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Cover Page Footnote

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A Study of Incarcerated Youth: The Effect of Student Interest on Reading Comprehension and Engagement

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Abstract

Motivating adolescents to read can be a challenge, but motivating incarcerated adolescents to read may be even more of a challenge. Developing readers in residential facilities are often overlooked by traditional classroom teachers, but much can be learned from incarcerated youth and their motivation and engagement. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of research on effective instructional reading practices that motivate and engage incarcerated youth. The existing research primarily examines the impact of literacy on recidivism instead of strategies for motivating and engaging students who are incarcerated. Numerous studies exist that focus on motivation and engagement of reading in traditional classrooms, but these studies are limited when focused on students from the classrooms in juvenile residential centers. This qualitative study examines the influence of high-interest materials on the comprehension of incarcerated youth and the effect of student dispositions on reading engagement. While there was no obvious correlation between high-interest materials and student comprehension scores, the results of the study suggest that mentor/student rapport, vulnerability, high-interest materials, self-efficacy, and value placed on reading all factor into student motivation and engagement.

Keywords: student interest, reading engagement, reading motivation, incarcerated youth, at-risk youth, reflective practice, SOAP notes, rapport, vulnerability

1. Introduction

Developing readers in residential facilities are often overlooked by traditional classroom teachers, but much can be learned from incarcerated youth and their motivation and engagement. Although there is a shortage of research on effective instructional reading practices for incarcerated youth (Weaver et al., 2020) and limited research focusing on students in the classrooms of juvenile residential centers (Brunner, 1993; Foley, 2001; Gentler, 2012), numerous studies exist that focus on motivation and engagement of reading in traditional

classrooms (Clark & Teravainen, 2017; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2017). Therefore, this qualitative study examines the influence of high-interest reading materials on the comprehension of incarcerated youth and the effect of student dispositions on reading engagement.

2. Literature Review

Researchers have studied a variety of factors that affect student engagement with reading achievement (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Kasper, Uibu, & Mikk, 2018), including interest in reading materials, self-efficacy, and the value students attribute to reading. These factors affect the way students engage with the material and their degree of comprehension (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Kasper, Uibu, & Mikk, 2018). Educators examined student engagement and understanding through the use of reflective practice. According to Dell’olio (1998), “reflection facilitates deeper understanding of theory, richer conceptualization of new ideas, and a keener sense of the possibilities of innovation in professional practice” (p. 184).

2.1 Repeated Reading and Vocabulary Strengthen Comprehension

One area to utilize reflective practice is the examination of the tools to build comprehension that include repeated reading and vocabulary instruction. According to Penner-Wilgner (2008), both repeated reading and vocabulary instruction improve students’ decoding and automaticity which also enhances reading comprehension. Research asserts that repeated reading is an effective strategy for developing reading fluency, comprehension, sight recognition, and automaticity in lower-level processing (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2010; Penner-Wilger, 2008). As automaticity and fluency improve, vocabulary knowledge plays a stronger role and is integral to passage comprehension (Ahmed et al., 2016; Elleman et al., 2009; Joshi, 2005; Oslund et al., 2018; Protopapas et al., 2007; Swanson et al., 2017; Yovanoff et al., 2005). Research suggests a strong correlation between vocabulary, reading, listening comprehension, writing, and speaking skills (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Penner-Wilgner, 2008). Research underscores the importance of explicit instruction on vocabulary acquisition (Elleman et al., 2009; Harmon et al., 2005).

2.2 Factors That Impact Reading Motivation

In addition to vocabulary knowledge, student interest is essential to text comprehension because it is tied to reading motivation and learning (Eidswick, 2009). When students are interested, they exhibit persistence, engagement, and positive dispositions toward tasks (Ainley et al., 2002, Hidi, 1990, 2000; Renninger, 1998, 2000). However, other studies suggest that student motivation to read is driven by more than just interest (Kasper et al., 2018). For example, Applegate and Applegate (2010) found that the motivation to read is affected by the

expectancy-value theory, stating that motivation is affected by two key factors: (a) self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed in a task (in this case, reading) and (b) the value an individual attributes to the completion of the task.

Guthrie et al. (2013) adopt a more complex view of the relationship between instruction, motivation, engagement, and achievement that combines and builds on aspects of Applegate and Applegate (2010) and Kasper et al. (2018) research. According to Guthrie et al. (2013), motivation is driven by intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, valuing reading, and prosocial goals. In this particular study, intrinsic motivation is defined as interest and enjoyment in reading, self-efficacy as confidence, valuing reading as the perception that reading is important, and prosocial goals as intentions to interact socially in reading (Guthrie et al., 2013). Based on this research, instruction that builds student motivation leads to higher achieving students, sometimes through the process of increasing engagement, and other times, directly through motivation itself (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Guthrie et al., 2013; Kasper et al., 2018).

Furthermore, higher literacy and academic abilities are known to reduce the likelihood of recidivism among incarcerated youth (Brunner, 1993; Wexler et al., 2014), verifying the importance of motivating developing readers and generating interest in reading among incarcerated youth confined in rehabilitation facilities. By generating interest in reading and building self-esteem among developing readers, dispositions may improve (Kasper et al., 2018).

Motivation and engagement in children and young adults may impact academic performance, frequency in reading, and background knowledge. For example, Wilson and Michaels (2007) stated, "the ability to read, write, and access information directly affects students' self-confidence, motivation, and school performance" (p. 206). These connections are particularly informative because, in research, incarcerated youth are characterized as students with challenging background experiences, low self-efficacy, difficulties with intellectual and academic performance, and emotional and behavioral disorders (Foley, 2001; Gentler, 2012; Harris et al., 2009; Houchins et al., 2018; Pyle et al., 2016).

2.3 Vulnerability Impacts Academic Performance

Incarcerated youths' background may impact their willingness to be vulnerable. According to Brown (2012; 2017), while vulnerability requires emotional risk, exposure, and uncertainty, it is also the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change. Incarcerated youth struggle with vulnerability in their learning because of their challenging background situations, low self-efficacy, difficulties with intellectual and academic performance, and emotional and behavioral disorders (Foley, 2001; Gentler, 2012; Harris et al., 2009; Houchins et al., 2018; Pyle et al., 2016).

Improving the literacy of incarcerated youth helps them meet short term goals such as building self-efficacy and improving academic performance (Foley, 2001; Gentler, 2012; Harris et al., 2009; Houchins et al., 2018; Pyle et al., 2016; Wilson & Michaels, 2007), but more research is needed on how to engage incarcerated students, especially in terms of reading instruction because many of these students hesitate to be vulnerable with learning and instructors, and they have been classified as struggling readers (Foley, 2001; Gentler, 2012; Harris et al., 2009; Houchins et al., 2018; Pyle et al., 2016).

2.4 SOAP Notes Promote Reflective Practice

Reflection on student interest, engagement, and comprehension is important to instructional practice and students' academic performance. An example of a reflective framework is Subjective, Observation, Assessing, and Planning (SOAP) Notes. This “is a framework used to organize records and thinking” (Mills et al., 2020) and offers guidelines for instructors to reflect on student engagement, dispositions, and interests (Mills et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2020). SOAP Notes used in education extend the seminal work of Schön's (1983, 1987, 1991) research on reflective practice that promoted further research on critical reflection in teacher education (Many & Many, 2014; Hofer, 2017). When educators develop their own narratives based on professional practice, critical reflection occurs (Greene et al., 2016; Hoffer, 2017). SOAP Notes promote reflection while assisting educators in compiling data regarding student engagement and interests and identifying and resolving learning obstacles for students in the classroom (Many & Many, 2014; Mills et al., 2020).

Incarcerated youth stand to benefit from literacy instruction and the reflective practice of instructors. Literacy instruction leads to improved self-esteem and academic abilities, the connection between higher literacy skills, and a wider range of employment opportunities. Furthermore, the reduction of recidivism indicates that literacy skills would have both short-term and long-term benefits for incarcerated youth (Brunner, 1993; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Wexler et al., 2014; Wilson & Michaels, 2007). These benefits become evident when teachers engage in reflective practice using SOAP Notes (Weaver et al., 2021). SOAP Notes promote awareness of student behaviors, engagement, and achievement through intentional notetaking.

3. Methodology

A reading-partnership program at a Midwestern public university was created to build instructional self-efficacy and skills and extends the work of Murnen et al. (2018) and Weaver et al. (2020) that highlighted a reading partnership with a juvenile residential center (JRC)

titled Mentoring in Literacy Enhancement (MILE) (Weaver et al., 2020). The MILE program aimed to benefit both the developing readers and the university's population of pre-service teachers. The volunteer mentors not only applied instructional reading strategies but mentors were also challenged to critically reflect on their instruction and student learning each week.

This study examined five case studies of reading mentors working with developing readers at the residential center. To mentor at the JRC, pre-service teacher candidates were required to attend two instructional reading workshops called Promoting Reading Achievement Across Content Areas (PRAACA). Each session lasted approximately three hours. During this training, pre-service teacher candidates practiced administering an Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) (Roe & Burns, 2011), assessed the reading level of a text using the Fry (1977) Graph Readability Formula, and practiced using interest surveys, as well as various vocabulary and comprehension strategies.

Following the initial training, volunteers participated in an additional workshop regarding the implementation of Learning A-Z (2021) instructional practices in addition to an overview of procedures and protocols within the JRC. This extra training was designed to equip mentors with guided instructional strategies that would enable them to address the learning needs of the students while also helping mentors adjust to the unique context of the JRC. Once mentors completed both training sessions, they became eligible to participate in the MILE program. With the establishment of MILE, freshmen and sophomore teacher candidates were offered the opportunity to design and implement reading lessons each week and mentor developing readers (Weaver et al., 2020).

In this study, mentors utilized SOAP Notes as a framework to reflect on students' engagement, dispositions, and academic performance. For each reading session, mentors completed a lesson plan template outlining the student's progress in the previous lesson, the plan for that day, and a description of the student's progress that day. In addition to documenting lesson procedures, mentors were also asked to complete a SOAP Notes template (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: SOAP Notes Template

Evaluation of Instruction (SOAP)	By:		Date:	
<u>S</u>	Subjective: Student’s willingness to participate, demeanor, body language, and attitude Teacher’s perceptions and reflections			
<u>O</u>	Observation of student learning: Anecdotal notes			
<u>A</u>	Assessing student learning: Progress monitoring, running records, and oral or written comprehension			
<u>P</u>	Planning for next lesson: Use bullet points			
Challenges: What challenges did you encounter while working with your student?				
Further Learning: What else do you need to know how to do?				

Weaver, J.C., Hartzog, M., Murnen, T., & Bertelsen, C.D. (2019). Bowling Green State University.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to contribute to educational research focused on readers in juvenile correctional facilities and to inform reading instruction at other facilities as well as traditional schools serving at-risk students. It examined the impact of juvenile residential students’ dispositions on engagement with reading within a constructed culture of

reading. The partnership at the JRC led to the following research question: How do students' dispositions affect their motivation and engagement with reading?

3.1 Participants

Five volunteer mentors — Aelin, Aaron, Ari, Cleo, and Margaret — were introduced to the MILE program upon completion of the university's PRAACA workshops and the additional Reading A-Z Training (see Figure 1). Five adolescents who identified as white males — David, Red, Bronson, Jacob, and Flash — were selected for reading mentoring by the JRC administration based on reading ability and willingness to participate. It is important to note that all mentors and students have chosen pseudonyms, and those will be used throughout the study.

Mentors and residents met for one hour every Saturday for a total of ten weeks of reading instruction. A diverse range of instructional materials and strategies were used depending on the individual interests and needs of students; however, central activities consistent across all mentors included repeated readings and vocabulary practice modeled at the A-Z Training session and explained previously in the Materials and Procedures section. In addition, mentors administered biweekly comprehension assessments that were also outlined in that same section.

Figure 1: Groupings of Mentor-Student Pairs

Mentors	Aelin	Aaron	Ari	Cleo	Margaret
Students	David	Red	Bronson	Jacob	Flash

3.2 Context

The interest survey and IRI were used to provide each mentor with knowledge about the student's background with reading, interests, and current reading strengths and weaknesses to inform and guide mentor and student decisions. Some readers came into the MILE program with stronger background experiences in reading and could provide mentors with titles of materials or topics they were interested in reading. These students did not need much help from the mentor in terms of selecting reading material, so the mentors were primarily responsible for making sure the material was accessible and that the material was brought to weekly sessions.

Other readers were still exploring their interests and were not familiar with materials they would enjoy reading. The mentor then played a larger role in the selection process by making

suggestions that might have been of interest to the student given his reading level and interests. It is important to note that when matching texts to each student, at times, mentors brought in reading materials above their students' reading levels because the students were motivated to read materials that were of interest despite a more challenging reading level.

3.3 Instructional Practices

Repeated reading, vocabulary practice, and comprehension questions were areas of focus for all participants. Each reader struggled significantly in at least one of these areas, and mentors adapted their instructional focus to target students' weaknesses while using students' strengths to build self-efficacy. Repeated reading began during the second week of the study and was incorporated into every session from that point forward. Vocabulary practice was more flexible and depended on the level of text being read. Each mentor conducted comprehension assessments every other week that included questions within the following categories: main idea, detail, cause and effect, inference, sequence of events, and vocabulary.

3.4 Data Collection

For this study, the data sources included pre- and post-surveys, mentor lesson plans, and SOAP notes (Mills et al., 2020). Surveys were used to serve multiple purposes. During the first mentoring session, readers were provided with an interest survey that focused on their interests, reading habits, and background reading experiences. At the very end of the study, they were given a post-survey to examine possible changes in their view of reading and/or perceptions of their progress. Furthermore, they were asked to rate their interest in the materials that were used during the sessions and to describe the challenges they experienced while reading.

In addition to surveys, SOAP notes were integral to this study. The mentors' lesson plans and SOAP notes were used to record observations about students' attitudes, engagement, and learning during each lesson to provide qualitative data to inform instruction for the following sessions. All data were de-identified to protect participants.

3.5 Data Analysis

To analyze the data in this study, the primary tool utilized was the constant comparative method (CCM) using open-coding (Kelle, 2005) within grounded theory (GT) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). CCM is an inductive process that allows for the re-coding of data as they are compared to other data and incidents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Open coding allows for core categories to emerge as data are re-coded and reduced (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Because the essence of the study surrounds the dispositions and engagement of incarcerated youth, it made sense to extrapolate the data using Strauss and

Corbin's (1998) definitions of the GT methodology: "a way of thinking about and studying social reality" (p. 3).

The analysis of the surveys and SOAP notes written by the mentors were critical to the study and researchers aimed to closely examine the dispositions and behaviors of the readers to analyze the impact on reading engagement and learning while noting the emerging themes. The five case studies describe and reflect the mentors' thought processes as they utilized the SOAP notes framework to inform instructional decision-making for their weekly sessions based on student dispositions and engagement.

4. Findings

To understand the impact of this study on the group as a whole, it was necessary to look at each mentor/student pair individually to track individual progress and development. Each case study describes the materials used during the sessions, interests expressed by the students, the determined IRI reading levels, the levels of the texts being read, the students' comprehension scores, students' reflections on their learning, mentor observations' and any additional information pertaining to each mentor/student pair.

4.1 Aelin and David

Before the fall mentoring sessions began, Aelin reported in her SOAP notes that she taught David in a class at the JRC over the summer. She stated that the strong rapport clearly carried into their reading sessions together in the fall. She wrote, "He mentioned that he enjoyed learning and wanted to inform me of all the topics he had learned since I had last seen him" (personal communication, September 21, 2020).

On his first day, David mentioned that he was currently reading the *Divergent* series, but expressed interest in reading the *U.S. Constitution*, which reads at the 1540 Lexile level and equates to above the 12th grade reading level. Aelin and David spent their ten weeks reading a pocketbook Constitution along with sections of the book *Love and War*, songs from *Hamilton*, and several other short articles related to the Constitution. David worked with reading material above his tested reading instructional level (9th grade), but his interest in the material was a high point of the sessions, according to one of his post-reading surveys in which he reported, "It's hard because the story is written in older language. It's easy because I am interested in the material."

According to his mentor and his reflection, despite the challenge that the older rhetoric presented, David's interest in the material appears to have motivated him to continue reading

and persist through difficulties. Throughout the SOAP notes, Aelin often described David as a “willing participant” and “engaged learner.” Aelin also took note of several behaviors that illustrate David’s engagement, including furrowing his brow and rubbing his chin (personal communication, September 28, 2019). Aelin also reported in the SOAP notes that these behavioral and attitude descriptions indicated that despite the challenges David faced with the language in the *Constitution*, he was willing to continue working and persisting through those challenges because of his interest in the material.

David’s scores on his comprehension assessments were inconsistent throughout the study, often taking significant leaps and dives, but according to Aelin, his fluency, expression, and vocabulary abilities significantly improved. In week three, David was able to read 115 words per minute and by week ten, David was able to read 150 words per minute with expression, demonstrating improvement in both his reading speed and prosody. Aelin also reported that David began adding new vocabulary words to his word wall without being told and even made a word wall for his own independent reading. Aelin noted in the SOAP notes that David stated “[he was] gaining vocabulary knowledge that has helped him understand the meaning behind the texts he [was] reading” (personal communication, October 20, 2019). David also shared with Aelin that after working with the word “wall,” he became more comfortable asking questions when he didn’t know something.

According to Aelin, the act of sharing his feelings and observations about his own learning first and foremost alludes to the strong rapport they established. The time together before the beginning of the fall session was a huge advantage that seemed to have allowed them to progress faster than other groups.

When David shared with Aelin that he created his own word wall to improve his vocabulary and admitted that the word wall helped him feel more comfortable asking questions, Aelin noted that David was revealing a perceived “weakness” or area that needed improvement. According to Aelin, comfort with his mentor, a willingness to be vulnerable, and metacognitive awareness contributed to David’s engagement with his own learning, as did David’s positive attitude and the value he placed on reading.

4.2 Aaron and Red

Aaron and Red had a very unique situation in this study that is necessary to explain before any additional information is shared. For the first three sessions of this ten-week study, the second author, Grace, worked with Red because his original mentor did not show up to the sessions. Aaron was recruited and received his training during that three-week time period, and Grace told Red that until Aaron was able to step in, she would be working with him. Grace gave Red the Interest Survey and conducted the IRI, during which time she learned that Red had several

negative reading experiences that impacted his view of reading in addition to a struggle with violent thoughts. While Red expressed his disinterest in reading long texts, he did share that he enjoyed picture books and artwork and was very good at using the pictures to make predictions. Grace brought in the book *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds for the last session together in the hope of providing Red with a positive reading experience from a larger text and with the goal of showing Red the danger and pain that come with violent actions.

When Aaron began working with Red the following week, Red was extremely upset. In his SOAP Notes, Aaron shared that Red refused to work with him until Grace joined them at their table. At first, Red only addressed Grace and she tried to help Aaron establish a rapport with Red; however, Red gradually became comfortable with Aaron, and Grace was able to leave to observe other groups. These details illustrate the unique situation and the reason it took an exceptionally long time for Red and Aaron to develop the rapport and expectations that would guide their sessions. Initially, this negatively impacted Red's ability to progress in the study compared to other groups.

In the third session, Aaron learned that he and Red shared an interest in video games. With this shared interest in mind, Aaron brought in short articles about video games for part of the study and shifted to the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline when Red expressed disinterest in continuing to work with video game articles. On the IRI, Red tested at a 5th grade instructional reading level which matched the reading level of the articles; however, *Ready Player One* tests at the 8th grade reading level which is interesting considering the drastic change in Red's engagement with the book when compared with the articles.

In the beginning sessions, Aaron reported that although Red did not struggle with comprehension and seemed to be able to quote the text directly, Red struggled significantly with fluency while reading the articles and often resisted Aaron's attempts to model fluent reading. Aaron said that the sessions were challenging because Red's attention span was so short and he became quickly irritated with the reading. After shifting from the articles to *Ready Player One*, Aaron reported notable changes in Red's behavior, saying that he listened more than before, allowed Aaron to help him with fluency, admitted that reading character dialogue was uncomfortable for him, and looked to Aaron for confirmation of words he didn't understand. Aaron also said that in one session, Red was so captivated by the story that he didn't even realize he hadn't colored until fifteen minutes before the session ended. This was significant because coloring was the incentive Aaron put in place to encourage participation, and Red was so engaged with his reading that he completely forgot about the incentive.

4.3 Ari and Bronson

On her first day working with Bronson, Ari learned from the interest survey that Bronson was extremely interested in Greek mythology. After conducting the IRI and identifying his instructional reading level (6th grade), Ari began with a few short articles on Greek mythology followed by a shift to *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan, all of which read at the 6th grade level.

Ari and Bronson's sessions were structured differently than the rest of the sessions as they met two days a week instead of one; however, Ari and Bronson still met the same amount of time each week as other mentors. Another interesting point in their sessions was that Bronson wanted to read *The Lightning Thief* in spite of already having read it. Ari said that Bronson wanted to revisit the text to make sure that he did not miss anything the first time around, but according to Ari's SOAP notes, another factor in Bronson's request to reread the text could have been his discomfort with reading out loud.

From the very beginning, Ari noted that Bronson seemed very uncomfortable reading out loud. In their third session together, Ari mentioned in her SOAP notes that Bronson expressed discomfort reading out loud despite his strong background knowledge in Greek mythology and his ability to comprehend the text. The same day, Ari also noted that while Bronson was passive, indifferent, and sometimes inattentive while reading and answering questions about the IRI passages, he often challenged what he read in the Greek articles, making statements such as "that simply would not happen in the Greek world" (personal communication, October 8, 2019). According to Ari, this shift from passivity to discontentment with the reading indicates a positive shift in Bronson's interest and engagement with the material. Although resistance to the reading presented a new challenge for Ari, she states in her SOAP notes that Bronson's interest in the topic contributed to his focus on the reading and motivated him to engage with the text.

Ari was pleased with Bronson's improving engagement and desire to discuss the text, but Ari also wrote in the "Challenges" section of her SOAP notes that she needed to find a way to create "a ready-to-learn, comfortable environment" (personal communication, October 8, 2019). In addition, Ari indicated that she wanted to create a comfortable learning session, but part of the problem might have been Bronson's discomfort with reading out loud. According to Ari, Bronson's low self-efficacy and low confidence in his ability to read out loud caused him to become defensive when Ari tried to work with him on his fluency and prosody. Ari also wrote that when she tried to incorporate a drawing activity into the day's lesson, Bronson was reluctant to participate. In response to Bronson's behavior, Ari noted, "[He] doesn't think he's good at it so he doesn't want to try" (personal communication, October 17, 2019).

While Bronson expressed his discomfort with reading aloud frequently during the first four weeks, Ari wrote that, although reluctant, he eventually began to warm up to the idea. She notes in the SOAP reflections that he is warming up to reading out loud after describing new developments in their relationship the past two sessions. Ari explained that Bronson talked to her about his future plans, and he inquired about hers. In her SOAP notes that day, she wrote, “Today I got [Bronson] to smile and laugh...He’s kind of shy but we are still building a good bond” (personal communication, October 22, 2019). The following day, Ari reported that Bronson did not seem to be interested in reading because he wanted to share information about his life back home and his reason for coming to the facility. She wrote, “I don’t think he was having a bad/sad day. Our conversation was very calm and easy going. He was simply opening up - kind of like building rapport” (personal communication, October 24, 2019). According to Ari, her consistent practice and encouragement played a role in Bronson’s growing tolerance for reading out loud.

Ari observed a huge shift in Bronson’s attitude toward the sessions once he began reading materials that interested him. In her SOAP notes, Ari quoted Bronson as he directly acknowledged interest as a motivator. He said that he is “very passionate about reading and learning if it is intriguing” (personal communication, October 3, 2019). According to Ari, this insight was reflected in his changing behaviors as he shifted from an unfocused and passive listener to a talkative and engaged participant. Although Bronson was initially resistant to the idea of practicing fluency, Ari reported improvement in Bronson’s attitude toward reading out loud and his fluency skills near the end of the study.

4.4 Cleo and Jacob

Cleo and Jacob spent their ten weeks reading *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline. According to Cleo, after giving Jacob the interest survey on the first day, she learned that Jacob wasn’t very interested in reading, rarely read outside of class, and hated school despite having decent grades. Cleo also learned that Jacob preferred video games, so when she asked if Jacob would be interested in reading *Ready Player One*, a book about video games, Jacob got really excited. Jacob tested at a 6th grade instructional reading level on his IRI, but like Red, he was still willing to read *Ready Player One* (8th grade reading level) because he found it interesting.

As Cleo and Jacob worked through the book, Cleo noted that Jacob was capable of reading very quickly and took pride in how fast he could read despite comprehending very little of the text. Cleo reported this challenge in her SOAP Notes: “...he reads super fast with no regard to punctuation” (personal communication, September 28, 2019). Cleo explained that his reading pace interfered with his ability to comprehend the text, but he slowed down significantly after watching her read. Reading pace was something that Cleo and Jacob worked on consistently throughout the sessions because it took a long time to help Jacob understand that while speed

does factor into “good reading” as he mentioned on his interest survey, it is not good when it impedes comprehension.

Another interesting observation Cleo shared in her SOAP notes was that Jacob hated reading short stories and only liked reading longer texts. Jacob was motivated to read *Ready Player One* not only because he found the topic interesting, but also because he enjoyed the length of the text. According to Cleo, both the topic and perceived difficulty of the text played a role in his engagement.

While Jacob definitely struggled to slow down his reading and shift his focus to comprehending the text, Cleo noted gradual improvement and eventually, Jacob began sharing his excitement with Cleo about his success in English class. Cleo noted that Jacob’s participation in the sessions was impacted by his performance in his other classes and his progress in the facility’s rehabilitation program.

On the other hand, this also applied to Jacob’s bad days. Cleo described several occasions where Jacob entered the session visibly upset, rushed through their session, and/or resisted participating in the day’s reading because he had received a bad grade in a class or gotten in trouble with the guards. According to Cleo in the SOAP notes, these mood swings and behavior changes are important obstacles to note as they interfered with Jacob’s ability to participate.

Cleo noted in the SOAP notes that Jacob’s comments provided valuable insights into his developing reading habits and takeaways from the text. Jacob’s emotional state and shifts in his medicine often affected his ability to focus and engage with the lesson, but Cleo stated that Jacob’s interest in the material, his self-efficacy, and the value he placed on reading shaped his motivation to read and engage with lessons over the course of the study.

4.5 Margaret and Flash

After the beginning sessions, Margaret noted in her SOAP Notes that Flash went into his mentoring sessions with a great attitude because they had already worked together prior to the sessions. Margaret reported that they had already established a rapport by the time the study began, so upon completing the interest survey and IRI (Flash tested at a 6th grade instructional reading level), they were able to immediately begin reading parables from the Bible and poems with biblical messages. Some of the materials covered in their sessions together included the parables *The Good Samaritan* and *The Mustard Seed*, in addition to a short poem called “Footprints in the Sand.”

Although Margaret initially stated that Flash had a positive attitude, she quickly observed that Flash was easily distracted, temperamental, and easily affected by his emotions. She

associated this frustration with low self-efficacy. She wrote in one of her SOAP notes that Flash “has a very low-efficacy self-concept of himself as a reader, but also strives to show me how much he can do” (personal communication, September 20, 2019). She reported that when she worked with him over the summer, Flash went back and forth between feeling challenged and bored, and often used going to the bathroom as an avoidance strategy.

Flash expressed in his interest survey that he had many good reading experiences with family, but not with friends. According to Margaret, Flash had a lot of difficulty with being separated from his family. This is relevant to the study because Margaret noticed that this challenge affected both his participation in the JRC rehabilitation program and his engagement in reading sessions. She reported that this happened a few times in their sessions together, but for the most part, he put forth effort to remain engaged in their sessions, demonstrating motivation to participate because of interest in the material and/or a strong relationship with his mentor.

On his last day at the JRC, Margaret observed that Flash was in a horrible mood because he had recently had a bad phone call with his family. When he came out, he didn’t have his glasses (because he broke them), and he told Margaret that he did not want to read that day. Margaret convinced him to participate for a little bit, but she said that every time he made a small mistake, he punched himself in the head, so she let him go back to his unit.

Margaret stated that although she encountered some difficulties with Flash’s behavior and emotional reactions, over the course of their time together, Flash developed the ability to observe and engage in strategies that good readers have. She noted that his attention to punctuation and expression improved, he began to self-correct while reading (which he took a lot of pride in), and he made clear efforts to take the perspective of the characters he read about. According to Margaret, these improvements increased confidence levels that helped with his self-efficacy, as did Margaret’s compliments on his progress.

5. Implications

This study was centered around five mentor/student pairs that allowed for close monitoring and detailed observations of reading sessions. In addition, there was an opportunity for one-on-one instruction as it allowed for individualized instruction tailored to the needs of each student. Furthermore, because the mentors had a wide variety of educational teaching opportunities and experiences, this allowed them to work together and learn from each other.

According to the data, the research question was answered conclusively. Interest does have an impact on student engagement and dispositions, aligning with Applegate and Applegate’s

(2010) expectancy-value theory and Brown's (2017) research on dispositions. In addition, consistency and rapport contribute to the reader's confidence in their reading abilities, the willingness to be vulnerable with their mentors, the motivation to read, and engagement in the sessions (Brown, 2017).

The findings also revealed that the mentors who had a strong rapport with their students created an environment that allowed students to be more vulnerable in the learning process that showed a positive effect on their motivation and engagement. Student engagement and progress depended on a willingness to expose weaknesses in order to improve, promoting the importance of vulnerability in student engagement and progress.

One of the most notable findings revealed that without a strong mentor/student rapport, limited learning takes place. Mentors who gained the students' trust progressed in learning and engagement with reading, while those mentors who were unable to gain the trust of their students struggled during their reading sessions. Once a bond had been established between a mentor and a student, interest and self-efficacy began to play a larger role in student reading motivation and engagement. By noting shifts in student behaviors and responses to high-interest reading material, in addition to observing physical and verbal signifiers of student confidence levels, it is evident that both interest and self-efficacy play a role in student reading motivation and engagement.

There were a couple of limitations in this study. For example, the JRC was willing to accommodate only five mentor/student pairs, all of whom were represented in the data collected in this study, and the demographics were limited to five white, male students. The sample size and demographics are limitations, but because there is a limited amount of research available on educational instructional strategies for incarcerated youth and educational resources and strategies implemented with incarcerated youth, the findings are noteworthy. Another limitation of the study is the timeframe. The study only lasted for ten weeks without additional follow-up with the resident readers due to the pandemic. Although a limitation, the SOAP notes reflection superseded the limitation because of the depth of critical analyses of the mentors.

The effects of this study opened up opportunities and questions for further research. For example, we would like to examine the degree to which the students capitalized on their work in the JRC and if their reading engagement and motivation transferred to their classroom work. We would also like to address some additional questions focused on the mentors' experiences: What were the long-term effects on the mentors? and To what degree did the mentors' experiences benefit or contribute to their instructional development?

6. Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that mentor-student rapport, a willingness to be vulnerable, high-interest reading material, self-efficacy, and value placed on reading all play a role in students' reading motivation and engagement in the learning process. These conclusions suggest that instruction centered around developing these attitudes and dispositions in students in addition to using high-interest materials is likely to increase the reading motivation and engagement of incarcerated youth.

This study contributes to the research highlighting the importance of student interest on dispositions and engagement in reading. In addition, student self-efficacy and instructor's consistency and rapport play a role in student engagement and motivation to read. In schools where reaching at-risk youth is a challenge, creating curriculum and materials of interest to students is an asset to their learning, engagement, and motivation. While interest is directly connected with motivation to read and engagement with the text, we suggest that practice, rapport, and feelings of trust be established prior to learning in order to maximize student success.

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