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BEHIND “LOVING READING”:  
READING BEHAVIOR IN EARLY ADOLESCENTS

By  
Rachel White

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts in Literacy Education

Hamline University  
Saint Paul, Minnesota  
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“Father said it used to be a gentleman was known by his books;  
nowadays he is known by the ones he has not returned.”

-William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### Introduction

This capstone seeks to answer the question: What does the lived experience of “loving reading” look like for middle school students? In this chapter, I discuss the context for this capstone. First, I will detail the learning and experiences that led me to my philosophy of literacy teaching. Then, I will discuss the rationale of my question by explaining how my professional learning around this issue clashed with my experience in the classroom. Finally, I will review the next chapters in the capstone.

#### Rationale & Context

**Personal Experience** There are two key throughlines of my life that led me to devote my research to the concept of loving reading. The first is my personal experience as a reader and the second is my experience as a reading teacher. It is difficult for me to reconcile these two narratives: that of the book-obsessed, people pleasing high achiever with that of the caring teacher who meets struggling readers where they are. The complexity of loving reading is a common thread between them.

I have always considered myself someone who loves reading. I would have said that I loved reading when I was a fourth grader who pretended to be scared of the dark so that my parents would leave my door open when they said goodnight, after which I would promptly reach for my book and read for an hour by the ambient hallway light. I loved reading when I was in seventh grade and bonded with my favorite teacher when she encouraged me to read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Color of Water*,

which I would read about 100 pages of, lose focus, but then return to her saying I loved it not because I loved the book but because I loved the way books brought us together. I would have said that I loved reading when I was a college English major but had not read a book that was not assigned to me in four years. I still say that I love reading although I do not have regular reading habits and probably only finish about five books a year that are unrelated to school. That is to say, while my actual reading behavior fluctuated over my life, something happened in my early life that led me to think I was a reader and someone who loved reading. That identity has not changed despite changes in my behavior.

**Professional Experience** My first full-time job as a teacher was at a charter school where teachers were encouraged to care deeply about their students' reading skill and performance but not to spend much time or effort on students' love of reading. The school had a classical philosophy that ran against a more student-centered reading approach, so my sixth grade class read a series of whole-class novels including *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Arthur Conan Doyle, and *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. We did our best to have students understand the books and to use strategies to tackle these complex texts. If students liked the book, it was considered a bonus but not essential. We did not prioritize students' reading for pleasure. We did not have a school-wide library for students to choose books to read. I grew to deeply dislike this strategy, mostly because I realized that it only worked because we were mostly working with high-performing readers. I disliked how little we modeled lifelong reading and how little I got to differentiate texts to meet student needs. However, I could not deny



that it worked for that population in terms of test scores -- over 90 percent of students at the school met or exceeded expectations on the state standardized reading tests and most went on to do very well on their college entrance exams. Eventually, I decided to leave and develop my own student-centered philosophy. However, the school did leave a lasting impression about the idea of loving reading -- while loving reading is important, it is not a critical component for reading success on achievement tests, at least for a certain type of student.

After leaving the charter school, I began working at a public school much more concerned with students' affective reading behaviors. I went from having 90 percent of my students meet or exceed standards on the state standardized reading test to having about 45 percent of the students I taught meet or exceed standards on the state standardized reading test. When given a reading assignment at grade level, a large percentage of my students would silently struggle to read the text. Another significant percentage of my students would loudly declare that they "hate reading" and would not even attempt to begin reading a text. It was clear that their feelings about reading were huge barriers for them. Meanwhile, the group of students who would profess that they liked reading would not only perform better on the state reading test but tackled reading assignments with confidence and curiosity. My students who considered themselves to be readers would still struggle with a reading task, but they were more likely to take those failures with a growth mindset. Little failures did not seem to shake their love of reading.

Professionally, I began reading some of the major theorists and writers who focus on loving reading. My last year at the charter school, my colleague handed me *The Book*

*Whisperer* by Donalyn Miller, which we both read and praised. The thesis about loving reading, and the vision of students happily reading over 40 books per year of their own choice and at their own pace, shook both of our beliefs in our school's whole-class novel approach. The discrepancy between Miller's vision and the school's philosophy contributed to my decision to leave. At the public school where I now teach, the Language Arts department read *Middle School Readers* by Nancy Allison my first year. Allison argues that students only really grow as readers when reading books that are at their independent level and that students will love reading more if they read books they pick. She encourages teachers to create huge classroom libraries and surround their students, literally and figurative, with a literary life.

In the summer of 2019, I attended the Teachers College at Columbia University's Reading Institute. Here, students' loving reading was paramount to the reading classroom. Lucy Calkins and Mary Ehrenworth, two of the senior staff at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop and lead lecturers at the institute, argued that by optimizing student enthusiasm for reading, students would accelerate their reading volume and therefore, reading performance. They also argued that the kind of analytical work that state standards require is more accessible and natural to students if they focus on a text they love and are genuinely curious to understand. At this institute, I developed a personal philosophy of loving reading: if students love to read, they have a significant advantage in their growth as readers, making it incumbent on the reading teacher to give that advantage to all students in the service of educational equity.

**Context** I returned to work in the fall of 2019 excited to implement the practices and philosophy I learned from the Reading and Writing Workshop. I performed initial interviews with my students regarding their thoughts about reading. The results of these conversations were not clean at all. I had students who said they loved reading but had not read a whole book in over a year. I had students who said that they hated reading but read four books over the summer because their parents made them. I had students that said that their love of reading depended on the book that they were reading. For my students, the experience of loving reading was complicated. In practice, my students did not always behave like the “kid who loves reading” from the books I had read.

My own personal experience as a reader mirrored the complex relationship to loving reading that I saw in my own students. While my reading identity was more fixed and my belief that I loved reading was consistent, my reading behavior was all over the place. For my students, a strong reading identity did not always affect reading behavior and reading performance. I began to question whether the phrase “loving reading” was even useful.

However, “loving reading” is such an important phrase in reading teacher culture that one cannot ignore it. I therefore decided to study it more. I wanted to know how students construct their understanding of whether they love reading and what they do once they have that understanding of themselves. I wanted to know why students who say that they don’t love reading don’t love reading.

Loving reading is a phenomenon, both in students’ minds and in the discourse around teaching reading. I decided to create a phenomenology that could enlighten

myself and other teachers about what it really means to develop and maintain that love and, if possible, see how that love informs the reading behaviors and attitudes that sustain academic reading growth and lifelong reading. Therefore, I devised the question: What does the lived experience of “loving reading” look like for middle school students?

### **Summary**

I base my research on my experience in the classroom and in my own life where I learned that readers do not neatly fit into a box of “the high achieving reader who loves reading.” For myself and many of my students, a sense that you love reading is often not connected to the kind of daily reading behaviors and habits that lead to reading success in an academic setting. I wanted to understand what loving reading really meant so I decided to create a phenomenology around the question: What does the lived experience of “loving reading” look like for middle school students?

The following chapters will detail this phenomenology. Chapter two includes a literature review that focuses on the major themes that ground, contextualize, and inform my research: the popular discourse around loving reading, reading volume, reading motivation, and methods of measuring reading attitudes. Chapter three details the methods of my research including my research paradigm, research instruments and data analysis procedure. The results and analysis of my phenomenology are in chapter four. In chapter five, I will crystallize conclusions and provide suggestions for further research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

In the introduction, I detailed my relationship with the concept of loving reading in terms of my changing identity as a reader, my professional learning, and my experience in the classroom. I discussed the struggle of being able to take the idea of “loving reading” at face value in my classroom. While these ideas were being treated simply in my professional learning, my students did not fit into neat boxes of “loving reading.” There were students who claimed they loved reading but read very little. Others said that loving reading was “dependent on the book.” Others read often and diligently but did not say that they loved reading at all.

The literature review will focus on components critical to answering the research question: What does the lived experience of “loving reading” look like for middle school students? First, I will explore popular work in creating the language of loving reading, as well as the often cited surveys that bring public attention to the lack of reading engagement among adolescents. Second, I will explore the importance of reading volume particularly in regards to collaboration between school and home. Third, I will identify two key factors in the love of reading: reading motivation and reading identity. I will discuss research concerning these concepts. Fourth, I will discuss methods of measuring reading engagement and motivation. The final section concludes with a summary of the chapter, and it provides a preview of chapter three.

#### **The Literacy Problem in Popular Understanding**

## **Introduction**

The first section of the literature review details the popular (amongst educators) understanding of the engagement problem and solutions for American adolescents. First, I will draw on the national surveys and research most-cited in articles raising the alarm bell about lack of reading engagement in schools. Next, I will highlight key thought leaders shaping the conversation around the response to lack of engagement. These leaders are also responsible for inundating classrooms with the language of loving reading. Third, I will demonstrate how leading literacy organizations commonly accept the importance of reading engagement and love of reading, especially for adolescents.

### **Adolescent Reading: A Crisis of Confidence**

Several surveys of the nation's children repeat the same tune: kids do not read and do not enjoy reading. This problem, research finds, is particularly acute with adolescents. Over and over, a new survey or score comes out that reveals, more American students are not falling behind in reading level, especially compared to students in equally wealthy countries.

**The National Assessment for Educational Progress.** This test, given to students at three points of their educational career (elementary school, middle school, and high school) includes both affective and skill-based measures. The 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that 27% of eighth graders reported reading for fun or on their own time. That was down 12% since 1984 (Musu-Gillette, 2015). Even worse, while 31% of high school seniors in 1984 reported that they read in their own time, only

19% did so in 2012. The decline seemed isolated to older learners, as the number (53%) was the same for third graders in both studies.

**The National Endowment for the Arts.** In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts released a report entitled “To Read or Not to Read.” It was a call to arms for teachers to get serious about reading engagement and reading volume in their classrooms. The study found a significant decrease in students that read for fun between 1984 and 2004. In 1984, 8% of 13 year olds said that they never or hardly ever read for fun and 35% said that they read for fun almost every day. In 2004, 13% said that they hardly ever read for fun and 30% said that they read almost every day (Iyengar, 2007). In addition to reporting that, at a national level, reading scores had decreased 25% in the last 25 years, they also noted that both students and adults were reading less often for fun (Iyengar, 2007). They found a reduction in reading scores across the board for adults with all levels of education, even highly educated ones (Iyengar, 2007).

After presenting the data, the National Endowment for the Arts explained what they felt were the larger implications of lack of reading culture in the United States. The authors attempted to draw connections that would raise questions about the impact of lower reading scores for the country as a whole. For example, they demonstrated that employers rated reading comprehension as one of the highest priorities for their employees. Also, the authors argued that a lack of literacy divorces citizens from the information they need to be informed consumers, voters and members of their community (Iyengar, 2007). While the analysis in the survey is biased and not entirely supported by the data, I mention it because it is so often cited by popular and scholarly

sources. It draws some sweeping and potentially hasty conclusions. For example, noting that employers rate reading comprehension highly does not necessarily mean that students who are not doing well in certain reading tests will not be great employees in the future.

**The NCTE.** In November 2019, the National Council of Teachers of English released a statement on independent reading echoing the need for protected reading time in the classroom. Their statement included core values about independent reading which were deeply informed by current scholarship and included an imperative that English teachers must “build enthusiasm for reading” (Shaffer et. al., 2019). It is important that here, the NCTE, which mostly consists of English teachers in high schools, were agreeing that building a love of reading through student-selecting texts is important because the typical high school curriculum has traditionally made little room for this (Shaffer et. al., 2019).

### **Loving Reading: The Thought Leaders**

If one discusses the national conversation around loving reading and reading engagement, then one must recognize figures at the center of it. One of the most prominent is Donalyn Miller. Miller, a teacher from the Fort Worth area who identifies as “not a researcher,” has become one of the most recognizable and popular writers about teaching in the last decade. Her work is pervasive and takes many forms (Miller, 2019, p. 10). Her blog “The Nerdy Book Club” is extremely popular and asked students to review books for students. She is one of the most popular reading speakers in the country (Miller 2019). She is not only beloved by teachers but also professional groups. Her book, *The*



*Book Whisperer*, was cited by the NCTE as “research supporting this statement” in their statement on independent reading (Shaffer et. al., 2019). Her approach focuses on building a high-interest classroom library, letting students read books that they choose often and constantly and moving away from worksheets and book reports. Most enticing to teachers was, very likely, the promise she made in her first book. Her fifth graders read an average of 40 books per year -- a book a week (Miller, 2009).

Almost equally popular but more grounded in academia than popular writing, Lucy Calkins and the Reading and Writing Workshop have a similar approach. In a Reading Institute, the phrase “on fire for reading” came up again and again (Calkins, 2019). This meant that students need to be deeply, intrinsically motivated to read. Similar to Donalyn Miller, the Teachers College presented a vision of middle-grade students happily reading 40-50 books per year (Calkins, 2019).

Another major thinker in this group was Nancie Atwell, who in 1980 founded the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), a teaching school in Maine designed to be an exemplar for teachers around the country. She stressed that students need to be passionate readers and, in the introduction to her book *The Reading Zone*, made an impassioned defense of the role of pleasure in the reading classroom (Atwell, 2007). She wrote, “When teachers embrace their role as literate grown ups who invite students to enter, again and again, one of the most pleasurable experiences human existence has to offer, then our students will embrace books and reading” (Atwell, 2007, pg. 15). Those words are certainly inspiring, and phrasing like this serves as a rallying cry for teachers to focus their instruction on love of reading.

## **Loving Reading: National Consensus**

More and more, the national consensus of literacy groups stresses engagement and student attitude around reading. The introduction of the International Literacy Association's policy brief "Creating Passionate Readers through Independent Reading" begins by posing the following challenge to readers: how do we make reading more enticing for kids than the latest video game craze (McVeigh, 2019)? The policy brief explains the importance of teaching kids to read books they love and creating fanfare and excitement around what they read.

The ILA particularly stresses engagement and affective reading factors with adolescent literacy. They argue that because identity formation is such an important part of adolescence, students' reading identities need to be prioritized during those years. Importantly, the ILA argues that reading engagement and reading identity are informed by community. The ILA also offers the most inclusive notion of what an adolescent reader could look like. They stress that teachers need to be aware of the many ways that students engage with literacy beyond having a book in their hands. The organization also stresses that classroom literacy culture needs to respond to students' social and home culture (McVeigh, 2019).

## **Reading Wars**

Any conversation about loving reading in popular educational understanding would be incomplete without some discussion of "the reading wars." In the 1960s, there seemed to be a schism in two instructional models of teaching early reading: one that put an emphasis on phonics and decoding and another that put more emphasis on

meaning-making and understanding whole words (Kim, 2008). Jeanne Chall noted these differences and brought the conflict between these two schools of reading instruction to the fore in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, published in 1967 (Kim, 2008). As early as 1975, organizations such as the NIE would hold panels about effective reading instruction with the goal of addressing the “reading wars” and virtually every subsequent panel and study has stated that devotion to a single, inflexible method is ineffective reading instruction and that early reading instruction should combine phonological learning with whole word learning.

However, repeated panels have not managed to silence the “reading wars” or at least the desire to write about them. For example, when the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that students’ reading performance was decreasing, “the reading wars” once again became the subject of educational discussion (D’Oro, 2020). These NAEP studies became the backbone and impetus for the American Public Media report and podcast “At a Loss for Words” which argues that American teachers are fundamentally misunderstanding balanced literacy, focusing too much on a three-cueing system for understanding words and not enough on sounding out words using phonics (Hanford, 2019). The report specifically criticizes Lucy Calkins’s early reading curriculum for its lack of decoding (Hanford, 2019). Advocates for students with dyslexia criticized Calkins’s approach for making reading even more challenging for those students. Calkins and her allies, such as Richard Allington, seemed dismissive about those critiques (Hanford, 2019).

These recent arguments have been lumped into the “reading wars” narrative. While I characterize the work of Miller, Calkins, Atwell and others as being very popular, it is important to note that their work is not universally accepted, especially among educators of early readers. However, there is very little criticism around their claims of the importance of loving reading, and the critiques center around their perception of the power of loving reading. The American Public Media Report argues that Calkins over-states the role that enthusiasm for reading plays in meaning-making (Hanford, 2019). My study is going to focus on middle school readers, so I will not engage a great deal with the “reading wars.”

### **What is Missing from the Conversation**

These popular educational thinkers invoke similar images for teachers: one of students demonstrating reading in a narrow but aspirational way. Nancie Atwell, in her book “The Reading Zone” presents the image of her classroom where 19 kids are reading 19 books. She proudly details the titles. Of these nineteen eighth graders, one is reading *Huckleberry Finn* (based on his mother’s suggestion), one is reading *Slaughterhouse Five*, one is reading *The Things They Carried* (Atwell, 2007). It is important to note that all of these titles are popular high school titles and some have been part of the white male literary “canon” for almost fifty years. Similarly, in the keynote to the 2019 Readers Workshop Conference, Lucy Calkins presented a similar aspirational image to thousands of teachers who traveled from around the world to watch her speak (Calkins, 2019). A teacher trained in Calkins’s methods, she said, took her students to get their school pictures taken. Without any prompting, as they were waiting, the entire class of the

students were sitting in line, silently, reading books that they chose. She argued that teachers need to make it their work to get all students “on fire for reading” (Calkins, 2019). Similarly, Donalyn Miller gives examples of types of non-ideal readers and spends her book discussing how to coach the various kinds of non-ideal into the ideal, voracious, reader (Miller, 2009).

In the introduction I detailed my frustration with the fact that the phrase “loving reading” was too vague for me to fully embrace in classroom practice. I argue the visions of “loving reading” presented in popular scholarship are dangerously limiting in their vagueness. These authors and similar thinkers in this student-centered reading movement have provided the teaching community with an invaluable shift in focus: students need to read a lot, and they need to be highly engaged in order to do so. They have provided excellent teaching in how to boost student excitement about reading. However, when these authors did not break down what “loving reading” really looks like teachers defaulted to their culturally-biased notions of what that looks like. It is telling that Nancie Atwell’s example classroom looks basically like an English classroom 50 years ago in terms of student text -- the only difference is that students chose the texts themselves.

**Racism in the Measurement of Reading Achievement** When discussing reading level or reading achievement, one must recognize the racism behind those terms. From my experience, they are mostly determined by standardized tests which are known to be racially-biased. As John Rosales (2018) writes, “Decades of research demonstrate that African-American, Latino, and Native American students, as well as students from some Asian groups, experience bias from standardized tests administered from early childhood

through college.” The bias in testing was baked into the system from the beginning. Carl Brigham, the psychologist who developed the first aptitude tests for the US Army during World War I, was an avowed eugenics and often wrote that African-Americans were on the low end of the intelligence spectrum. His tests inspired the boom standardized testing in the 1920’s and 1930’s and his influence can still be seen in the tests today (Rosales, 2018).

Standardized tests continue to disproportionately fail students from communities of color. The tests have linguistic biases against English Language Learners and speakers of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). The content of the test questions “seek responses which ignore cultural experiences, perspectives and knowledge of children from racial and ethnic minorities” (Froese-Germain, 2001, p. 116). Most critically, when a technology (such as a standardized test) is created, it inherently privileges the identity of the creator. As Bernie Froese-Germain (2001) wrote, in standardized tests “the values, biases, and assumptions of the elite group who create technology are reproduced in technologies” (p. 117). Because the groups that produce standardized tests and Fountas and Pinnell leveling assessments are largely white, they create an assessment that implicitly values whiteness.

Furthermore, standardized testing and reading leveling allows educators to engage in the myth of color-blindness. The tests, in claiming to be objective, equal opportunity assessments of student skills, claim that they can be blind to race. Bestowing validity on these tests means ignoring the racist history and racist bias of the tests and sets educators up to blame the disproportionately low performance of students of color on those students

and their communities. Stewart and Halves (2015) wrote, “By equating low test performance among racially minoritized students with a lack of college preparedness or low-rung employment with underachievement, there is a justification for the racialized hierarchies of privilege in society” (p. 127). These tests, which are inherently biased but need to be considered objective by definition, are designed to perpetuate the race-blind myth of meritocracy in our country.

Therefore, all discussion of reading “achievement” measured by standardized tests, whether they be the NAEP, the state standardized test, or even Fountas and Pinnell levels, needs to recognize that these are flawed measures that are designed to fail racially and ethnically minoritized students. This is yet another reason why exploring students’ own language for the way they talk about reading is so critical. These qualitative and personal indicators are key for anti-racist teaching.

### **Reading Volume and the Home/School Connection**

#### **Introduction**

Researchers and teachers know that they cannot ignore statistics about lack of reading. Students need to read a huge volume in order to make progress as readers, with Nancie Atwell suggesting a “Reading Zone” of 40-60 pages per day, which many scholars agree with. This volume is much better achieved if students read on their own and, more importantly, enjoy reading (Atwell, 2007). Studies show that pages, as opposed to time, is the best way to measure reading volume as students can be “reading” but not actually making that much progress through pages with time (Ehrenworth, 2019).

#### **Influence at Home**

At every stage of a student's life, families have tremendous influence on the reading volume achieved in the home. One study demonstrates that access to print media at home is one of the major predictors of long term academic success, including college attendance and high school graduation (Atwell, 2007). Children who had books in their homes and are read to are more likely than other children to consistently meet standards on reading tests. A 1988 study from Anderson, Wilson and Fielding demonstrated many positive correlations between reading outside of school and various measures of achievement (Anderson, 1988). They studied 150 students in Central Illinois and measured their self-reported reading outside of school, actual reading outside of school and compared it to short and long term academic success measured. They wrote, "Among all the ways the children spent their time, reading books was the best predictor of several measures of achievement, including gains in reading achievement between second and fifth grade" (Anderson, 1988, p. 285). Importantly, the study showed that teachers have an vital influence on how much time children spend reading books during after-school hours. The more students read in school in a literacy environment created by the teacher, the more they read out of school.

There has been much time and effort dedicated to demonstrating the connection between home literacy and early reading behavior, but evidence suggests that students also need this home literacy environment as they get older. Merga (2015) concluded that adolescents also need access to books at home, not just at school. Her study also indicated that access to books at home increases the frequency and attitude towards reading at school, especially when it comes to boys (Merga, 2015).



## What Students Read

While there is pretty much total consensus among researchers that students should read at home as much as possible to ensure lifelong literacy and academic success, the type of texts that “count” as good reading are more in dispute. The type of reading that students do is wide and, because of social media, ever-changing. For instance, in researching this chapter, I found a short-lived but rich scholarly conversation about the power of magazines as a text for students (Gabriel, Allen, Billington, 2012). After 2012, the scholarly conversation around magazine reading essentially ended as the ubiquity of mobile technology and social media meant that magazines became less significant for students and adults. As media changes so quickly, educators are still considering whether or not certain types of reading are as valuable as book reading. For instance, is spending 40 minutes reading and responding to Instagram posts as valuable in building lifelong skills as 40 minutes spent reading a Young Adult novel?

Many studies have shown that, in terms of frequency, print novels were not what students are reaching for when they read at home. The 2007 study by Hughes-Hassell and Rodge focused on a research group of urban adolescents, 93% of whom reported leisure reading “sometimes” or “often.” Of the students who read, magazines were the preferred choice (Hughes-Hassell and Rodge, 2007). Forty four percent of students said that they read comic books for fun and only 30% of students said that they read print books (Hughes-Hussell and Rodge, 2007). It is clear that, when leisure reading is defined broadly, students read at home more.

However, there are some value judgements placed on the type of reading, potentially a hierarchy. In 2011, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development found that “in most countries, students who read fiction for enjoyment are much more likely to be good readers” (p. 100). They also found that “students who read newspapers, magazines and non-fiction books are better readers in many countries, although the effect of these materials on reading performance is not as much pronounced as the effect of fiction books” (p. 100) (Hull and Shultz, 2002). There seems to be some consensus that, ideally, students would be reading levelled fiction books for the majority of their reading time. However, if the alternative was not reading at all during leisure time, other forms of reading were still encouraged. This hierarchy presented teachers with some tricky choices for what to encourage students to read.

### **Equity and Home Literacy**

There is a history of home literacy studies promoting prejudicial policies and attitudes towards families of color and families living in poverty. In 1992, Dale Walker at the University of Kansas studied working class families (7 out of 10 of whom were Black) and “professional class” families (9 out of 10 of whom were white) and found that the “professional class” families spoke to their children much more than the “working class” families (Kamenetz 2018). After recording and transcribing time spent in the home for 2.5 years, Walker found that children in “working class” families learn 30 million fewer words by elementary school than “professional class” families (Kamenetz 2018).

Walker’s study, published in one book in 1992, has been cited over 8,000 times (Kamenetz 2018). Walker’s “word gap” had policy implications as well, as politicians

cited the study to allocate funds into Head Start and other federal programs (Kamenetz 2018). There was something about the number and the phrase “word gap” that seemed to resonate with the largely white, economically comfortable class of educators and policy makers. It reinforced stereotypes about impoverished people and people of color, implying they were deficient parents and that these students started school behind the others.

However, the study’s acclaim and acceptance were unearned. First, the results were not replicable. Subsequent studies have shown that the supposed “word gap” could be four million words or even smaller (Kamenetz 2018). In other words, it is far less significant than originally thought. Also, scholars have found that the phrase “word gap” is pathologizing of families in poverty and families of color. Instead, thinking of it as “word wealth” more likely to be given to professional class children by their parents changes the framework and encourages educators to meet children where they are instead of thinking of them as “already behind” as they enter school (Kamenetz 2018). There are many examples of studies like this, but this stands as the most prominent example of educational academia relying on racism and other negative stereotypes to demonize families of color when it comes to home literacy.

In fact, studies demonstrate that students of color do not necessarily have less exposure to text than white students, but rather the families see a different purpose for reading. One study demonstrated that families of color value literacy as a social aspect as opposed to an academic one (Guthrie, et. al. 2009). In terms of variety of texts, the study showed that families of color are more likely to expose children to informational texts

such as coupons and magazines and social media than white families who focused on storybooks (Calkins, 1991). However, because schools traditionally have valued story book learning in kindergarten and did not measure exposure to the kinds of texts most often seen in the homes of people of color, it made it seem like these students were “behind in reading,” when really they were just not meeting the standard set by white students. When measuring students’ reading, it is important to make sure that the measures are not biased in favor of a performance of whiteness.

To summarize, reading volume and leisure reading are important parts of measuring how much students enjoy reading. Adolescents in particular need to see meaning and connection in what they are doing in order to practice it (need citation). Also, identity formation and reading are inextricably linked in adolescence: if a student sees reading as part of their identity, they are more likely to read. Perceiving the situation through an equity lens highlights that the students who enjoy reading are the ones who are much more likely to succeed. Therefore, igniting a love of reading has become a point of fascination for teachers, researchers and authors.

## **Reading Motivation and Reading Identity**

### **Introduction**

The inciting problem of this research is the lack of concrete information and definition about what “loving reading” really means and its definition outside of “I know it when I see it.” Therefore, in order to explore the scholarly implications of this topic, it is best to investigate two critical elements of “loving reading”: 1) reading motivation and 2) reading identity.

## **Reading Identity**

Building the identity of the learner hinges on feeling personally connected and fully seen in the context for learning. Students do not build identities in vacuums, rather, research shows us that it is dependent on classroom and community. bell hooks (1994), professor and education theorist, provided an empowering and astute explanation of a strong learning community:

I think that a feeling of community creates a sense of shared commitment to a common good that binds us. What we all ideally share is the desire to learn -- to receive actively knowledge that enhances our development and our capacity to live more fully in the world. It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice. (p. 39)

Here, hooks noted that a positive educational community must both establish and honor shared commitments as well as notice and honor individual identities and voice.

Therefore, each student must see their identity reflected in their classroom. To build an identity as a reader, students need to feel that reading helps them “live more fully in the world.” They need to be individually valued in their reading lives.

## **Windows and Mirrors**

The “window” and “mirror” literacy concept provides useful language for discussing reading identity. Scieurba (2015) noted that we read texts in two ways, as “mirrors,” meaning that they reflect the reader back to themselves, or “windows,” meaning

that they allow the reader to look into an experience different from their own. Students need to be able to read texts that are both mirrors and windows. If a student from a marginalized or underrepresented group did not see themselves in the texts that they are reading, (they do not have any “mirror” texts), they did not see themselves in the world of literacy. Without themselves represented in the reading world, they will, as Scirbua said, not be able to personally identify with reading. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that the students who were most marginalized in their representation in literature (i.e., students in ethnic and religious minorities) are also the most likely to not pass their standardized reading tests. Scholars suggested that building a reading identity is critical to students and in order to build that identity, they must see themselves in the books that they read.

### **Socially Formed Reading Identities**

Reading identities are also socially formed. Peer attitude towards reading is critical for reader development, especially for adolescents. Merga’s 2014 study found that 35% of avid readers had friends that encouraged them to read. Only 8% of reluctant readers had reading encouragement from friends. Her study also demonstrated that if a student’s friends did not read, that student was more likely to agree with the statement, “It is not cool to read books” (Merga, 2014). Interestingly, this was equally true for boys and girls because conventional wisdom among teachers was that boys were more likely to have a negative attitude towards reading than girls. This study demonstrates a key point of reading identity formation: one cannot divorce reading identity from social identity.

### **Reading Motivation**

Wanting to read is one of the most important components of literacy. Therefore, much research has been developed over the last thirty years to encourage and develop students' reading motivation. Adolescence is a time of identity development and increased agency so there should be a particular focus on motivation for these readers. Especially in terms of adolescent literacy, there is a particular focus on motivation because of the development of agency and choice is so important to adolescents. If you can leverage reading into the development of those key adolescent milestones, students will probably be more likely to read. While it is difficult to summarize this huge sector of research, most research on getting adolescents motivated to read can be placed into one of three categories: choice in reading material, social involvement in the reading process and depth and relevance of thinking and reading applications.

**Choice in Reading Material.** Almost all the research indicates that having a choice in what they read correlates to student enjoyment of reading. Linda Gambrell, motivation researcher, found that when students are reading about something in which they are interested, they are more likely to expend more effort and employ more strategies to comprehend the material (Gambrell, 1996). In Gambrell's study of 3rd-5th graders, she found that when she asked students to describe a book they enjoyed reading, 80% of students discussed a book they selected themselves from their teacher's libraries, and only 10% discussed a book that they were "assigned" (Gambrell, 1996).

Kelly Gallagher (2009) argued that the assigned whole class novel was one of the major reading "killers" in schools. Donalyn Miller (2009) said that the way that she gets students to read 40-50 books a year is to allow students to choose books from her

classroom library filled with high-interest titles. Lucy Calkins (1991) designed all of her curriculum to have students reading independently chosen books at all times because, she claimed, it is the only way for students to own their reading and accelerate independently.

**Social Involvement in the Reading Process.** While reading itself is a solitary process, research found that reading instruction needs to be fully socially integrated in order to be motivating. Linda Gambrell (1996) notes that this social engagement should happen on two levels. First, student interaction and encouragement can be great leverage for encouraging students to read more often and more broadly. When a student can recommend a book to another student and reading becomes incorporated into their social and academic identities, the motivation to read becomes entwined with their motivation for social engagement (Gambrell, 1996). She also argued that book circles, book clubs and other collaborative discussion and project opportunities were huge motivation builders for students because students did not want to let each other down and they were buoyed by each others' energy (Gambrell, 1996).

The social involvement in reading applies to the teacher-student relationship as well as the student-student relationship. Gambrell (1996) argued that motivating teachers were more likely to model excellent reading behaviors. These teachers made reading seem fun and interesting and constantly talked about books. They also made an effort to develop relationships with students around reading, modeling the way that academic reading be a part of their social lives (Gambrell, 1996). These practices motivate students because they leverage a powerful teacher-student relationship with reading.



Book talks are one of the most powerful ways for teachers to model reading enthusiasm. Book talks are informal, generally whole-class discussions where a teacher shares and “sells” a book that is meaningful to them. After the “sell,” there is usually a period of discussion opened up to the class (Kittle, 2012). Kittle (2012) argued that these practices build motivation mostly because they created a social environment around reading and used the power of the group to build excitement about specific books but also reading in general.

**Depth and Relevance of Thinking and Reading Applications.** Research demonstrates that if students do not think that the work associated with a reading is interesting, they will not think the reading itself is interesting. Ruddell (1995) found that teachers of motivated readers asked mostly open-ended questions that encouraged depth of thinking. In fact, he found that those motivating teachers ask factual questions only 22% of the time. Building motivation means asking students to find multiple interpretations of texts and answer questions that require a deeper level of thinking.

In *Readicide*, Kelly Gallagher (2009) argued that the standard book report puts a damper on reading motivation. He found that the summary-based thinking made reading and sharing reading knowledge as boring as possible. Gallagher suggested that teachers instead should ask the kinds of questions that force students to think deeply about their books and apply them to their lives. In addition, Gallagher suggested that teachers should search for more authentic ways for students to engage with their reading either by engaging with the authors themselves, engaging with a larger community online or engaging with each other. Gallagher argued that students will not only learn more reading

skills if applying their knowledge more authentically, but will also be motivated to keep reading and thinking (Gallagher 2009).

### **Summary**

In summary, reading identity and reading motivation are critical parts of loving reading and the research shows that they are both complexly constructed. To a tremendous extent, both are based in social constructions. Students construct a reading identity socially and within a learning community. Motivation is determined through social interactions both with students and teachers. Motivation is also derived from the depth of thinking and element of choice in the classroom. Finally, motivation is one of the most important determinants of reading volume and therefore, reading achievement. The next section will discuss the methods of measuring reading motivation and other reading attitudes, data which is critical to understanding and improving reading motivations.

## **Measuring Reading Attitudes and Affect**

### **Introduction**

When studying reading attitudes, behavior and affect is critical, partly because so many standardized measures of reading achievement are racially-biased. However, pressure to maintain objectivity and standardization has led to a lack of assessments of more subjective reading behaviors. Many articles about the critical subject of measuring students' reading attitude, self-perception and behavior begin with a statement about the relative lack of data about reading attitude compared to reading comprehension, fluency, word recognition, etc. There is a dearth of information about how to measure reading

attitude and how to apply that knowledge. Possibly, there are few assessments of reading attitudes because any such measurement is less objective than one for, say, fluency. Trying to assess this aspect of reading involves delving into some of the murkiest, hardest to express aspects of the mind. Self-perception, efficacy, desire, goals — when students discuss these aspects of reading there is so much subjectivity. Students need to 1) know what they think about those issues and 2) have the language to express their attitudes and 3) be given a survey or assessment that allows them to express their truest knowledge of themselves. Despite the mightiness of the challenge, many researchers prioritize understanding these attitudes.

### **Major Qualitative Surveys and Assessments**

**MRQ.** Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) used research in cognitive science and social components of motivation to create the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ). This was a complex survey, attempting to draw on the many components of motivation. The goal is not only to get a number for a general motivation level for the reader, but to diagnose the weakest aspects of the motivation to better target the motivational needs in the reader. Wigfield and Guthrie use a taxonomy to achieve this. The first component of reading motivation in the MRQ is self-efficacy, defined as “how good one feels at a certain ability” and “goal oriented behavior,” which is the way the individual makes goals, accesses strategies to achieve them and gets pleasure from achieving them (Wigfield and Guthrie, 2007). The second component of reading motivation on the taxonomy is the purposes that students have for reading, including their social and personal purposes. The third component is work avoidance, or the desire to avoid reading

behavior. The higher the aversion to reading behavior, the lower the motivation (Wigfield and Gurthrie, 2007).

The MRQ measures all components of reading motivation with a questionnaire organized by eleven sub-dimensions of the components of reading motivation. The dimensions are self-efficacy, challenge, work avoidance, curiosity, involvement, importance, recognition, grades, competition, social life, and compliance. The questionnaire is fifty questions and asks students to rate themselves 1-4 in terms of how much they relate to “I” statements such as “I read about my hobbies to learn more about them” and “It is very important for me to be a good reader.”

**SARA: Survey of Adolescent Reading Attitudes.** McKenna, et. al developed an adolescent specific reading attitude survey. Importantly, they note that measuring students’ “predisposition, or inclination, to read is too broad to be of practical use” (Conradi et al, 2013). In other words, just knowing if students like reading is not useful to teachers. In the 2013 version of their survey, emphasized the importance of understanding that reading attitudes may change based on the context for reading (ex. academic vs. recreation, digital vs. print) (Conradi et al, 2013).

The SARA, or Survey of Adolescent Reading Attitudes, focuses on four domains based on the need to understand student attitudes across all contexts. The domains are academic print reading, academic digital reading, recreational print reading, and recreational digital reading (Conradi et al, 2013). It asks students to identify how they feel on a 6-point scale with 1 being “I feel bad about that” and 6 being “I feel good about that.” The questions ask specifics in regards to each domain. For example, one question

for the recreational digital domain is, “How do you feel about texting or emailing friends?” and one from the recreational academic domain is, “How do you feel about reading a book for fun on a rainy Saturday?” (Conradi et al, 2013). In their initial study in 2013, the researchers used their connections with the National Council of Teachers of English to have 4,491 6-8th graders in 23 states take the survey (Conradi et al, 2013).

The replicability of the survey is strong, as well as the awareness of multiple reading contexts. As with all of the qualitative surveys, one of the SARA’s selling points to researchers and teachers is that it produces a score created by averaging the student responses in each domain. The higher the score, the stronger the adolescent’s reading attitude. Disaggregating the score allows teachers to understand how the student feels about each domain. The SARA provides an excellent base of language and questions for understanding adolescent specific reading behaviors that indicate positive reading attitude.

### **Other studies and minor surveys**

Other studies provided insight into the question of how to tap into and document the truth of adolescents’ understanding of themselves as readers and their understanding of what a good reader is. Coombs and Howard (2017) used the popular, Huffington Post-style online quiz format to ask students “What kind of reader are you?” This quiz asked questions about their style as a reader and funneled them into different categories of texts to read. While that does not align perfectly with this research, the leveraging of a format that students understand and relate to is important. This approach is both disarming and accessible. It is disarming in that it is a non-academic style that is not what

the student is expecting and it is accessible in that students are used to telling the truth in that kind of quiz format.

Johnson (2005) used a survey to have students define what a “good reader” looks and acts like. She asked students to describe a good reader that they know and define what good readers do and what poor readers do (Johnson, 2005). The goal of the survey was for students to identify the reading strategies that “good readers” use. This purpose does not align with the purpose of this study, but the method is compelling. By depersonalizing the question and asking students to define what they think good readers do, researchers will be able to see 1) what students think the desired behaviors are and 2) it allows researchers to see the distance that students see between their own behaviors and the behaviors of good readers. This can give a sense of the student’s “self-efficacy” which Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) identify as a key aspect of reading motivation.

### **Qualitative Understandings**

Much of the research devoted to reading attitude has been with the goal of investigating the correlation between reading attitude and reading achievement. As Morgan and Fuchs note in their 2007 meta-analysis, there have been more than a dozen peer reviewed studies dealing with the correlation between reading attitude and reading achievement (Morgan and Fuchs, 2007). The authors show that the overarching theme of all of these studies is that there definitely is a correlation between reading attitude and reading achievement — a fact that any classroom teacher would have noted without needing a dozen peer-reviewed studies. Because of this pressure to hold up reading attitude to reading achievement, reading attitude needed to be contained to a number.

Each of these studies (the SARA, RAS, MRQ) provide a number that summarizes each students' reading attitude. This number could be compared to other numbers and objective measurements: standardized tests scores, fluency numbers, reading levels. It also elevates and demystifies our understanding of reading attitude by making it an approachable number which teachers can theoretically use and try to improve.

I recognize that to a large extent, the point of social sciences research is to take the most abstract and tangled aspects of human understanding and standardize them. But I would argue that qualitative research in reading attitudes is also critical. In order to understand how motivation and reading attitude works, having almost 5,000 students across the country take a survey is certainly useful. It is also useful to sit and listen to a few students and hear in complete, messy, language about what they think of themselves as readers.

In her book *Adolescents talk about reading: Exploring resistance to and engagement with text*, Reeves (2004) used long-form interviews and case studies to investigate students' relationships to reading. The book consists of about a dozen case studies of student readers. There is no number associated with their attitude towards reading; rather Reeves was guided by students' own words. However, she was able to gain much insight and make recommendations based on these interviews. She noticed patterns across all interviewees. She found that in almost all students, their interests in literacy activities and personal love of reading conflicted with the literacy practices in their school. These adolescents sought connection and desperately want to be able to

connect to what they are reading. Most reported not finding that connection in school (Reeves, 2004).

These broad themes, from such a small sample size and without any quantitative information, are not designed to make generalized, new, conclusions about the nation's population of readers. However, the intention is to help educators make sense of their own students' struggles as they will see their students in the interviewees (Reeves 2004). The professional analysis and connections that Reeves offered provided a scholarly platform for the student voices. Her goal in this data collection was to demonstrate the ways that teachers could adapt their instruction to better suit their students and that theme runs through clearly (Reeves 2004). While the goal is more instruction-oriented than my research, the method and care in presentation are central to the goals of my research. Therefore, my qualitative research will be in many ways modeled after Reeves.

### **Conclusion**

All of the above scholarship informs my research. As I conduct my own research, I first try to understand the conversation around the ideas of "loving reading." Also, in order to design the research, I needed to understand both the makeup of reading motivation and the formation of reading identity. Also, I will ground my own case studies in a deep understanding of home literacy and the necessity of interrogating the racism around that study. Finally, I will combine the reading motivation research and the qualitative focus of Reeve's book in my research design. With this focus, my phenomenology will attempt to problematize, contextualize and shed light on the question: What does loving reading mean in middle school?



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

The goal of the research for this study was to create a phenomenology for loving reading. A phenomenology is a study of a social or mental phenomenon, which suits this study because I believe that loving reading is both a mental and internalized experience for adolescents but also a socially constructed phenomenon. The phenomenology explores the question: what is the lived experience of loving reading for middle school students? In this chapter, I will discuss the research paradigm I chose to guide my investigation and the method I chose to collect data and its links to the paradigm. I will also detail the specifics of my participants and research context. Finally, I will provide my research method and materials, as well as the process with which I analyzed the research.

#### **Research Paradigm**

To answer the research question: what is the lived experience of loving reading for middle school students, I am using the research paradigm of interpretivism. There are two key understandings of interpretivism: relativist ontology and translational epistemology. Both understandings support my educational philosophy and the drive behind this research. Interpretivists believe in relativist ontology, which does not put much value on the idea of objective truth but rather understands that learning and understanding is best understood relatively, looking at the social context of the information (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). In fact, interpretivists believe that learning needs

to be done with full awareness of social context and, ideally, in a more social format optimizing organic learning experience (Angen, 2000). The experiential nature of learning is imbedded in the research about reading affect and motivation. Because understanding reading identity, behaviors, and motivation is relativist ontology because it recognizes that the *experience of reading* and the emotional and social environment around it is critical to our understanding of the skill. Therefore, research about a student's attitude of themselves as a reader lends itself to relativist ontology, and thus, interpretivism.

The second key tenant of interpretivism is translational epistemology. Translational epistemology assumes that research cannot be entirely objective because they cannot pretend to not know what they know or believe about a certain subject (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Therefore interpretivists with this belief do not try to rely on objective experimentation techniques because they believe that the hunt for objectivity is ultimately futile.

In practice, interpretivists make their relativist ontology and translational epistemology come to action by creating interpretivist research methodologies. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2006), the research method in the interpretivist paragraph should include the following tenets.

1. Knowledge is construction and research is conducted in more naturalistic environments, such as interviews and analysis of existing texts.
2. There is a dialogic approach to the building of knowledge, where the subject and the researcher listen to each other and collaborate to develop understanding.

3. The meanings or understandings emerge from the research process, rather than the research process confirming or denying an existing hypothesis.
4. Typically, qualitative rather than quantitative data is collected using an interpretivist approach.

In order to conduct interpretivist research, one must understand how to evaluate research conducted with this approach. Angen (2000) wrote *Evaluating interpretive inquiry: Reviewing the validity debate and opening the dialogue* which gave criteria for quality research in this paradigm. For me to design my own research, it is key to understand these elements. Key elements to keep in mind here are:

1. Being respectful and aware of the needs of the subjects and the duties of representing them
2. Being aware of the role of the subjectivity of the researcher and the impact on bias and life experience in the collection and interpretation of the findings
3. Ethical validity -- meaning that the researcher has proven that the findings and research could have a positive impact on the target population
4. Substantive validity -- meaning that the researcher needs to prove that the substance of their argument is useful in the form of taking into account bias and demonstrating their thinking process and their interpretive choices
5. The researcher needs to make some kinds of persuasive argument relating to the research question using the evidence from their findings

In summary, the interpretivist framework fits my research question because it provides a holistic approach to research just as this research question involves a holistic

approach to reading. Interpretivists also believe that knowledge and ways of thinking are constructed. My research question asks what behaviors, identities and social understandings construct “loving reading.” Also, the interpretivist approach provides thorough tools to guide and evaluate the research itself.

### **Choice of Method**

To research my question, I conducted long interviews of students in order to create a phenomenology. This was not a “case study” per se because I used multiple subjects which were not selected cases of study. Therefore, the data I collected was qualitative, not quantitative.

Interviews are one of the most important research methods used in the interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivists argue that research needs to be conducted in a naturalistic way. It was always my intention to conduct the study in a neutral environment, so students were home while I interviewed them.

Interpretivists also argue for a dialogic approach to learning. Therefore, interview questions are not simply asked and answered. Rather, I prepared a series of questions and potential follow ups that I could ask depending on what the subject was saying. I was able to be responsive and in dialogue with the subjects to ensure that the subject was really understanding the questions and that the response genuinely reflected the subject’s ideas about the topic. Also, I allowed myself to ask follow up questions that I did not prepare. Because the nature of the research is dialogic, during the interview, participants sometimes provided information and learning that inspired me to construct even deeper questions. I created my research method to allow for that organic exchange.

My method is inductive, not deductive. Before conducting my interviews, I had no working theory or hypothesis about the reading behaviors, identities and motivations that go into “loving reading.” Rather, I looked to my research to help me draw conclusions. I was not searching for certain types of answers and weeding out the rest, rather, this exploration was truly open-ended.

Finally, my data collection is qualitative. This also aligns with the interpretivist approach, which stresses qualitative data over quantitative. As detailed in chapter 2, there have been many attempts at qualitizing reading motivation in the forms of surveys. However, I believe that in order to understand the way that “loving reading” is constructed individually and socially, I needed to hear how that concept plays out in a student’s life in their own words. Therefore, their qualitative accounts are more useful than any quantitative data collection.

### **Setting**

The setting for my interviews was a middle school in a mid-sized school district representing inner-ring suburban towns in a Midwestern city. All students interviewed were soon-to-be-eighth graders from the same middle school.

It is useful, in understanding this setting, to learn some statistics about the school and the community. At the time, there were a total of 750 students attending the school, 37% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. While it fluctuates year to year, the racial makeup of the school was usually about 60% white, and around 10% each African-American, Latinx, Asian, and two or more races. It was far more diverse than the racial composition of the state but far less diverse than the racial composition of the nearby city.

Importantly, the community has become more socio-economically disadvantaged in the last 20 years. Due to a changing racial makeup of the community and open enrollment from other districts, the school has also become increasingly racially diverse in the same amount of time.

Despite the inherent racial bias of standardized tests, they do provide some insight into the setting. For the state standardized reading test taken in the spring of 2019, 63% of students in the school met or exceeded standards. This number reflects the latest in a downward trend of reading scores over the last seven years for the school. Particularly, this cohort of students achieved below the score average with about 58% of them meeting or exceeding the standards according to the text. Additionally, the same cohort of students achieved over 60% on the state test in fifth grade.

The reason I chose this setting is two-fold. The first reason is access. I worked in this school district as a 7th grade Language Arts teacher. Accordingly, I had access to the data that is useful for me to conduct my study, such as individual reading scores and parent contact information. I also had a better understanding of the students beyond the interview in terms of their past performance on exams as well as their general reading behavior in class. Secondly, this school provided access to a diverse array of students -- those from all over the socio-economic and parental education spectrum, students with IEPs, English Language Learners and students from many racial backgrounds.

The actual interviews were conducted virtually off-premises. When I was originally designing my research in the fall of 2019, I could not have imagined the context of my research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, none of these students had sat

in a classroom since the first week of March. It was only safe for the interview to be conducted virtually, via password protected Zoom meetings. These interviews took place in the end of June and beginning of July, a time marked by the partial “opening” of society and the increase in COVID-19 cases across the country and in their community, specifically.

In summary, the setting of the study was a middle-class inner-ring middle school outside of a major Midwestern city. The school is relatively racially diverse relative to the state. The school has been struggling overall with maintaining reading growth for cohorts of students over their middle school tenure.

### **Participants**

All participants for the study were in my 7th grade Language Arts class during the 2019-2020 school year. In June of 2020, I sent an email to all of the families in three of my classes asking them to talk to their children about voluntarily participating in the study. I created my participant pool based on the positive responses to that question. Within that pool, I randomly chose six participants within groups based on reading scores. Two participants performed below grade level standards on either the state reading standardized test or their fall 2019 Fountas and Pinnell assessment. Two participants met grade level standards on those two assessments and two exceeded standards on those two assessments. I wanted to ensure that the study had a range of perspectives on reading, so I did look to assessments for that reason. However, the questions and analysis focused much more on the students’ perception of their reading performance, habits and attitude, and little on assessments.

Fred is a gregarious person and student. He was usually the first to raise his hand in class and also usually the first to blurt out answers. He was extremely sociable during his 7th grade year and made easy friends with all of his peers. He was able to socialize with people in many different “friend groups.” While he has never struggled on the yearly state standardized test, always meeting or exceeding standards throughout his school career, more in-depth tests were a challenge for him. In November, when students were tested for their Fountas and Pinnell reading level, he was leveled at a “T,” which is far below what is considered “grade-level” for a 7th grader. At the higher levels, he struggled the most with questions that asked him to, as Fountas and Pinnel calls it, “think beyond the text.” This data confirmed an observation I had made about him as a student: his comprehension rested on the surface of texts without more teacher guidance.

Linus is a highly motivated, highly competitive student. He loves fishing, baseball and hockey. He usually performs with excellent test scores on standardized tests and was above grade level for his mid-year 7th grade Fountas and Pinnell. His grades do not always match his excellent aptitude tests, as he usually gets Bs and Cs in all of his core classes. I know that he would prefer better grades but he often gets distracted with the social elements of school, loses track of timetables and occasionally gets into power struggles with teachers. With me, Linus has always been jocular. We would chat about true crime podcasts often. He said they were the key to being able to focus.

Henry is a thoughtful and kind student. He is a student in the lower third of academic performance and, during the school year, would often say that he did not like reading. He did have a strong relationship to his grades and he always wanted to feel a



part of the class community, so he went along with reading assignments and reading time. His parents were aware of this and his mom noted his dislike of reading when she responded to my initial interest email for this study. He loves the community aspect of school and was the most consistent participant in optional online discussions during the emergency learning period of spring 2020. He loves professional sports and video games and one of our favorite topics of conversation is the NBA.

Dani is a quiet, eclectic student. Early on in the school year, she came up to me with a post-it on which she had drawn a picture of a rat. With that post-it, she explained, she invited me to the Rat Club and she was the Rat Queen. She meant this as a joke and I took it that way as well -- she has a great sense of humor. In 7th grade, she was in a group of friends that was really motivated by grades. Sometimes she struggled to keep up with those high standards, but we had very self-reflective conversations about it during those times.

Brian walked up to me on the back-to-school night and immediately told me that he loved reading. All year, he had particular love for the *Wings of Fire* series, even showing off some of the *Wings of Fire* clothes that he had. His enthusiasm for these books is clear. He is a kind student with a gentle sense of humor who loves to joke about his interests. Switching subjects to another person's curiosities can be difficult for him, but he does try. He would get redirected often in class for reading *Wings of Fire* during non-independent reading times. He also told me that this would happen in other classes as well.

Victoria is an outgoing and highly motivated student. In class, she was one of the most attentive and consistent participants in class discussions. She was always willing to take feedback and adjust her thinking, which is rare with such a high-achieving student. She loves conversation about social justice and equity, and she even began an initiative to donate books to students during the Scholastic Book Fair. Victoria thrived off inside jokes and was very conscious of the feeling of the classroom.

### **Method and Research Instruments**

#### **Research Design**

The main data collection in this research is qualitative data obtained in interviews. The data is designed to ask students to explain, in their own words, what loving reading means to them. As discussed in chapter two, key elements of loving reading are reading behaviors at home, reading motivation, reading identity, and perceived reading skill.

My questions are designed to be flexible and dialogic. The interpretivist research paradigm believes that the construction of knowledge should be a two-way process between the researcher and the subject. Therefore, as the subjects provided information and insight, I used different questions to be responsive to their ideas. I also allowed myself to ask any follow-up questions that I believed were appropriate and would provide insight into the key research question or any of the sub-questions. Rather than a list of research questions, I have provided the map of the main research question, sub-genres of that question and potential questions that I used in a more circular, discursive, responsive mode as opposed to a linear, prescribed list of questions.

#### **Question Matrix/Research Tool**

The question matrix that I created is Figure 1. I designed the questions to include key themes from the literature review as well as lines of questioning inspired by other affective reading assessments. Embracing the discursive style of the interpretivist paradigm, the subcategories of questions were deployed in any order with the exception of one. I intentionally asked the “loving reading” question last because I did not want such a broad and definitive question to change the way that the subjects answered the remaining questions.

In order to maintain accuracy, the interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording software. I also took notes on responses as the interview was happening, but the goal of those notes will mostly be to help me formulate follow-up questions. When it comes to the eventual inductive coding of the data, I relied on the video recordings. After the coding was completed, I deleted the recordings to preserve student anonymity.

### **Internal Review Board (IRB)**

I sought IRB approval for my project at the end of May of 2020. In order to receive approval from Hamline University’s IRB, I demonstrated that my research would be ethical, not harm participants and protect participant anonymity. I received approval from the principal of my school to conduct the research and use the school’s contact information to contact parents. After receiving approval from the IRB, I received informed consent from all participants’ parents to conduct the interview and use it for research.

**Summary** My research consisted primarily of interviews with students to explore the phenomena of loving reading. The interviews were conducted in a discursive and

dialogic manner, with some degree of improvisation on my part, as students brought new insight into the phenomenon. There is a matrix of questions in the categories of types of texts, reading habits, reading identity, reading at home, reading self-efficacy, reading future and loving reading.

### **Data Analysis**

These interviews were the basis of the phenomenology. The analysis of the data was inductive analysis, which is in accordance with the interpretivist paradigm. It is also one of the most commonly used types of analysis when collecting qualitative data.

Thomas (2006) lists four main strategies/principles for this approach:

1. One of the most common methods of data analysis in a phenomenology is inductive coding.
2. Analysis is in the form of the identification of categories from the data -- these categories should be major themes from the qualitative data.
3. Some amount of subjectivity is part of the research because the researcher has to determine the data that is the most important. Therefore, a different researcher may find different interpretations of the same data, but this is to be expected in the analysis of inductive data.

The key reminders for the researcher are to be brave and bold with their categories and themes that they find while being open and honest about potential biases and perspectives that led them to those categories.

Inductive coding is the method that leads to the development of themes from qualitative data which then leads to conclusions. Inductive analysis begins with a few

close readings of the raw data, in this case, audio recordings (Thomas, 2006). As Thomas (2006) writes, “The outcome of an inductive analysis is the development of categories into a model or framework that summarizes the raw data and conveys key themes and processes.” To develop these categories, I will use inductive coding. Thomas (2006) provides an excellent description of the process of inductive coding. After an initial reading of the data, the researcher identifies specific text segments related to objectives then labels the segments to create categories then reduces the redundancy between categories and finally creates a model incorporating the most important categories, which should have about 3-8 categories. At the final stage, my coding had four categories.

In summary, the method for the data analysis follows logically from the interpretivist approach and qualitative data. I used inductive coding to create segments of texts and then categories which I then used to derive themes. From those themes, I created a relationship or model of the categories which I used to develop theories.

### **Conclusion**

The data analysis method is designed to create a phenomenology answering the question: “What is the lived experience of ‘loving reading’ for middle school readers?” Because the data was collected in the form of interviews, it is qualitative data. The research paradigm is interpretivism, which emphasizes the dialogic and subjective experience between the researchers and the subject. One of the common research outcomes of an interpretivist study is a phenomenology, which looks to describe a phenomenon using qualitative data, in this case using student interviews to describe the phenomenon of loving reading. Qualitative data is most commonly used in interpretivist

approaches, so these interviews aimed to follow the discursive and dialogic approach of that research paradigm. Once the data was collected, I used inductive coding to categorize and analyze the data, possibly drawing themes, theories and a model of understanding the phenomenology. In chapter four, I will explain the results of my research.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

Over the course of two weeks during the summer of 2020, I conducted six interviews with six of my former students to explore a phenomenology of loving reading. The goal of the study was to answer the question, “What is the lived experience of ‘loving reading’ for middle school readers?” I followed the research paradigm and methodology, as explained in Chapter 3.

When I conducted these interviews, the question of: “What is going to happen in September?” hung over the conversations. The governor had yet to announce whether kids would be returning to school with full-time in-person learning, hybrid of in-person and online learning or fully distant, online learning. While these circumstances did not necessarily change my questioning and do not detract from the validity of this research, it is important to clarify this context as the discussion of research results continues. The interpretivist paradigm that guides this investigation embraces subjectivity and context.

This chapter will explore the students’ lived experiences as told in interviews and will be organized according to components of “loving reading”:

1. reading identity
2. reading habits
3. reading motivation
4. reading future

Every section will begin with an explanation of the findings from each component based on coded inductive analysis. It will follow with my own analysis of the results as they pertain to the question: What are students' lived experiences of loving [or not loving] reading?

### **Reading Identity**

**Results** Five out of six participants said that they did consider themselves to be readers. For a description of each of the participants, refer to "Participants" in Chapter 3. However, each participant had highly individualized narratives that constructed their reading identity.

Frank said that he always considered himself a reader since he was able to read picture books on his own. He said it was important that kids think of themselves as readers: "It is important to say that you're a reader because people know they can talk about books." When asked about how his reading played into his social life, he said, "I think [my friends read], but I don't know if they like reading" and that he talks about books with his friends "sometimes." Similarly, Linus considered himself a reader and said he felt like a reader from the beginning of his educational career. However, he contrasted with Frank in his sense of the importance of reading as a social identity. He said that some of his friends considered themselves to be readers, but most did not and he said he certainly did not seek out friends who considered themselves readers. Exploring this concept further, Linus explained that he did not want to be known as *just* a reader but preferred to be known for being funny and friendly over being a reader or being smart. He sought out people who do the same.



Two other participants, Dani and Victoria, said that their reading identities developed over time. For Victoria, she did not feel like a reader until her fourth grade teacher introduced her to Mary Downing Hahn's intermediate reader horror books, such as *Stepping on the Cracks* and *Wait Till Helen Comes*. She identified that as the first time she felt immersed in her reading and motivated to read on her own. From that point on, she felt close to her reading identity, explaining that most of her friends also identified as readers. She believed that it was important for kids to think of themselves as readers because of the role identity played in reading motivation. In her words, "If you are going to be reading a lot of books, it is helpful to think of yourself as a reader because it makes you want to do it." Dani had a similar experience with feeling like a reader for the first time in late elementary school. At the end of fourth grade, she began reading Tui T. Sutherland's *Wings of Fire* series. For her, this series was the first time she felt very invested in reading independently and also felt that it was the first time she could see the impact of reading on her other skills such as her vocabulary. Since then, she has thought of herself as a reader. Socially, she wished her friends talked about books and reading more. She said that they were a group of academically motivated students, and they mostly talked about what is happening in math and orchestra. Most of them were in the most accelerated math track or, as Dani called it, "smart kid math." With them, she tried to steer conversations to reading because she felt more included.

All but one of the participants felt that reading identity was a clear and binary idea: if you read a lot, you are a reader. Brian, however, thought of it with more nuance. He always considered himself to be a reader. He felt that being a reader was one of his

favorite parts about himself. For him, his reading identity also revolved around the *Wings of Fire* series. He brought about a dozen of his favorite *Wings of Fire* books to the video interview and even was wearing a *Wings of Fire* shirt. For Brian, reading identity was a high bar to clear. He said, “Some people read a lot of books and don’t consider themselves readers because they don’t love reading and some people love reading and don’t consider themselves readers because they don’t read a lot of books.” He also said that some kids read a lot and liked books but did not necessarily consider themselves readers because they wanted to be known for something else amongst their peers. For him, there was a social implication of being a reader that some students might be ashamed of (not dissimilar to being identified as a nerd).

Finally, one participant said that he did not consider himself a reader: Henry. He never felt that he was a reader and has never felt particularly close to being a reader. Some of his friends read a lot, but he never asked them if they thought of themselves as readers. At the end of the interview, I asked him if he felt that reading made you a better person. He emphatically said “no,” explaining, “I know a lot of people who read a lot of books, but they are pretty terrible people.”

**Analysis** It may have seemed that the question of reading identity was a binary one: are you a reader or are you not? However, beyond the binary of that response, the diversity of interpretations of what it meant for these students to be readers was striking. Some, like Frank, Linus and Henry, had never interrogated their reading identities and did not see them as something that changed and grew with them. For them, you either were a

reader or you were not and it did not change. Victoria and Dani felt that their reading identities changed over time.

Each of these students' explorations of their reading identities aligned with one of the two most prominent theories of adolescent identity development: the narrative theory and the dual cycle theory. In the 1950's Erik Erickson concluded that the integral struggle of adolescence was identity development and this theory continued to be widely accepted in both popular and academic circles (von Doesselar, 2019). Current research around adolescent identity formation focused on two schools of thought: the narrativist identity theorist argued identity formation was based around individuals forming a life story about themselves which included key events where they take on an identity. Meanwhile, the dual cycle approach claimed that identity formation was a constant cycle of making identity commitments and then exploring the breadth and depth of those identity commitments before inhabiting that identity in later life (Von Doesselar, 2019). It is important to note that both approaches maintained Erikson's original theory that this process is most active and unstable during adolescence. The students I interviewed were at the very beginning of the process of identity formation, and it showed in their responses. Both Dani and Victoria identified key events that contributed to their reading identity, which is integral to the narrative approach to identity formation. While Frank, Linus, and Brian did say that they considered themselves to be readers, none of them could identify any key events in their identity formation. Frank and Linus did not seem to have explored the depth of that identity because they could not explain how that identity was formed or interrogate how it impacted their lives. Brian, however, did seem to be

exploring the depth of his reading identity when he noted that identifying as a reader consisted of a combination of an enjoyment of reading, a habit of reading, and a comfort with the social implications of being seen as a reader.

From this very small sample, it is clear that this time in adolescence is an unstable but powerful time in identity development and some students are only beginning to explore their own identity commitments and identity narratives. This is important for teachers to remember as they are presenting their students with the possible identity commitment of being a reader. Even though students younger than adolescent age may be able to say that they are a reader or they are not, grappling deeply with that identity is just beginning to happen in middle school. Teachers should present being a reader as a possible identity commitment for students to explore rather than make the reader identity a binary choice. In presenting that commitment, the identity of “reader” should be presented as inclusively as possible.

These participants’ experience with the social element of identity formation supported the existing literature. The Merga (2014) study claimed that students who were avid readers were more likely to have reading encouragement from their friends than students who were not avid readers. In reading identity and reading habits, the most avid readers of the group were Brian, Victoria and Dani and all of them identified that their friends read, and they talked about books with their friends. Henry, who did not identify as a reader and also did not read much said that some of his friends were readers but he did not talk about books with them. Frank and Linus both identified as readers but had the least depth of exploration in that reading identity and said that their reading lives did

not play much of a role in their social identities. This pattern suggested that the more deeply explored and held reading identity could impact these adolescents' social identities.

### **Reading Habits & Reading at Home**

#### **Results**

While a short summary of participant reading habits can be found in Figure 2, these experiences existed in an important context. Victoria and Frank were, at the time of the interview, the only participants reading daily. Victoria said she was engaged in re-reading the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth and was also reading *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, the Hunger Games prequel by Suzanne Collins. She said she was reading every day before bed and during family reading times her mother initiated. Frank, at the time of the interview, was reading *The Maze Runner* during the daily thirty minutes of reading time that his mother enforced in the home.

Brian, Dani, Henry and Linus said they were reading infrequently or not at all. Brian was re-reading some favorites from the *Wings of Fire* series and said that some weeks he found time for reading and some he didn't. He began the interview by apologizing to me for not reading very much. Dani said that her reading was "seasonal." In the fall and winter, she explained, she reads voraciously, finishing 3-4 books per week. In the spring and summer, she said it is hard for her to be motivated to read and spends a lot of time playing video games instead. Linus said that he very rarely reads outside of school, even during the school year and usually brings a book to his classes in case he has downtime or structured independent reading time but does not read much outside of that.

Sometimes, he said, his mother would ask him to read and he would spend a week reading a book, usually a Stephen King novel. Henry, the only participant who does not identify as a reader, was not reading at all and said that he doesn't read much during the school year at all. When asked if they wished they were reading more, Brian and Dani both said that ideally, they would be reading more and Henry and Linus both said that they felt happy with the amount that they were reading.

### **Analysis**

Based on this sample, reading identity did not entirely correlate with reading habits. The time of the study, summer vacation, is in some ways a flawed time to take the sample because it has been a long time since these participants have had the reading motivation that school can provide socially, practically and emotionally. In other ways, it is an illuminating time to take the sample because it shows what elements of that reading motivation students have internalized to be able to entirely independently perform. It is striking that while five participants identified as readers, only two were actually reading on even a regular weekly basis. One of the two students that was reading regularly was doing so because his family was structuring a mandatory reading time. When I asked this participant, Frank, if he would still be reading even if it was not mandatory in his house, he said, "probably."

All of the participants felt that they were "supposed" to be reading every day. They said that their teachers have been telling them this since elementary school. When I asked the participants why they were not reading as much as they said their teachers expected them to be reading, distractions were a clear theme. Three participants said that

they were playing a lot of video games instead of reading. I found this particularly interesting because all of the participants informally discussed their boredom during the beginning of the interview. This summer was a time of massive shifting in social behaviors: some businesses were beginning to reopen, but generally families were still maintaining social distancing if not complete quarantine. Participants expressed that they were not able to see friends in the same relaxed, prolonged and free manner that they expected to in the summer before 8th grade. They identified their feelings as boredom. Even in this boredom and considering themselves readers, many of them were not reading. These results highlight a key finding: without the support of a teacher modeling reading motivation and providing a social-academic context for reading, even some students who identify as readers struggle to build and maintain reading habits independently. For some, like Dani and Brian, the quality reading teaching that aligns with all of the reading motivation-building research described in Chapter 3 increases daily reading but others, like Linus, may not make a habit of independent reading even with that quality instruction.

### **Motivation to Read**

#### **Results**

The five students who identified as readers identified varied and complex motivations to read. While different motivations were more resonant with different students, it was clear that whichever motivation worked for the participant, it was deeply felt. For the students who identified as readers, three key motivations arose:

1. Competitiveness with peers

2. Escape within text
3. Reflecting family values

Both Linus and Dani quickly identified their competitiveness as the key to their motivation to read. They also both quickly remembered key events, as identity theorists would say, that played a pivotal role in their competitive reading identity. Linus said that in second grade, he was placed in a middle-level reading group. He knew it wasn't the lowest group but could tell (even though the teacher seemed to be not sharing the levels of the groups) that he was not in the highest group. From that point on, he was determined to get into the highest group and said that in subsequent years, he was always placed in the absolute highest group. In third grade, there was a contest with an objective he vaguely remembered: "Something about reading as many books to kids as you can. I don't really remember...but I do remember that I won. I still have the medal." He recalled taking the Fountas and Pinnell reading level test during 7th grade and said that he knew it was his goal to "get as close to Z as possible, if not Z." When I asked what he did to accomplish these achievements, he said, "try really hard," but for Linus this did not mean reading more in preparation. In fact, he admitted to lying on reading logs for most of elementary school. It was easier for him to find what the assessments or tasks were asking for and achieve that than it was to read more outside of school.

Dani also identified competitiveness as one of her main motivations to read. She also said that she was placed in one of the lower reading groups in elementary school for many years. She remembered being shocked and feeling inferior when she saw that kids were reading Nancy Drew in first grade. She said she was "stuck on Junie B. Jones," for



a lot of elementary school. When her mom bought her the first *Harry Potter* book at the beginning of third grade, she got a few pages into it and thought, “I have no idea what is going on” and then closed it. She said that she just didn’t really care to read more and didn’t see the importance of it, but she said, “the older I got, the more I understood that grades mattered.” Once she felt motivated by grades, she began reading *Wings of Fire* and was pleased to see her vocabulary get better, and from there she began reading more and more. Once she felt that she was good at reading, she found joy in besting her peers in reading assessments. In fifth grade, she got a higher score than “the really smart kid” on a reading project, and as a result it was her favorite project that year. In 7th grade, students kept track of how many books they read by adding post-its next to their names. She said that every day she would walk into class and check the post-it accumulation of a student who was in a different class, a friend of hers who she identified as “the smartest kid in the grade.” If he had more post-its than she had, she was determined to finish a book that day.

Dani, as well as Victoria and Brian, identified escapism and entertainment as a major motivation for reading. Dani loved reading “scary books, like...really scary books.” She said that *#MurderTrending* was her favorite book of 2020 so far. She said that, when she is reading a lot, it is a combination of being “into the plot” and competitive with her friends that keeps her going. Brian, who loves the *Wings of Fire* series, says he read because he loved the story so much and being a part of that world was often preferable to whatever was going on in the “real world” for him. He would get in trouble for reading in other classes because he found that was just a draw to him. He said that he was always

into series books and, before it was *Wings of Fire*, it was *Warriors*, and before that it was something else. Being immersed in the world made it more likely for him to read, which, he said, is why it is sometimes hard for him to read over the summer because he doesn't have his Language Arts class time to force him to read and get his interest piqued. There were other worlds over the summer that he could enter with a little less cognitive effort and more social and mental stimulation: video games.

Victoria also identified escapism as a major motivation for reading. She loved reading and re-reading series because she could get "sucked in" to the characters and the story. Particularly, at the time of the interview, she loved reading the *Divergent* and *Twilight* series. For her, the perfect series had sensationalism and big plot twists without being otherworldly. While Brian and Dani called out *Wings of Fire* as books that turned them into readers, Victoria particularly mentioned *Wings of Fire* as a series she really disliked because the premise leaned too far away from reality to her. She said that she loved how reading offered her a "different perspective" on the world. She particularly mentioned how important reading is to her as a person with white privilege because she felt that she needed to be reading the stories of people of color in order to understand their perspective. Victoria said that she found standardized tests and other measures of reading ability deeply un motivating because she felt that she never performed as well on them as she hoped and felt that they told a story about her reading ability that did not feel complete to her. Therefore, competition around objective measures such as tests and grades did nothing for her motivation. Rather, she seemed more motivated by the stories but also her conviction that reading had a moral component.

Victoria and Frank were the only two participants who answered “yes” to the question, “Does reading make you a better person?” They both said that reading taught patience, discipline, and new perspectives. For Victoria, this seemed like a component of her reading motivation but for Frank, it seemed to hold more weight. Frank was the only participant whose family had continued to enforce a structured reading time after elementary school during all times of the year. When he described the types of books he liked, he said, “Science fiction, sports, that’s about it” and did not go into detail with the same enthusiasm that some of the other participants did. He took pride in being a good reader, saying that he once earned \$120 in a Read-a-Thon and that he liked that he could Google his favorite subjects, like fishing, and actually understand the articles, but he did not mention being competitive with his friends. It was clear that reading was a habit and a value for Frank. He said that he hoped people were still reading in the future because if not, “that would be kind of sad” because it would mean that “people are getting dumb.” It seemed that for Frank, his motivation was not competition or a love of literature, but a sense of duty to the idea of being a reader, a value instilled by his family.

Henry did not read and did not consider himself to be a reader, but his thoughts on reading motivation were still illuminating. He said that he loved learning but preferred to get his information from videos instead of books. He was adamant that the type of text had no impact on his desire to read. For him, the act of reading, the sitting still, the quiet, the type of processing, was unappealing. He hated when teachers would say things like, “You just haven’t found the right book yet.” “What goes on in my head when teachers say things like that,” Henry said, “is eye roll emoji.” He said that he never felt like he was

bad at reading, so he never worried about reading more to catch up to the standard. When the state standardized tests came along, he would “just do it to get it over with because he knew he had to do well on it.” He met grade level standards every year. Activities that leveraged competition never “sparked interest” for him. He said that he does sometimes worry that his lack of reading will catch up to him, that he will no longer be able to perform to standard with his current habits, but said that those worries are small and infrequent and have not changed his attitude.

### **Analysis**

Even though I categorized the motivations for these participants as competition, escapism, and values, every participant had a combination of motivations that was uniquely their own. I hesitate to value one motivation above another, but if it is educators’ goal to develop their students into lifelong readers, one has to interrogate the value of reading for competition. Competitions are externally created and driven by external motivation. When that external piece is taken away, the students seem to have no motivation to read. Adult life has very few extrinsic rewards for readers, especially if one does not seek them out. Therefore, it seems that an intrinsic motivation could be more beneficial for students in order to develop lifelong reading habits.

Those who considered themselves readers all spoke with pride about what made them read and felt comfortable with their unique chemistry of motivations. Comparing the students’ discussion of reading motivation in their own words to the scholarly conversation around it, there were some striking similarities and some glaring omissions.

The scholarly conversation around reading motivation focuses much energy on instructional strategies that teachers can use to stoke reading motivation. In these interviews, participants did not name a single instructional strategy that they agreed was effective. Three participants said that competitions, both purposeful ones their teachers held and ones they created themselves, were helpful to motivate them to read. However, two participants said those competitions were actually de-motivating. Importantly, even those who liked competitions did not say it made them enjoy reading more or get more out of their reading, it just made them competitive.

No participants mentioned open-ended questioning, which Ruddell (1995) and others claim is a key element of stoking reading motivation. Dani did mention that she was motivated by book clubs but no other participants mentioned instructional techniques that leveraged students' social lives with reading, a key element of the scholarship of Linda Gambrell. I do not necessarily think that the omission of these strategies means that they are illegitimate. These participants are 12-14 and they may not be fully able to analyze and verbalize all of the instructional strategies that had an effect on them. However, their understanding of themselves is integral to their reading identities so it is important to note what does seem to matter to these participants in building a reading identity.

Over and over, with the exception of the participant who did not think of himself as a reader, books, not teachers or instructional strategies, played key roles in developing reading motivation. Dani said she became a reader when she read *Wings of Fire* and Brian's current reading identity is based around those books. Linus loved reading James

Patterson mysteries and said he felt pride walking into a classroom with a three and a half inch book with small print. Victoria said she became a reader with Mary Downing Hahn's books. Frank said that he loves having books around him to choose for his reading. Some participants mentioned that teachers helped them find their favorite, reading identity-affirming titles. They mentioned that they appreciated teachers structuring reading and book shopping time into the routine. Teachers also played a role in stoking participants' interest in their reading, but the text appeared more centrally their narrative than the teachers did.

However, this does not mean that the teachers did not play a central role. Gambrell (1990) says that the teacher's main role in reading motivation is to model reading behaviors and build excitement around books. Donalyn Miller (2009) and Lucy Calkins (1991) stress that teachers need to provide students with an environment rich in text and allow them to have complete agency over what they choose to read. None of my participants found or affirmed a reading identity with an assigned text. The participants echoed the teachings of Gambrell, Miller and Calkins because they found success when their teachers and families created an environment for them to choose texts and find joy in exploring them. While Henry said that teachers claiming he just hadn't found the right book yet made him "eye roll emoji," it is understandable why that is a common refrain. It seemed to work for so many other students.

## **Reading Future**

### **Results**

Participants almost universally felt that reading would play a central role in their future success. Many noted that reading is a critical skill to being a good student, something all of them wanted to be. Frank said that reading is a skill similar to other “basic” things and that it is hard to do more “advanced things” if you don’t have the basics. Linus noticed that reading made other classes easier, particularly saying that knowing Greek and Latin roots helped him in science. Henry said that he wanted to perform well on tests, like the state standardized tests and, eventually, the ACT. . Brian said that his reading habits sometimes get in the way of his other classes, because he reads his books instead of paying attention, but also said that he likes that he can understand everything assigned to him in all of his classes. Victoria said that reading fiction independently helped her gain more “perspective” on non-fiction books and allowed her to “make more connections” to what she is learning in school. Dani said, “reading takes a lot of concentration, especially for me” and said that developing that concentration has helped her in other subjects.

The participants who had a strong idea about the careers they wanted as adults felt that reading would be a part of their adult lives. Henry, who did not identify as a reader, also was the participant with the least formed idea of what career he wanted. He said that ideally he would be a professional YouTuber. However, he knew that was probably not an option and had not thought much beyond that. Dani wanted to be a writer when she grows up and knows that she is going to be reading constantly for inspiration. She felt that reading already helped her own writing. Victoria said that, up until recently, she had wanted to be a teacher when she grew up but, at the time of our interview, she wanted to

work in the Emergency Room as either a doctor or a nurse. She said that she knows that she is going to need to be a strong reader to gain those career credentials and said that she also hopes she continues to read for fun as an adult.

Both Linus and Frank linked their reading skills to allowing them to make money in the future. Linus said that he “definitely wants to make a lot of money, at least \$200k per year” and said that getting a job that makes that much money involves reading. Frank said that he wants to be an anesthesiologist because he heard that they make a lot of money and said that being a good reader would help him in those goals, specifically referring to the tests he would have to take to be a doctor.

### **Analysis**

Participant responses to questions around reading achievement and reading efficacy did demonstrate that participants saw a link between reading and long-term achievement. These links seemed strong with the students who identified as readers. They saw how reading was a vehicle that would get them where they wanted to go.

However, in participants’ answers to questions around achievement in reading and life, there was a tension between achievement on reading assessments and achievement in reading. As mentioned in the discussion of reading motivation and reading identity, many participants equated their performance on standardized tests and their reading level to their reading skill. The only participants who did not were Victoria and Henry, the two most voracious independent readers. The others only really spoke of reading accomplishment in terms of accomplishment in assessment. They would cite getting in a certain reading group, getting a good grade on a project, passing the state standardized



tests, or achieving a certain reading level as evidence of reading accomplishment. This translated into their visions for their future; when discussing reading in the future, every participant other than Victoria and Brian discussed being able to use their reading skill to pass a test or to meet a certain standard for their careers.

As established in the literature review, standardized reading assessments are known to be biased and teaching to the test is known to be damaging to students of color. Without prompting, many participants felt that their only measure of knowing their strength as a reader was a standardized test or reading level. Even though these students have been presented with other measures for their quality as a reader, they hold on to these “objective” scores as the main measure of reading skill. If these tests can become such a strong element of perceived reading ability and they are known to be biased, they can be hugely damaging to students’ reading narratives. It is unclear to me if it is even possible to continue giving these tests and these metrics without them causing more harm than good.

### **“Loving Reading” and Conclusions**

Every participant who identified as a reader said that they loved reading, even though three of those participants were not reading often. A chart of participant responses is Figure 3. I asked Linus what he thought of that contrast, and he said that he didn’t think about it. He just always said he loved reading because he always has. He said that he did realize that it looks like he doesn’t, but he just does.

From these interviews, it is clear to me that these simple questions of “Do you love reading?” and “Are you good at reading?” barely begin to tell the stories of the

complex narratives these participants are forming around their own identities. Those simple questions often get simple answers that students, as Linus noted, don't even really think about.

It seemed that when students are asked things like, "Do you love reading?" and "Are you a reader?", answering them does bring about the self-reflection that the questions seem to require. The self-reflection came in the questions about motivation, loving reading, and reading future meant to the students.

All of the participants who identified as readers, and even the participant who did not, had a unique recipe of experience, personality, skill and self-concept that came together to make the narrative of their reading identity.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Major Learnings**

##### **Connection to Literature Review**

This project began with the question: what makes a student love reading? This question was based on my experience as a person whose reading identity was always strong even though my behaviors were in flux. It was also based on my experience as a reading teacher who saw the power that came when students were motivated and confident readers.

Through interrogating the current literature around the subject, the question transformed: What does loving reading really mean for students, particularly early adolescents? What is their experience of loving or not loving reading? These questions arose after considering and critiquing the work of very popular authors such as Donalyn Miller, Lucy Calkins and Nancy Atwell who stressed a progressive notion of student agency around choice in reading but often measured student success in narrow and regressive ways. My exploration of the research on reading motivation and reading identity only deepened my interest in these questions as it was clear that the idea of “loving reading” was tied to these subjects that are particularly rich for adolescents. Finally, my investigation of qualitative research methods made it clear that a missing element in the conversation about reading motivation and loving reading was a phenomenology: an interpretivist investigation of the experience of loving reading given

in adolescents' own words through open-ended, discursive conversations. My research with six participants between the ages of 12-14 set out to begin that phenomenology.

### **Major Findings**

The key findings of this study were:

1. For the participants in the study, there was not a strong correlation between reading identity and reading behavior. There was a strong correlation between reading identity and reporting loving reading.
2. Exploring the motivation to read, for the participants in the study, seemed to offer greater clarity around the connection between reading behavior and reading identity.
3. Students read or do not read for a wide variety of reasons. The stories behind reading identity, reading motivation and reading future were unique to each student in the study.
4. Participants were able to explore the connections between their current reading habits and their desired futures. However, for most participants, self-perception of reading efficacy was strongly linked to standardized reading tests and reading levels.

Practically, these findings will influence the way I discuss reading with my students. Discussing reading habits in relation to their desired future seems more fruitful than discussing "loving reading" broadly or relying on biased reading achievement measures. I will be allowing students to create their own goals for reading volume and comprehension achievement based on what they want for their reading lives.

### **Limitations and Further Studies**

The interpretivist paradigm embraces the subjectivity and individual experience of the subjects and looks to explore a topic rather than draw objective conclusions about it. While I am not drawing any sweeping conclusions in the study, it is important that I restate this element of the framework.

Even in the participants' narratives about their own experience, there is variability and subjectivity. The goal of the interviews was to engage in a discourse around loving reading. Because I had the flexibility to change the order and framing of the questions, not every interview was the same. Because adolescent identity narratives are in flux, the participant replies were a reflection of what the participants were thinking that day in that context. Therefore, even for the individual participants, the results may not be replicable.

All of these participants volunteered to spend an hour of their summer talking about reading with their former teacher. That, in itself, requires a self-selecting group. The students who participated, presumably, were more likely to have positive associations with me and with their reading narratives because they chose to participate. While there were some benefits of this personal affinity between myself and the participants, such as increased level of honesty and depth, the study is potentially missing the perspective of students who do not feel as inclined to their former Language Arts teacher.

Finally, because I was limited to creating a research pool with the positive responses to my initial interview request, I did not have any participants who consistently did not meet reading standards on the state performance tests. These readers are the ones

who are being the most failed by the current system, and while it was not my initial intention to not have their voices in this study, I need to recognize that no conversation about reading is complete without the voices of those most marginalized by current practices.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

As I mentioned before, I believe a similar study needs to be conducted focusing on reading identity and reading motivation solely for readers who are performing below grade level and not meeting standards on reading exams.

Also, this study was limited to middle school aged readers who are just at the beginning of their identity development and awareness. High school readers or even adults would be able to have more clarity around their personal identities and identity narratives and a study that highlighted those voices would be important for this field of research.

Finally, this investigation has forced me, as a teacher and researcher, to interrogate the unspoken hierarchy of desirable reading behaviors. The participants in this study demonstrated many reading behaviors that researchers such as Calkins and Atwell would consider undesirable. Many participants did not read daily, some read only when given an external competition, some only read certain books and refused to read beyond a very narrow text type. As a teacher, I may coach students and encourage them to read more and find more inherent value in reading or read more widely. However, I would not be asked to or have the resources to engage in any formal intervention with these students unless they did not pass the state reading standardized test. As established in the literature

review, these standardized tests are known to be biased towards white, native-English speakers. As we strive towards anti-racist teaching, we need to interrogate the fact that, while there are many undesirable reading behaviors, there is only one that is pathologized to the point of intervention: not passing a racially-biased reading test. This system, as it stands, sets students of color and non-English speaking students up to be told that they are poor readers while not putting the same level of focus on the undesirable reading behaviors of other students. I believe that this issue, the racially-biased, unspoken hierarchy of undesirable reading behaviors, is the issue of this study that requires most immediate and thorough attention in the form of academic student and teacher introspection.

### **Reflections and Implications for Teachers**

Reflecting on this study brings me to the conclusion that talking about reading identity and, to some extent, loving reading, is amorphous for adolescents because their identity is in upheaval. Often, their identity does not match their behaviors but rather comes from a key life event or a perception of themselves, as can be seen in the results of the study. I do not think that the lack of correlation between reading identity and reading behavior reflects poorly on the student. If a student says they are a reader but does not read independently, it just means that they are grappling with the role that identity plays in their life, which is very typical for adolescents. If teachers' goal is to get students to say that they love reading, it seems pretty clear that we could get that while still having many students who have no skill or motivation to read on their own. We could also meet that goal while still having students who are reading below grade level.

Another takeaway is that motivation varies hugely for kids, and there does not seem to be a reading motivation that is fool-proof and without holes. Some are motivated to read through external rewards, which is problematic. Some are motivated to read because they love the escape that books provide. However, teachers providing choice, agency, and modeling excitement around reading is key.

When students are in such a time of exploration and flux with their reading, I believe that is important for teachers to be clear and consistent in their messaging. Practically speaking, I am going to strive to stop the racially-biased, unspoken hierarchy of undesirable reading behaviors in my classroom, and I am going to strive for total honesty with my students. Instead of telling all students that I am going to get them to love reading, I will begin by getting to know my students and helping each of them find their own motivation to be better readers. One student may want to be a better reader because they want to read Stephen King novels while another student may want to be a better reader because they eventually want to get into medical school. Once I know the student, I can encourage them to read often and widely to understand increasingly challenging texts and to achieve their goals.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates the diversity of reading motivations among students and the complexity of their reading identities. Frank read often and considered himself a reader but seemed to do so because his parents taught him that it was a morally good thing. Linus considered himself a reader but did not read on his own unless it was motivated by a competition. Victoria loved reading because of the perspective it gave her



on the world but felt that she did not perform well on reading exams. Every participant had their own unique recipe of reading identity, reading behavior, reading motivation and vision for a future in reading.

A question that I have is, does there need to be more clarity around what we want for our readers in terms of their affective behavior? There is a lot of clarity, personally and in the literature, of what we do not want for our students. We do not want a lack of reading skill to be a barrier for students. We do not want them to be performing “below grade level.” We do not want kids to hate reading.

But what do we want? If a student is not reading often but feels like a confident reader and meets standards on assessments, do they require intervention? If a student is motivated to read because of external competition, does that hold the same value as intrinsic motivation? How are the ways that we intervene and coach reading behaviors perpetuating white supremacy?

For me, a study that was designed to turn a mirror on my students has ended with me turning the mirror back on myself. I am now investigating how I model and message what a reading life can and should look like. This project is ending with the question, what do teachers mean when they ask students to love reading? Is that even the right question to ask?

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Figure 1: Interview Question Matrix

<b>Main research question: What behaviors and attitudes comprise “loving reading?”</b>		
<b>Reading Identity</b>	<b>Types of Texts</b>	<b>Reading Habits</b>
Do you consider yourself a reader? Has that ever changed over the course of your life? Do your friends consider themselves readers? Do you think it’s important the kids think of themselves as readers?	What type of text takes up much of your reading life now? In an ideal situation for you, what kind of reading would take up the majority of your reading life? What is your least favorite type of text to read? Do you consider the reading that you do on your phone (social media, etc) to be “reading”?	What are your current reading habits? [time spent reading, where you read, how much you read] What would be your ideal reading habits? [time spent reading, where you read, how much you read]
<b>Reading at Home</b>	<b>Reading Self-Efficacy</b>	<b>Reading Future</b>
Is home a good place to read? What does your family do to help you read at home? What makes you want to read at home? What keeps you from reading at home? Do you think reading at home is important for anything [mental health, personal identity, academic achievement]?	Do you feel like reading is something you are good at? How has your perception of your reading skill changed over time? Did you ever feel you were better? Worse? Why?	Do you think reading will help you in your future as a student? Why or why not? Do you think reading will help you in your future career goals? Why or why not? Do you think reading helps make you a better person? Why or why not?
<b>“Loving Reading”</b>		
Do you love reading? Have you ever loved reading? Do you think it is important for kids to love reading?		

Figure 2: Participant Reading Habits

Participant	Reading Every Day	Reading Infrequently (1-2 per week)	Not Reading
Brian		X	
Dani			X
Victoria	X		
Frank	X		
Henry			X
Linus			X

Figure 3. Summary of Participant Responses

	Dani	Victoria	Henry	Brian	Linus	Frank
Do you identify as a reader?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Are you currently reading more days than not?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Are you good at reading?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Do you think reading will help you in your future career?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Do you love reading?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Yes

No



