kids who have never read poetry or thought they’d want to read poetry. And they got right into it. And they really enjoyed writing. And the reason for that was they were bringing out what was inside them. The poems and the professor I was working with was really good at doing this. She gave them types of poems to write that would really bring out what was in them.
I feel the same way about books. I think sometimes it’s just finding a book that brings out what’s inside you. Finding a book with characters you can identify with.
## APPENDIX C

### BOOK BALLOTS

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### Results:

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<tr>
<td>Fantastic Beasts</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catcher in the Rye</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bible</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

GAMES PLAYED

Anonymous responses:

Farming Simulator

Overwatch

Black Ops

Call of Duty Modern Warfare

Castle Cats (2 responses)

Grand Theft Auto

Fortnite

March Through Birmingham

Harry Potter