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# Vertical Examination of Reading Environment and Student Engagement in 1st-3rd Grade Classrooms

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Vertical Examination Of Reading Environment And Student Engagement In 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Classrooms

By

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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Midway Honors Scholars Program  
Honors College  
East Tennessee State University

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between instructional environment and student engagement during reading instruction. Environment is composed of three key elements: teacher attributes, instructional methods, and the physical classroom setting (Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; De Naeghel, Van Keer, Vansteenkiste, & Rosseel, 2012; Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2006; Housand & Reis, 2008). This study examined a first, second, and third grade classroom in one East Tennessee school. Qualitative data was collected using a combination of instructional observation and teacher interviews in order to examine existing practices for successfully engaging young readers. Teachers for each of the classrooms were interviewed; following the interview, each teacher's classroom was observed three times to examine the teacher's attributes and most frequently used instructional methods, the physical classroom setting, and the expressed level of engagement of the student body in the classroom. The findings indicate that environment in terms of teacher attributes, instructional methods, and physical classroom setting affects student reading engagement; classrooms with high levels of organization, novel reading areas, and opportunity for students to select reading material were found particularly effective for reading engagement.

*Keywords:* classroom environment, instructional methods, literacy practices, physical setting, student engagement, teacher attributes, reading

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In 2013 United States (U.S.) Secretary of Education Arne Duncan issued a statement that U.S. students are lagging behind their international peers in terms of achievement, and he boldly said that U.S. school systems need to “do a better job of preparing students for today's globally-competitive world” (U.S. Department of Education [U.S.DOE], 2013). Indeed, the fact is that only 35% of fourth grade students were achieving reading levels at or above proficient when Duncan challenged the educational community to increase achievement across disciplines (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). One reason for the gap between U.S. students’ achievement levels and those of students living in other nations may stem from disengagement between students and schoolwork, for engagement in schoolwork has been linked to increases in achievement in both academic and extracurricular settings (Connor, Day, Ingebrand, McLean, Spencer, Guiliani, & Morrison, 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008).

The 2014 Gallup Student Poll for student engagement indicated that only 53% of students in the fifth through twelfth grades were engaged in school; what is worse is that the engagement level decreases as students progress in grade level (Gallup Student Poll, 2014). Because the 2014 Gallup Student Poll examines all subject areas, no distinction is made in reading itself. This is problematic because students’ reading achievement has been shown to be correlated with general academic success as well as achievement and functionality as an adult, and reading engagement has been linked to reading comprehension, which is linked to overall reading achievement (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008).

Reading has been hailed as the foundation of education, for reading is involved in and expanded upon in every aspect of learning and subject matter; from biology to philosophy to mathematics, proficient reading skills impact student success in numerous ways (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). Thus, increasing reading engagement is crucial not only to increasing reading achievement, but also achievement in other subjects. Engaging readers is a challenge that teachers face on a day-to-day basis, particularly with the technological advances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century competing for student attention.

Reading engagement is positively correlated with reading comprehension, the primary concept associated with reading achievement (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). There are numerous components of reading comprehension including questioning a text, synthesizing information into new ideas, forming connections between materials, and thoroughly understanding the function and theme of a text (Nystrand, 2006; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Reading comprehension can be difficult to measure for the simple fact that cognitive processes cannot be visualized and the notion that diagnostic tests may not present an accurate picture of a student's actual comprehension ability, but student engagement, a vital precursor to comprehension, can be observed (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Guthrie, 2004; Hurry & Doctor, 2006; Unrau & Quirk, 2014; Wigfield et al., 2008). A lack of reading engagement in a classroom should be relatively easy to identify, though correcting the problem is more easily said than done, as the 47% of disengaged students in U.S. schools indicates (Gallop Student Poll, 2014). Because reading engagement is linked to reading achievement and reading achievement is linked to an overall level of academic achievement and life success, educators need to implement strategies to increase student engagement, particularly in reading.



Most educators understand that, with the importance of reading as a whole, teaching and promoting reading should be at the forefront of every teacher's instructional design, and teachers should strive to create classroom environments conducive to reading engagement and reading achievement. The question remains of how to engage students in reading instruction.

Environmental influences in the classroom, consisting of teacher attributes, instructional strategies, and the physical classroom design, may be areas to examine when seeking to increase reading engagement (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Guthrie et al., 2006; Housand & Reis, 2008; Molfese, Modglin, & Molfese, 2003; Nystrand, 2006; Ormrod, 2014). Because reading engagement is related to reading achievement and reading achievement aids in achievement across subject matter, increasing reading achievement in students is imperative for rising to Arne Duncan's challenge to better prepare students for the modern world.

#### Relevance of Study

Despite an understanding of research-based pedagogies, only 35% of the nation's fourth graders achieve at or above proficient on reading assessments (NCES, 2013). Fourth grade is a pivotal year as students begin the annual testing requirements in the fourth grade, and while the statistic is shocking, it is an improvement over previous years' data (NCES, 2013). United States (U.S.) Secretary of Education Arne Duncan notes that U.S. students lag behind their international peers in terms of achievement, noting that U.S. school systems need to "do a better job of preparing students for today's globally-competitive world" (U.S. Department of Education [U.S.DOE], 2013). Tennessee has been hailed as one of the fastest improving states, and in Duncan's statement about the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

results, Tennessee's reading achievement gains from 2011 to 2013 are described as "noteworthy" despite the national gains being "modest" (U.S.DOE, 2013).

Because reading achievement is influenced by reading engagement and reading engagement is influenced by environment, focusing on environmental conditions that encourage reading engagement may be one method of increasing reading achievement levels (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). Because Tennessee has been one of the fastest achievement gaining states, studying environmental conditions in Tennessee classrooms may provide insight to practices other states can apply to reading instruction to increase achievement (U.S.DOE, 2013). However, having knowledge of instructional strategies for increasing reading engagement, and thus reading achievement, does not necessarily mean that a teacher applies that knowledge to the classroom. With the modern teacher education system, the question is not whether or not teachers are adequately prepared to teach reading, but whether or not the practices teachers use in their classrooms contribute to higher levels of reading engagement and achievement.

#### Purpose and Research Questions

This study focuses on the relationship between instructional environment and student engagement during reading instruction. Environment is composed of three key elements: teacher attributes, instructional methods, and the physical classroom setting (Assor et al., 2002; Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Guthrie et al., 2006; Housand & Reis, 2008; Molfese et al. 2003; Nystrand, 2006; Ormrod, 2014). This study examines the interplay between these three environmental elements to evaluate the relationship between environment and student reading engagement. Because fourth grade is a pivotal year, as students begin the annual NAEP testing requirements, this study assesses the foundations in reading instruction

provided in first through third grades to evaluate differences in teacher attributes, instructional methods, and physical classroom setting, all of which contribute to reading engagement, which is positively correlated with reading comprehension (Assor et al., 2002; Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Guthrie et al., 2006; Housand & Reis, 2008; Molfese et al., 2003; Nystrand, 2006; Ormrod, 2014).

The questions guiding the research are:

1. What beliefs about reading, reading instruction, and classroom environment do selected early elementary school teachers in the East Tennessee region express in an interview situation?
  - 1.1 Do those expressed beliefs align with the teachers' practices in a reading instruction setting?
2. What kind of environments do selected teachers create in their classrooms?
  - 2.1 What reading instruction strategies do these teachers use?
  - 2.2 What attitudes, beliefs, or values about reading and education do the teachers transmit to their students?
  - 2.3 How are the physical components of the classroom related to the overall climate?
3. In what ways does the student engagement level seem to be affected by the environment in the classroom?
  - 3.1 Do the instructional strategies used affect student engagement?
  - 3.2 Does the environment created by the teachers' attributes affect student engagement?

### 3.3 Do the physical classroom elements affect student engagement?

#### 4. How do the answers to the previous questions vary based on grade level?

##### Summary

This section has established the relevance of increasing student reading engagement in U.S. schools. By increasing student reading engagement, it is likely that reading comprehension may increase, potentially leading to increased reading achievement and increased competence in other academic areas as well (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). The study focuses on three primary aspects of environment – teacher attributes, instructional methods, and physical classroom setting – which may be areas to examine when seeking to increase student reading engagement (Assor et al., 2002; Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Guthrie et al., 2006; Housand & Reis, 2008; Molfese et al., 2003; Nystrand, 2006; Ormrod, 2014). The next section expands on the ideas presented here by reviewing pertinent literature.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Though many researchers differ on a universal definition, reading engagement for the purpose of this study refers to students being immersed in reading a text and can be manifested in students' interactions with and within an environment, which means engagement is observable (Guthrie, 2004; Nystrand, 2006; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Reading comprehension is the primary concept associated with reading achievement and is positively correlated with engagement (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). Unlike engagement, comprehension is not observable because of the internal cognitive processes students use to fully understand a text; reading comprehension can be measured using various assessments, though the accuracy of such assessments is questionable due to the internalized nature of comprehension (Guthrie, 2004; Hurry & Doctor, 2006; Unrau & Quirk, 2014).

The more engaged a reader is with the text, regardless of subject matter, the higher level of comprehension can be reached, which translates into a higher level of achievement (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). Determining what practices foster reading engagement is critical for increasing reading achievement levels. There are numerous influences on student engagement, but of particular interest for this study is the environment of a classroom. Countless research studies both directly and indirectly related to student engagement indicate that there are three key components of environment: the teacher's attributes, the instructional methods used, and the classroom setting (Assor et al., 2002; Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Guthrie et al., 2006; Housand & Reis, 2008; Molfese et al., 2003; Nystrand, 2006; Ormrod, 2014). Of these environmental components,

teachers are most important because teacher attitudes and attributes influence the emotional environment in a classroom, the instructional methods, and the physical classroom setting.

#### Teacher Attributes

Teachers are a key element in engaging students because they do not just bring their pedagogical experience to the classroom but they also create and influence the overall classroom learning environment through their attributes (Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; Ormrod, 2014). Students are more willing and more able to achieve at a higher level in a classroom setting with a supportive environment where students feel safe, cared for, comfortable in their diversity, and able to take risks in learning (Lensmire, 1994; Ormrod, 2014). That is, the general feeling in a classroom needs to be a positive and participatory one, for both the students and the teacher.

Students are more participatory and engaged in classrooms where all students feel valued and teachers communicate a genuine belief in their ability to teach and the students' ability to learn material (Blair et al., 2007; Lensmire, 1994; Ormrod, 2014). The feeling of value may be manifested in mutual respect between teachers and their students. Respect can be demonstrated through eye contact, a warm tone of voice, respectful exchanges, and a general cooperation between teacher and students (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). A teacher's confidence in both their ability to teach and their students' ability to learn can be shown through the teacher's demeanor as well and includes such characteristics as approachability, enthusiasm for learning, and positive expectations for both themselves and students (Pianta et al., 2008).

Encouraging autonomy and allowing some freedom in assignments, withholding from excessive criticism yet providing clear, constructive feedback, and demonstrating relevance of classwork are some actions of teachers that contribute to a classroom environment in which students feel confident in their ability to control their education to a degree and take risks that

enhance learning (Assor et al., 2002; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Housand & Reis, 2008; Ormrod, 2014). Creating a natural feeling environment in which students are valued and independent and understand that the education is purposeful can contribute to motivation to read, and since motivation is positively correlated with engagement, effective teachers should strive to foster a classroom environment in which motivation to read is present and spotlighted (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Gooouch & Lambirth, 2011; Guthrie et al., 2006; Unrau & Quirk, 2014; Wigfield et al., 2004).

### Instructional Strategies

Effective and engaging reading teachers employ a variety of instructional methods, materials, and texts; tailor instruction to student needs; assess student achievement frequently; and allow students to participate in authentic activities (Blair et al., 2007; Housand & Reis, 2008; Ormrod, 2014). Teachers who successfully capture their students' attention and direct that attention toward meaningful learning most often use explicit instructional strategies such as thinking aloud, questioning students about a text, and modeling self-regulated learning strategies (Blair et al., 2007; Housand & Reis, 2008; Ormrod, 2014). Reading teachers who keep students engaged in lessons also demonstrate the relevance of texts, clearly define learning outcomes prior to the lesson, use small group instruction often, and rely on critical discussion of texts and concepts (Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; Nystrand, 2006; Ormrod, 2014).

The instructional methods that are a component of environment are influenced by a teacher's preference and knowledge base. Teachers will certainly employ variations of the strategies the literature finds to be effective or may even use entirely different strategies, but there are several instructional methods that should be at the core of every teacher's instructional style. One effective practice is reading aloud to students. Hearing a text read aloud aids in

comprehension and may help with composition assignments after reading; in addition, when students are encouraged to read aloud, participation, engagement, and comprehension can increase (Benjamin & Oliva, 2007; Goouch & Lambirth, 2011; Vogl, 1985). When a text is read aloud, the door for discussion is opened. Discussion has been hailed as one of the most effective instructional methods for increasing student participation, engagement, comprehension, and creativity, particularly for low-achieving students (Barkley, 2010; Goouch & Lambirth, 2011; Nystrand, 2006). While discussion and other instructional methods are often used in a whole-class setting, a more effective method of keeping students active in learning is using small-group discussions, activities, and instruction (Conner et al., 2014; Nystrand, 2006). Teachers should also strive to provide a variety of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities into lessons in order to incorporate multiple sensory modalities into reading instruction (Ormrod, 2014).

#### Physical Classroom Setting

In addition to the emotional and cognitive aspects of classroom setting, the physical setting of a classroom can influence student engagement (Assor et al., 2002; Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Guthrie et al., 2006; Housand & Reis, 2008; Molfese et al., 2003; Nystrand, 2006; Ormrod, 2014). In order for reading to receive utmost importance in the classroom, the reading center should be attractively designed and welcoming (Goouch & Lambirth, 2011). Reading centers containing attractive reading displays that highlight featured books, posters, comfortable chairs, multimedia books, and toys related to the books have been recommended for encouraging reading; even though the reading center should exude an inviting and relaxing atmosphere, it should retain a degree of order to promote on-task behavior (Goouch & Lambirth, 2011; Housand & Reis, 2008; Ormrod, 2014). Toys and other props serve to evoke creativity in young readers, allowing them to play and connect with the text



on a deeper level, thus increasing their engagement (Goouch & Lambirth, 2011). The reading center should be the focal point of the room, catching the eye of all who enter the classroom (Goouch & Lambirth, 2011). In essence, a classroom's reading center should be a place that children want to be, one where they are free to immerse themselves in reading and creativity.

### Summary

This section reviewed pertinent literature regarding reading engagement, teacher attributes, instructional methods, and physical classroom setting, as well as intrinsically related factors. There were not current studies that combined the three primary elements of environment within the research. Current studies did not evaluate the selected grade levels within the same study.

Reading comprehension is the primary concept associated with reading achievement and is positively correlated with engagement, meaning that increasing reading engagement could lead to an increase in reading achievement (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). Because reading achievement is influenced by reading engagement and reading engagement is influenced by environment, focusing on environmental conditions that encourage reading engagement may be one method of increasing reading achievement levels (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). The next section explains the methods used to conduct the present study.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

Reading engagement is linked to reading comprehension, and environment may be one area to study when seeking to increase student engagement in reading (Connor et al., 2014; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). As students' annual NAEP test results begin being reported in fourth grade, the literacy instruction students receive in first through third grade is important in laying the foundation for reading achievement. Because of the state's rapid improvement in reading achievement in recent years, Tennessee is a prime candidate for studying the engagement tactics that teachers are using that may lead to higher reading achievement (U.S.DOE, 2013). The research was conducted in one East Tennessee school district from a convenience sample of all elementary schools in a thirty-minute driving radius of East Tennessee State University. The first school to respond positively to the research objectives was selected as the site where research was conducted. The research site was a small, K-12 school that has approximately 500 students.

Because one of the research questions is concerned with variation in environments and reading engagement as grade level progresses, the three classrooms selected consisted of one of each of the following grades: first, second, and third. The classrooms were selected from the research site, with the teacher who first responded favorably to the study being selected as the representative participant for the given grade level.

In the initial stages of the study, teacher participants were informed their compensation would be in the form of two purchase orders for books: one to be used for classroom literacy needs and one for personal use. After the study concluded, the teachers who filled out a book request were given the items they ordered. Students did not receive any compensation.

Each of the three teachers were interviewed prior to the observation portion of the study. Interviews took place on an individual basis (i.e., the teachers were not in a group interview). The questions of the interview were designed to gauge each teacher's pedagogical beliefs, favorite instructional methods, and overall attitude toward teaching and learning, all of which contribute to the classroom environment, as the literature represents. There was some variation in where the interviews took place. Two teachers were interviewed in their classrooms, while one was interviewed in a school office because the classroom was being used. Questions for the interview were created by the primary researcher using information gathered from the literature and were used to guide the discourse in a semi-structured fashion. See Appendix A for the teacher interview script.

As part of each interview session, the physical design of the classroom was also examined to determine the ways in which the participants' classrooms aligned with the literature findings on classroom design, especially pertaining to the literacy center. Because one teacher's interview was not in her classroom, the classroom observation checklist was completed at a later date still prior to the first observation. The literacy center checklist was adapted from the Reading Rockets website, an organization dedicated to identifying and aiding children at risk of reading difficulties. See Appendix B for the literacy environment checklist.

Following the interview session, each teacher scheduled observation times for their reading block. These three separate, non-consecutive occasions totaled nine observations for the study (i.e., three for each teacher's reading block). Each observation was intended to be at least 14 days from the previous session, but there was one exception where a classroom had to be observed during an intended off week and was observed twice within a two week period. The wait time between observations was designed to allow for the examination of the teachers'

attributes, teachers' instructional methods, and physical classroom environments to be spread over time to avoid bias in data collection. Each classroom was observed one time during the same week in an effort avoid bias based on the events occurring during the semester. For example, it would have been unfair to observe one classroom the week prior to winter break and the other two classrooms two weeks prior to the break because the students in the classroom observed closest to the break would likely have a lower level of engagement due to the excitement for winter break.

The instructional strategies that the teachers used were also important to the classroom observation portion of this study. In addition, how those strategies were implemented is important because the implementation of instructional methods is related to teacher attributes, which affect the classroom environment as a whole (Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; Ormrod, 2014). For the sake of ease during classroom observations, the instructional strategies and the teachers' attributes checklists have been combined, though the attributes and methods components are able to be distinguished.

During each observation, a teacher observation checklist was completed. The checklist was adapted from a checklist found online created for Temple University's Winter Teaching and Learning Conference. The literature was to adjust the checklist to the present study. Inter-rater reliability was established with a research graduate assistant who attended two observation sessions. The results of the assistant's checklist and the primary researcher's checklist were then compared to establish agreement. There was above 80% agreement so the instrument was deemed reliable. The See Appendix C for the teacher observation checklist.

While the teachers were the primary participants in the study, their students' expressed level of engagement was observed, making students additional participants in the study. No

identifying individual student data was recorded. Only the expressed level of engagement was noted. Observation of student engagement included the nature of their discussions during activities, manner in which they responded to the teacher or other students, and their facial expressions during reading (Becker, 2013).

Student engagement was evaluated by visually scanning the room for approximately fifteen seconds every five minutes and noting the percentage of students who were disengaged. Disengaged students were counted because that number was hypothesized to be smaller than those engaged and therefore, easier and faster for the researcher to determine. The duration of fifteen seconds was designed to allow students who might not be fully disengaged to return to work. For example, a student may have only been taking a five second break for their eyes and it would be inaccurate to count that student as disengaged. The overall student engagement level was evaluated during each observation using a checklist. The checklist was created by the primary researcher using literature primarily from Becker (2013), and inter-rater reliability was found using the same manner as the teaching observation checklist. See Appendix D for the complete student engagement checklist.

After the data was collected using the variety of checklists, which were adapted from organizations committed to reading achievement improvement and better classroom management strategies as well as developed by the researcher using the literature, each classroom was evaluated in relation to the other classrooms and the literature to determine how the environmental influences presented throughout this discussion affected student engagement (Becker, 2013; Pianta et al., 2008; Reading Rockets, n.d.; Temple University, 2006). The researcher examined notes from the data collection instruments to look for themes, trends, and connections among the data. Statistics were not used in analysis of the data because of the small

sample size. Of particular interest to this study were environmental influences found universally in the three classrooms, influences unique to particular classrooms, and influences that significantly affected student engagement.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

The findings are discussed in accordance with the research questions. Each question's section incorporates the data from all the participants (i.e., there is not a separate section for each teacher). It is important to realize that the following findings and generalized statements pertain only to the study site; they may be applied to other classrooms but are not meant to be interpreted as definitive.

For the protection of the participating teachers, codes have been used to identify them. Each code consists of the same two random letters (i.e., M and B) followed by a number indicating the grade level. Therefore, MB1 refers to the first grade teacher; MB2 corresponds with the second grade teacher; and MB3 represents the third grade teacher.

It is worth noting that there was not a significant difference in demographics among the teachers. All teachers hold a master's degree and have been teaching for approximately the same number of years. While there was variation of the work experience of each teacher (e.g., committees they have been part of, other teaching experience, or administrative duties), these differences are not thought to have affected the findings.

#### **Research Question 1: What beliefs about reading, reading instruction, and classroom environment do selected early elementary school teachers in the East Tennessee region express in an interview situation?**

The teachers each expressed a belief in the importance of reading in education. The emphasis on the importance of reading in relation to other subjects differed by teacher. Both MB1 and MB3 acknowledged that reading is important but that other subjects should not be de-emphasized so that reading may be prioritized. These two teachers seemed to take a holistic

approach where all subjects and all aspects of each subject are of equal importance. MB2 seemed to place more emphasis on reading instruction, particularly on comprehension, saying that reading comprehension is “the most important thing.” All teachers also acknowledged that adequate reading skills are crucial to comprehending other subjects, and MB3 said:

[Reading and writing] definitely open the window to all other subjects...without those two subjects, the rest are going to be difficult for children to succeed in.

Each teacher believed that all students can learn to read, though some students may require more time and instruction. The teachers indicated that reading ability depends on the individual student’s capabilities, and their role is to help each student reach a personal best. It is worth noting that MB2’s interview responses demonstrated a belief that differences – even significant ones, such as not knowing all the letter sounds – in students’ reading ability are standard, and her role is to instruct struggling readers in a way where they are not frustrated or discouraged by not being on the same level as advanced students. MB2’s philosophy is:

[Students] grow at different rates. I think that’s completely normal...I don’t think [reading ability] defines them, so we work hard to help that be the case.

At the research site, the designated protocol for reading instruction was the workshop model, where students are introduced to a concept whole-group then practice the concept in stations or centers. All teachers followed this method of reading instruction. In general, the teachers changed the activities within stations on a weekly basis. Each teacher said their reading centers are themed with other subjects as frequently as possible, and literacy activities are incorporated into other subjects so that learning is authentic and integrated.

The teachers placed significance on personalization of instruction. This personalization may have come in the form of free-choice books and activities within the centers, independent



reading time, or individual reading instruction. At the same time, not all activities were choice-based; there were also structured activities. In addition, each teacher kept a detailed record of each student's reading ability to further individualize the learning process. The teachers said that frequent evaluations of the students' reading levels allows them to keep students progressing in their reading skills. MB1, in particular, indicated that assessing student reading achievement key for instruction, saying:

I have a sort of IEP [Individualized Education Program] for each student, so I know exactly what level they read on, their strengths, and their weaknesses; I use that in my planning.

It is also worth noting that MB1 acknowledged learning to read well is not a linear process. She expressed that part of growing in reading ability is growing in confidence.

According to MB1:

There are times when there is a little bit of regression. Sometimes, I'll have the students read on a lower level than what they're capable of – it builds confidence and makes them feel like good readers, especially if they are having a difficult time.

All three teachers indicated that environment is important for a quality level of reading engagement to exist in a classroom. The teachers each believed that the classroom should be at what they call "kid-level." Students should be able to access materials freely and easily, and they should know how to manage materials and books. In addition, MB1 felt that teachers should be at kid-level as much as possible to increase student engagement, she said:

[My aide and I] might be on the floor with markers or otherwise helping at the centers, but we're engaged with the kids. Because I'm engaged with them and they're engaged with me, that should help them learn better.

MB2 believed the routines and procedures in a classroom must be emphasized for students to be properly engaged. She felt that allowing students to participate in developing classroom rules is important. According to MB2:

When kids have things that are routine to them and they know your expectation and it's always the same, then they kind of take risks in other places – in good ways.

MB3 believed that students should participate in developing classroom rules because it promotes a sense of ownership that results in an intrinsic motivation to follow the rules. Like MB2, MB3 also mentioned the importance of risk-taking for students to grow in their reading ability. To her, a learning-conducive classroom is one where students feel safe, and the teacher's responsibility is to create that environment. MB3 said:

I think that kids have to feel safe in their environment, and that's going to mostly come from the teacher and their demeanor. If they feel safe in their environment, then they feel respected, and they feel valued, and they're able to take risks, and they're going to learn more and grow more as students.

**Research Question 1.1: Do those expressed beliefs align with the teachers' practices in a reading instruction setting?**

In general, the teachers' expressed beliefs during the interviews aligned with the observations. Each of the teachers were positive in demeanor and created an environment where students appeared to feel capable of learning and taking risks that lead to higher achievement. In

addition, the teachers followed their stated instructional preferences and tailored instruction to each student's unique level through strategies like small-group and individualized instruction.

**Research Question 2: What kind of environments do selected teachers create in their classrooms?**

Each classroom environment was one where students had everything needed to learn at their level. All three classrooms permitted free access to materials, which were primarily stored along the perimeter of the room and clearly labeled in most classrooms. In general, the ability to access materials at any time during reading time did not appear to interfere with engagement, but there were some occasions when the freedom was abused. In MB1's classroom, several of the tables were located near materials for other subjects, and students began to examine these other objects as their interest in the station at hand began to fade. For example, a station that allowed students free-choice of books within a teacher-selected category was located near the math center, and some students turned away from the table to play with counting blocks at the math station. MB1 corrected this off-task behavior promptly.

The ease of access of classroom materials did not necessarily need to refer to academic material only. In MB3's classroom, facial tissue presented occasional engagement issues. Students would frequently leave their stations to get a tissue. Sometimes, the student would use the tissue. On other occasions, the student would stand by the tissue box for an extended amount of time, stare or make various facial expressions at the rest of the students, and never use the tissue. This behavior frequently was followed by another student doing the same. The freedom to use a tissue or other non-academic material – whether or not the student actually did so appropriately – may have presented an escape from class work, possibly decreasing engagement.

Each of the teachers created a positive, mutually respectful environment in their classrooms. Teachers predominantly called students by name, as opposed to a generic term like “somebody.” Students were also expected to respect the teacher and were corrected for using terms like “hey” rather than the teacher’s name. In addition, each teacher’s demeanor was positive, with the teachers smiling, laughing, and engaging in social conversation with students as appropriate.

MB2 created a unique atmosphere in her classroom by using the word “friends” as a reference to her students. She frequently made statements similar to the following: “I had some friends last week that misspelled words because they didn’t go back and double check, so let’s try to check our work this time,” or if some students were being disruptive in a group-learning situation, she might have said, “Some of you being disrespectful to your friends who are trying to learn; please, sit still and listen.” The use of such language seemed to be related to behavior modeling and seemed to contribute to MB2’s enhanced level of engagement and classroom control.

Desired behavior was rewarded by allowing students behaving appropriately to hold leadership roles in group activities or take first choice in group tasks. Most frequently, students behaving well were permitted first choice of topic for a group project (e.g., students selected an element of a story, such as characters, problem, or solution and other groups chose from remaining elements).

Rewarding good behavior also applied to students who had previously been misbehaving or disengaged. In whole-group instruction, students who were being distracting to their peers or the teacher were told to sit away from the group. When these students complied with the rules of

conduct in the whole-group setting, they were permitted to return and were frequently rewarded as mentioned previously.

Each classroom was generally well-managed and was presented as a risk-free learning environment. Students were encouraged to read more challenging books, answer critical thinking questions, and delve deeper into their activities, primarily through creativity. The emphasis on instruction was not presented as “teaching to the test” but as teaching for understanding. MB2 even referred to her weekly spelling test as a “Spelling Show What You Know.” This may have decreased test anxiety and the pressure students felt to perform to a standard and may have increased their achievement.

**Research Question 2.1: What reading instruction strategies do these teachers use?**

The teachers all used the workshop model, with the lessons beginning in a whole-class setting and moving to a small-group setting. During the small-group setting, students typically rotated through stations at intervals determined by the teacher. On occasion, the small-group session was spent on group work so the students did not rotate but rather worked with their assigned group for the duration of the reading block.

Activities within the workshop model varied with each observation and differed by classroom. Most frequently, MB1’s stations included a choice of reading books, a worksheet or book activity, individualized reading instruction, free journaling, and free drawing. MB2’s stations typically included individualized reading instruction, a worksheet specific to the learning needs of the children in the rotation (e.g., one group might complete a worksheet about sentence fragments while another group may have a worksheet similar to a book report to complete), a station using an iPad, and free reading. MB3’s stations changed more frequently than the first and second grade stations. There was not a typical station activity in her classroom (e.g.,

sometimes the students worked in a single group for the duration of the block and other times the students changed stations on intervals for more specialized work), but there was always a warm-up activity at the start of the reading block and time for silent reading at the end of the block. Group reading strategies (e.g., popcorn reading) were not observed in any classroom throughout the duration of the study.

Each teacher's stations incorporated a variety of modalities, which the literature demonstrates as aiding in reaching students with a variety of learning styles (e.g., kinesthetic or visual learners) (Ormrod, 2014). In addition, the use of a variety of instructional strategies, as Blair et al. (2007) recommend, was another way the teachers tailored instruction to the various learning preferences of their students. For example, on two observations, MB3 called her students to the carpet in the front of the room. Her students each had a copy of the *Scholastic News* issue and highlighters to mark important information in the assigned article (e.g., water conservation); at the same time, the article was displayed on the projector screen and was read aloud by the automated voice (i.e., MB3 did not read aloud). In that way, auditory learners could listen to the article, visual learners could either read along on the screen or in their own magazine, and kinesthetic learners could physically hold the article and interact with it using the highlighters.

The role of the teacher was predominantly to facilitate the learning while the students worked in stations, which corresponds with effective teaching attributes discussed in Blair et al. (2007). In addition, the notion of teacher as facilitator may contribute to feelings of autonomy and intrinsic motivation and may aid in increasing reading engagement (Assor et al., 2002; Ormrod, 2014; Schiefele as cited in Putman & Walker, 2010). The teachers circulated among the groups ensuring that students were on task. The frequency with which the teachers circulated

among the groups increased with grade level. If a given teacher was not circulating the classroom, she was most often providing individualized reading instruction to students.

**Research Question 2.2: What attitudes, beliefs, or values about reading and education do the teachers transmit to their students?**

In general, each of the teachers indicated that reading was important, but they conveyed this importance by different means. MB1 and MB2 seemed to make reading instruction a privilege. Both would remove misbehaving students from the group and tell them they could return when they felt ready to learn; the teachers also verbally and nonverbally communicated the idea that reading instruction was fun and something that students should be excited to participate in. Through various interactions in the classroom, MB3 did not communicate the idea that learning was a privilege but more of a necessity, even if it was an enjoyable one.

Each of the teachers expressed the inevitability of mistakes in the learning process and stressed that errors are not catastrophic to learning. MB2 and MB3 particularly communicated this to their students. During one observation, MB3's students were working in pairs to create a book. Several students were making fun of another child's misspelling and editing errors. MB3 promptly reprimanded the students and ensured them everyone makes mistakes. The teachers viewed mistakes as growth opportunities and told students the only way to learn was by making errors throughout the process.

**Research Question 2.3: How are the physical components of the classroom related to the overall climate?**

The physical components of the classrooms in this study generally related to the attributes of the teacher. MB2 placed emphasis on classroom rules and procedures during her interview. Her classroom reflected this by being very structured and organized. All materials had

a place and were clearly labeled (e.g., books were labeled by level or series title; each center was labeled; markers, stamps, etc. were labeled and stored in the appropriate center). This contributed to an atmosphere in which students appeared to feel responsible and mature and take learning seriously. It is important to note that emphasizing rules did not cause the classroom to have a climate that seemed “stuffy” or restrictive.

MB1’s classroom did not have the structure that MB2’s classroom exhibited. In MB1’s classroom, some materials were in mislabeled containers and books grouped according to subject (e.g., winter, history, and space) but were located in various areas of the classroom (i.e., there was not a definitive literacy center). While this environment did occasionally negatively affect engagement (e.g., when students began playing with counting blocks rather than reading), it also contributed to engagement to the extent that MB1’s students had free access to materials as well as MB1 and her aide. The environment reflected the beliefs that MB1 expressed in her interview that teachers should be engaged with students and that all materials should be presented on a “kid-level” that students are comfortable with. This supports the literature that by feeling comfortable in their environment, students are encouraged to be more engaged and participatory in reading instruction (Lensmire, 1994; Ormrod, 2014).

**Research Question 3: In what ways does the student engagement level seem to be affected by the environment in the classroom?**

The three components of environment observed in this study – teacher attributes, instructional methods, and physical classroom environment – each seemed to affect student reading engagement. The influence of each environmental component was variable, and there remain deviations within the trends mentioned. Of these three components, teacher attributes seem to be most related to student reading engagement.



**Research Question 3.1: Do the instructional strategies used affect student engagement?**

Because the instructional methods used in each classroom were essentially the same (i.e., the workshop model), there was not a difference in reading engagement based on the instructional methods as a whole. However, within the workshop model, differences in engagement could be noted with the type of activity at each station. For example, children in MB2's classroom used iPads to interact with a story at one of the stations. Students at this station were rarely – if ever – off task. Other stations exhibited variable levels of disengaged students. For example, students at stations including journaling frequently began to draw in the journals rather than write their stories. Illustrating the stories was a secondary task, but the students were supposed to have written prior to drawing.

On occasion, one station in MB1's classroom included a choice between a word-building activity or reading a library book the student had chosen. Students who chose to read their library book were more engaged than students who chose to word-build. It is possible that being able to read a library book that the student had chosen heightened feelings of autonomy and ownership, increasing on-task behavior. This relates to Schiefele's explanation that intrinsic motivation to read is amplified when children have the ability to choose what they read (as cited in Putman & Walker, 2010).

**Research Question 3.2: Does the environment created by the teachers' attributes affect student engagement?**

Teachers seemed to affect student reading engagement more than physical classroom environment or instructional methods, which supports the literature that teachers create and influence the overall classroom learning environment through their attributes (Blair et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2014; Ormrod, 2014). How the teachers acted, what they said, and even the

messages they communicated indirectly to students had the potential to either enhance or detract from student engagement.

The teachers in this study frequently interacted within the reading stations by questioning students about the task, answering students' questions and offering solutions, and providing anecdotal comments relevant to the task. Students in MB1 and MB2's classrooms became noticeably more engaged when the teachers participated in a station. This was evidenced by the children's facial expressions (e.g., smiling, looks of amusement, or expressions indicating wonder) and general increase in on-task discourse. MB3's interactions with students at stations tended to be less anecdotal than MB1 and MB2 and were focused at ensuring students were comprehending the task. While MB3's interactions within stations did not cause an immediate, obvious increase in engagement, they offered students the autonomy and opportunity to solve problems, which she expressed as important in her interview and found important for growth in reading ability and reading engagement, which also support findings from Assor et al. (2002).

It is worth noting that there was one occasion where MB3 was leading a small-group whose task was to read aloud a portion of an issue of *Scholastic News*. Despite MB3 being present in the group and leading discussion, one student was often off task and MB3 had to re-engage him frequently. While a teacher being actively engaged in the reading instruction may be enough to cause some students to participate on a deeper level than if a teacher were not present, some students may need more stimulation in order to remain on task.

Classroom procedures (e.g., methods of moving through stations, how students are to respond to the teacher's questions, and how students should speak to or treat one another) seemed to play a role in enhancing student engagement, so long as the rules were enforced. In MB2's classroom, students were frequently reminded of classroom rules and procedures. She

took infractions on the rules of conduct seriously. For example, one student was talking within his group and used the term “stupid” as an adjective (i.e., he was not name calling another student); MB2 immediately called him over and discussed his poor choice of language, which relates to her expressed beliefs in the interview that language is very important for classroom management.

On the other hand, MB3 frequently asked students to cooperate with rules. There did not seem to be consequences for not cooperating, and students therefore continued to misbehave. In one instance, MB3 gave her students “three strikes,” which meant the noise-level had become so intense that no more talking was allowed. While the talking quieted for a moment, it did not cease, and soon the noise-level raised to almost where it was when the no talking rule was enacted. It seemed that, in order to be effective for increasing engagement, classroom rules needed to be enforced.

The students in well-controlled environments in this study may have been more likely to be engaged and take risks academically. MB2’s frequent use of “friends” to refer to her students and overall rule- and procedure-oriented classroom may be related to the engagement levels in her classroom. The literature demonstrates that without fear of being criticized for making errors, students are more likely to read at a higher level, which increases a student’s confidence and likely reading engagement (Lensmire, 1994; Ormrod, 2014).

### **Research Question 3.3: Do the physical classroom elements affect student engagement?**

The physical classroom environment in each of the classrooms was relatively similar according to the literacy environment checklist, see Appendix B. However, the discussion of limitations addresses that the instrument did not prove to be as effective for drawing comparisons between the physical literacy environments in the classrooms as intended.

The materials were primarily located along the perimeter of the classroom, but the distance between the materials and the students' tables or desks varied by classroom. While the actual distance was not measured, those classrooms in which the tables were closer to other materials promoted disengagement in learning. In MB1's classroom, students would occasionally turn from the task at their table and begin playing with counting blocks or looking for cities on a map of the U.S.

As mentioned, MB2's classroom was very structured but did not appear to restrict the students. In fact, MB2 had the highest average percent of engaged students of the three classrooms observed. It is possible that the level of discipline and organization within the classroom may have contributed to the high engagement levels.

MB3's classroom could be placed in between MB1 and MB2's classrooms as far as structure and organization. MB3 had approximately the same percent of engaged students as MB1, which indicates that physical classroom environment and organization may be a factor in predicting the potential for students to be engaged in reading.

The present study's findings indicated that there may be a correlation between the number of books in a class library and the general student engagement level. While the actual number of books in each classroom was not counted, MB2's class library had visibly more books than MB3 or MB1's class libraries. Students in MB2's classroom did take more time to choose a book from the library, but once they had, the average level of engagement was greater than in the other classrooms. It is worth noting that all three teachers mentioned they had instructed their students in the process of finding a "just right" book, so the time a student took to choose a book was likely not related to a lack of knowledge on what type of book the student was capable of reading.

MB2 had a designated reading area in her classroom. The area included a lofted bed, a retro bathtub, and comfortable chairs for the students to relax while reading. MB1 and MB3 did not have this sort of literacy center. MB1's reading stations were spread throughout the classroom and students rotated through them, and MB3's students read at their desks. MB2 had a higher percentage of average student engagement than the other teachers, and students reading independently in the literacy center were on task to a greater extent than some other stations in the reading block. Therefore, there may indeed be a correlation with the novelty of the reading experience and student engagement, as suggested by the informal reading environments (e.g., gardens or museums) that Putman and Walker (2010) found conducive to engagement.

**Research Question 4: How do the answers to the previous questions vary based on grade level?**

The teachers did not alter the workshop model as a whole within each grade level, but there were slight variations in the implementation of the model. At each grade level, the reading block began with a whole-group lesson. In first grade, the whole-group lesson typically involved the teacher reading a story to the students, discussing the story, and giving instructions on the stations for the day; second grade typically involved the teacher giving instruction regarding the stations for the day; third grade typically involved the teacher reviewing the warm-up exercise and then giving instruction for the stations for the day.

In each grade-level the stations during reading block changed frequently in accordance with the reading lesson and lessons of other subjects. For example, as Thanksgiving approached the featured books in MB1's classroom were related to historical life, and new books were featured approximately every week for the duration of the study. In MB3's classroom, activities reflected a holistic approach. Students spent an extended amount of time over the course of the

weeks leading up to the first observation drafting, editing, and finalizing a copy of their classroom book “All About Bats.” In general, as grade level progressed, the structure of the reading block seemed to become more liquid in nature, adapting freely to student preferences and integrating more with other subject areas.

The activities at the stations did seem to allow for increasing autonomy and required more focus and time as grade level increased. In first grade, reading station activities fostered creativity (e.g., drawing and journaling) and basic writing skills. Second grade activities incorporated more difficult writing skills (e.g., determining between complete sentences and fragments) and instruction in writing as it relates to reading (e.g., purposes for writing and story elements). Third grade activities included an increased focus on group work, independent reading time, and assignments of extended duration (e.g., drafting, editing, and finalizing the bat book).

There was a noticeable decrease in students reading aloud as grade level progressed. In some cases, students seemed discouraged from reading quietly aloud and even only moving their mouth. It is hypothesized that because only some students were discouraged from reading aloud, the teacher was challenging more advanced students to read silently.

Students in first grade seemed to enjoy sharing their books with other children (e.g., showing pictures). This could be used as a measure of engagement because students who shared their books frequently engaged in summarization of the story. Book sharing decreased substantially with each grade level, and was rarely observed in the third grade classroom.

### Summary

In summary, the findings for each question are briefly reiterated below. The differences between teachers and classrooms were discussed previously, but these blanket statements offer a general overview of the study findings.

**Research Question 1: What beliefs about reading, reading instruction, and classroom environment do selected early elementary school teachers in the East Tennessee region express in an interview situation?** The teachers each believed that reading was important for a balanced education and that reading and writing form the foundation for understanding other subjects. The teachers believed all students can learn to read to a personal best, which varies by student, and the time taken to reach that personal best also varies by student. All teachers followed the workshop model of instruction and personalized instruction as much as possible.

**Research Question 1.1: Do those expressed beliefs align with the teachers' practices in a reading instruction setting?** The teachers seemed to align their teaching practice with the beliefs they expressed in their interviews.

**Research Question 2: What kind of environments do selected teachers create in their classrooms?** Each classroom was relatively well organized and designed for the students to have free access to materials. The classroom environments all seemed to be positive, with students and teachers in a mutually respectful relationship. Students exhibiting positive behavior were rewarded and those misbehaving were corrected, typically promptly.

**Question 2.1: What reading instruction strategies do these teachers use?** All teachers used the workshop model, with lessons beginning with whole-group instruction and moving to small-group work. While activities in each classroom and even each observation varied, typical small-group stations included: guided reading, free reading, worksheets, and journaling. Each teacher

incorporated a variety of modalities (e.g., visual activities and auditory activities, such as books on tape) into their reading block.

**Question 2.2: What attitudes, beliefs, or values about reading and education do the teachers transmit to their students?** The teachers all transmitted the idea that reading is important to their students. The inevitability and necessity of making mistakes in the learning process was conveyed by each teacher to their students.

**Question 2.3: How are the physical components of the classroom related to the overall climate?** Physical classroom setting seemed to be related to teacher attributes (e.g., teachers who placed more emphasis on procedures had higher levels of organization in the classroom). All classrooms were designed for students to feel comfortable, independent, and able to access materials freely.

**Question 3: In what ways does the student engagement level seem to be affected by the environment of the classroom?** Because teacher attributes seemed to be related the overall feeling in a classroom as well as the physical classroom setting, teachers seemed to affect student engagement more than other factors.

**Question 3.1: Do the instructional strategies used affect student engagement?** The instructional methods in each classroom were various stations within the workshop model. Stations that seemed to be most conducive to reading engagement were those containing iPads and those allowing students to read books they had selected from either the class library or the school library.

**Question 3.2: Does the environment created by the teachers' attributes affect student engagement?** How teachers acted, messages they communicated indirectly, and their verbal communication seemed to affect student engagement by influencing how students thought about



reading and learning in general (e.g., some teachers indicated that reading was a privilege to be valued). Students typically became more engaged when a teacher was present in their small-group, as opposed to a student-only group. Teachers who enforced classroom rules seemed to promote higher levels of engagement during reading block.

**Question 3.3: Do the physical classroom elements affect student engagement?** Each classroom was relatively similar in general design, but there were differences in how the design was implemented. For example, while all classrooms had materials around the perimeter, some classrooms' materials were more organized than others. Classrooms with more books in the classroom library and novel reading areas were correlated with higher levels of reading engagement.

**Question 4: How do the answers to the previous questions vary based on grade level?** As grade level progressed, students began to internalize reading (i.e., the occurrence of reading aloud and self-talk about books decreased). Tasks became more holistic and required more focus, autonomy, and an extended duration as grade level progressed.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The present study is initial-level. This pilot study was designed to examine teachers' literacy practices as related to environment in a small sample of early elementary school classrooms in the East Tennessee region. Findings in the study can still be used to suggest effective classroom practices for engaging students more fully in reading instruction.

### Limitations

Because the study was performed by an undergraduate, first-time researcher, some human error is expected, as with any research. For example, while an attempt to scan the classrooms was made every five minutes, the exact duration between classroom scans may have differed slightly based on the circumstances.

On occasion, classroom observations were not all completed in the same week or on the scheduled day. That is, there were weeks when only two classrooms were observed and the other was observed during what should have been a non-observation week and weeks when a given classroom was observed on a Friday, for example, when it was supposed to have been observed on a Monday. Similarly, one teacher's classroom literacy environment checklist was filled out during an observation session after the interview while the other two teachers' checklists were completed immediately after the interview. That teacher also was interviewed in an office rather than her classroom because there were students present in the classroom at the time of the interview. Such alterations did not seem to affect the data.

Data collection was conducted with the researcher present in the classroom. While this was necessary for the teacher interviews, it may have affected teacher and student interactions during classroom observations. The degree to which the physical presence of the researcher may

have affected such interactions was not deemed threatening to the validity of the study. In future studies, the use of a video recording system may be one method of avoiding such a bias.

The data collection instruments used for this study would need to be adjusted for future research. There was a discrepancy within the literacy environment data collection instrument, see Appendix B. The results from the checklist would indicate that the differences between classroom literacy environments were minute. However, even upon entering a classroom, it was clear to the researcher that differences among the literacy environments in the classroom – including the overall physical classroom setting – were more than the checklist would indicate.

In addition, the classroom observation checklist that combined both instructional methods and teacher attributes, see Appendix C, was altered throughout the study. Revisions to the checklist made directions for scoring clearer to the researcher and the graduate assistant when testing inter-rater reliability, and some segments and questions were removed from the instrument because they were not seen as applicable to the research situation.

Due to the nature of discourse in interviews, each interview was different. It was not possible for the researcher to follow the interview script, see Appendix A, exactly. Based on the participants' responses, the order of questions may have changed, a non-listed question may have been asked, or a listed question may not have been asked.

#### Future Research

Throughout this study, it became evident that students at reading stations using iPads were on task significantly more than other stations not using iPads. The use of interactive devices, such as iPads or other electronic devices, in reading instruction may be an avenue to increasing students' engagement in reading.

Also, students in this study exhibited an increase in engagement when reading library books they had chosen themselves and in classrooms that contained more books in the classroom library. Choice in reading engagement has been established as effective for increasing engagement (Nystrand, 2006; Putman & Walker, 2010). Even though classroom libraries offer students a choice in reading material, school libraries certainly offer more choices. Differences in volume of choice – whether it is between classroom libraries or comparing a classroom library to the school library – may be an area to research to examine a possible correlation between choice volume and student engagement with books.

On a related note, the findings discuss an instance in which students became distracted and began to play with counting blocks at a reading station featuring teacher-selected books. As student-selected books generally corresponded to an increase in reading engagement in this study, the question is: would the students have been as prone to distractions if the books at the station had been ones they had selected themselves? The extent to which choice impacts not only in-depth engagement with a text but also general on-task behavior may be important to further affirm that choices must be provided to students in order to engage students in reading as well as other subject areas.

This study did not specifically evaluate the teachers' aides in a classroom. Not all classrooms had an aide on staff during the literacy block (i.e., MB3's classroom did not have an aide). Future research may examine the role that aides play in the classroom, particularly the extent to which teachers' aides affect student reading engagement.

MB2's classroom environment was noteworthy for two primary reasons: her use of the term "friends" to refer to her students and her unique reading center. Language, particularly as discourse on texts, has been established as an important element in the facilitation of engagement

(Barkley, 2010; Gooouch & Lambirth, 2011; Nystrand, 2006), but the use of specific terminology (e.g., “friends”) and its relation to reading engagement may be of interest to academic researchers. Furthermore, novel situations and environments may be conducive to reading engagement (Putman & Walker, 2010), but more research on the extent to which such situations affect engagement may be necessary to further improve reading engagement.

#### Summary

Even with various limitations in the study, it is apparent to the researcher that environment in terms of teacher attributes, instructional methods, and physical classroom setting affects student reading engagement. More research is needed to further examine the relationship between the various elements of environment and student reading engagement.

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Appendix A

Blank Teacher Interview Script

[Created by researcher using the literature]

**Teacher's Interview Notes Form**

**Interview Details**

Teacher Name: \_\_\_\_\_

School Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Question** How long have you been teaching? How long in this school?

**Notes**

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**Question** How long at this grade? Is that the grade you have always intended to teach?

**Notes**

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**Question** What is your education level?

**Notes**

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**Question** What is your philosophy on student learning? Can all students learn?

**Notes**

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**Question** How confident are you in your teaching abilities? Can you help all students learn?  
Has your confidence level undergone a noteworthy change since starting teaching?

**Notes**

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**Question** How important is reading well and reading comprehension?

**Notes**

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**Question** What do you think are the best methods for reading instruction? Ex. small group, discussion, silent reading, popcorn reading, etc.

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**Notes**

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**Question** Do you think the classroom environment contributes to a student's abilities to learn? What are the most important aspects of the environment?

**Notes**

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**Question** Does the environment affect student engagement?

**Notes**

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**Question** What role does engagement play in reading and comprehending?

**Notes**

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**Please Rate Your Job Satisfaction Level From 1 to 10 And Explain**

**1 = Extremely Unsatisfied**, for example: “I am seriously considering leaving the profession”

**10 = Extremely Satisfied**, for example: “I would do my job if I won the lottery and didn’t need to work another day in my life.”

**Notes:**

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**Additional Notes**

Appendix B

Literacy Environment Checklist

[Adapted from ReadingRockets.org]

**Classroom Literacy Environment Checklist**

|   | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| <b>The Literacy Center</b>  |     |    |
| Children’s participation in designing the center (rules, name, materials)   |     |    |
| Area placed in quiet section of the room  |     |    |
| Visually and physically accessible yet partitioned off  |     |    |
| Rug, throw pillows, rocker, bean bag chair, stuffed animals, other toys   |     |    |
| Private spot in corner (such as a box) to crawl into and read   |     |    |
| Uses about 10% of classroom space and can fit 5-6 children  |     |    |
| <b>The Library Corner</b>   |     |    |
| Bookshelves for storing books with spines facing outward  |     |    |
| Organizational system for shelving books  |     |    |
| Open-faced bookshelves for featured books   |     |    |
| Five to eight books per child   |     |    |
| Baskets of books representing three or four grade levels of the following types: picture books, picture storybooks, traditional literature, poetry, realistic literature, informational books, biographies, chapter books, easy-to-read books, riddle and joke books, participation books, series books, textless books, TV-related books, brochures, magazines, newspapers |     |    |
| Twenty-five new books circulated every four weeks   |     |    |
| Check-out/check-in system for children to take books out daily  |     |    |
| Headsets and taped stories  |     |    |
| Felt board and story characters with related books  |     |    |
| Materials for constructing felt stories   |     |    |
| Other story manipulatives (roll movie, puppets, with related books)   |     |    |
| System for recording books read   |     |    |
| Multiple copies of the same book  |     |    |
| <b>The Writing Center (Author’s Spot)</b>   |     |    |
| Tables and charts   |     |    |
| Writing posters and bulletin board for children to display their writing  |     |    |
| Writing utensils (pens, pencils, crayons, felt-tip pens, colored pencils)   |     |    |
| Writing materials (many varieties of paper in all sizes, blank booklets, pads)  |     |    |
| Typewriter or computer  |     |    |
| Materials for writing stories and making them into books  |     |    |
| Message board for children and teacher to post messages   |     |    |
| Place to store “very own words”   |     |    |
| Folders in which children can place samples of their writing  |     |    |
| Place for children to send private messages to each other   |     |    |

| <b>Word Study Center</b>   |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Magnetic letters and phonograms  |  |  |
| Wooden letters and phonograms  |  |  |
| Cards with letters and phonograms  |  |  |
| Letter stamps  |  |  |
| Letter cubes and phonograms  |  |  |
| Prefixes, suffixes, and roots in magnetic, wooden, foam, cards, and felt forms                       |  |  |
| Pocket chart   |  |  |
| Felt letters and felt board  |  |  |
| Word wall for high-frequency and other sight words   |  |  |
| Word wheels for constructing words   |  |  |
| Slates and markers   |  |  |
| Magnetic boards  |  |  |
| Word-sorting activities  |  |  |
| Word-building activities   |  |  |
| Skill development games (Concentration, Jeopardy!, Bingo, Lotto, card games)                         |  |  |
| Puzzles for constructing words   |  |  |
| <b>The Rest of the Classroom</b>   |  |  |
| Environmental print, such as signs related to themes studied, directions, rules, functional messages |  |  |
| Calendar   |  |  |
| Current events board   |  |  |
| Appropriate books, magazines, and newspapers   |  |  |
| Writing utensils   |  |  |
| Varied types of paper  |  |  |
| Place for children to display their literacy work  |  |  |
| Place for teachers and children to leave messages for each other                                     |  |  |
| Print representative of multicultural groups present in the classroom                                |  |  |
| Content area centers present in the classroom (circle those appropriate)                             |  |  |
| <p>music    art    science    social studies    math    dramatic play</p>                            |  |  |

Appendix C

Teacher Observation Checklist

[Adapted from 2006 Winter Teaching & Learning Conference, Teaching and Learning Center at Temple University and Pianta et al. 2008]

## Classroom Observation Checklist Form

|                   |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| Instructor: _____ | Date: _____         |
| Time: _____       |                     |
| Reviewer: _____   | No. Students: _____ |

**Directions:** In each of the following sections please indicate the presence of the following actions and behaviors (with a check, +, or Y). Leave unobserved items blank. If item is not relevant for this class or instructor’s teaching style, please indicate with the notation N/A. In the intervening spaces provided, please provide specific examples of actions that exemplify the characteristics or that support your rating.

**Variety and Pacing of Instruction**

The instructor:

\_\_\_ uses more than one form of instruction

- small group, large group, lecture, read aloud, students read, stations, other

\_\_\_ pauses after asking questions

- at least 5 seconds are allotted for student responses

\_\_\_ accepts students responses

- provides re-direction/correction if incorrect

\_\_\_ draws non-participating students into activities/discussions

- requests comments/questions; places student in position requiring participation (e.g., group leader), other



- \_\_\_ prevents specific students from dominating activities/discussions
  - asks for responses in various areas of the seating arrangement, other
- \_\_\_ helps students extend their responses
  - questions meaning, requests elaboration, offers suggestions, other
- \_\_\_ guides the direction of discussion in group-instruction
  - keeps students on topic, asks questions that provoke desired responses
- \_\_\_ mediates conflict or differences of opinion
- \_\_\_ demonstrates active listening
  - does not interrupt students, provides gestures/facial expressions/verbal cues
- \_\_\_ provides explicit directions for active learning tasks (e.g. rationale, duration, product)
- \_\_\_ allows sufficient time to complete tasks such as group work
  - permits at least 70% of students to finish tasks before moving on
- \_\_\_ specifies how learning tasks will be evaluated (if at all)
- \_\_\_ provides opportunities and time for students to practice
  - assigns in-class work or homework that is not graded but is discussed

Examples of above:

## **Organization**

The instructor:

- \_\_\_ arrives on time
- \_\_\_ relates this and previous class(es), or provides students with an opportunity to do so
  - primes students with questions about recall/prior knowledge/hypotheses/other
- \_\_\_ provides class goals or objectives for the class session

- written or verbal statements
- \_\_\_ provides an outline or organization for the class session
- written or verbal
- \_\_\_ knows how to use the educational technology needed for the class
- \_\_\_ locates class materials as needed
  - or places materials so students are able to locate the materials as directed
- \_\_\_ makes transitional statements between class segments
  - there is not a sudden change of pace/instruction/other
  - uses a consistent method of changing pace/instruction/other
- \_\_\_ follows the stated structure but demonstrates a degree of flexibility within the structure
  - permits extra time as needed, changes instruction type as needed
- \_\_\_ conveys the purpose of each activity or assignment during group work
  - written or verbal
- \_\_\_ completes the scheduled topics/instructional areas (e.g., workshops)
  - if not, explain why (e.g., students were not grasping a concept)
- \_\_\_ summarizes periodically and at the end of class (or prompts students to do so)
  - verbal summary, student notebook, exit ticket, pair-share, other

Examples of above:

### **Presentation Skills**

The instructor:

- \_\_\_ is audible to all students articulates words so that they are understandable to students, and/or visually represents words that might be difficult for students to hear
- \_\_\_ varies the tone and pitch of voice for emphasis and interest
- speaks at a pace that permits students to understand and take

notes

\_\_\_ establishes and maintains eye contact

- eye contact is not limited to just one area of classroom/certain students

\_\_\_ avoids over-reliance on reading content from notes, slides, or texts, if used

\_\_\_ avoids distracting mannerisms uses visual aids effectively (e.g. when appropriate to reinforce a concept, legible handwriting, readable slides)

\_\_\_ effectively uses the classroom space

\_\_\_ maintains a warm, calm voice

\_\_\_ demonstrates enthusiasm for the subject and lesson

Examples of above:

## Clarity

The instructor:

\_\_\_ notes new terms or concepts, as needed

- verbal or written explanation, word board, other

\_\_\_ elaborates/repeats complex information/skills/content/etc.

- e.g., if a student asks about a vocabulary word, the teacher may repeat the word and offer a definition or use it in a sentence

\_\_\_ uses examples to explain content/terms/goals/etc.

\_\_\_ makes explicit statements drawing student attention to key ideas

\_\_\_ pauses during explanations to ask and answer questions

- permits at least 5 seconds

Examples of above:

**Instructor-Student  
Rapport**

The instructor:

- \_\_\_ attends respectfully to student comprehension or puzzlement of difficult concepts/material/terms/instructions (as related to content of lesson)
  - also responds to off-topic comments in respectful ways
- \_\_\_ invites students' participation and comments during group-instruction
  - calls on students, draws in non-participating students, requests questions/comments, etc.
- \_\_\_ treats students as individuals, e.g. frequently uses students' names rather than "somebody"
  - credits ideas to students, as needed
- \_\_\_ provides periodic feedback during group work
  - responds to student questions/comments, explains fallacies in reasoning, other
- \_\_\_ incorporates student ideas into class (as related to lesson)
  - uses past examples from student comments, requests student comments, creates a platform for students to share ideas
- \_\_\_ uses positive reinforcement (i.e. doesn't punish or deliberately embarrass students in class)
  - also rewards positive behavior by allowing well-behaving students first choice/first in line/other privileges
- \_\_\_ engages in social conversation with students when appropriate
- \_\_\_ shares materials, discussion time, etc. so all students may participate
- \_\_\_ uses respectful language with students
- \_\_\_ offers peer assistance as needed
  - e.g., asks if other students can help a student think of an answer

\_\_\_\_ uses friendly expressions, e.g. smiling, laughing, etc.

Examples of above:

**Additional Comments:**

## Appendix D

## Student Engagement Checklist

[Created by researcher using the literature from Becker 2013]

**Observation of Student Engagement**

*Note: The occurrence of the following criteria applies in both small group settings and whole class settings. In student led instruction, “teacher” can be synonymized to “leading student,” as in “The students are listening to the student speaking and answering that student’s questions,” rather than “The students are listening to the teacher and answering the teacher’s questions.”*

**Physical Observations**

- Looking at teacher
- Taking notes as instructed
- Sitting quietly, reading silently, or listening as instructed
- Indications of engagement including, but not limited to:
  - head nods, head shakes,
  - pensive furrowing of brows,
  - following along in the text using a finger, pencil, or other indicative motion, or
  - moving the mouth to indicate silent reading

**Verbal Observations**

- Asking questions
- Responding to teacher’s questions
- Appropriately responding to teacher’s tone, inflection, humor, or gravity
- Responding to other students’ questions