

# Choice and the Reader's Identity

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*Abstract: This study sought to discover a fifth grader's reader identity. During the research students were given free time to read a book of choice during class time. They were then asked questions weekly about themselves as readers, their reading habits, how they feel about choice in the classroom. Students discussed their identity as a reader and described what it means to be a good reader.. This study wanted to discover how a fifth grader's reader identity could change over a six-week period with more choice reading time.*

*"I don't read good." George*

*"I hate reading." Michelle*

*"Books are boring." Michael*

*"My last teacher wouldn't let us read for fun." Robert*

*"I love to read." Tiffany*

*"I am a very fluent reader." Julie*

These are just a few quotes that represent the different reader identities in one-fifth-grade classroom. When students enter a classroom they bring their own identity to the learning environment. They have their own experiences, knowledge and feelings towards school and life. Each student is an individual. Just like school, they come to reading and English classrooms with different reading identities.

Being a reader in the fullest sense means reading voluntarily, having confidence, collecting books, recommending books to others, talking about reading, knowing different authors and illustrators styles, reflecting on reading, making connections and thinking critically (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). So how do we as teachers help to foster a student's love of reading, and give them the opportunity to have a positive reader's identity? "It should be the teacher's aim to give every student a love of reading, a hunger for it that will stay with him or her through all the years of his or her life" (Layne, 2009, p. 6).

As a fifth grade English Language Arts teacher, I noticed that my students were not reading books. They would read the book that I gave them to read as a class, but they would not read for fun or enjoyment. I observed that when I did give them time to read a book, they would walk to my classroom library, pick a book read it for a few minutes then put it back. I realized that they were not evolving in their love of reading, they were developing the skill of reading by what the teacher suggested they read. At that point, I decided to make a change because I wanted my students to have that hunger to read and realize that reading is more than just reading a book quickly or answering questions after reading a book.

The purpose of this study was to find out how students choose books, how they feel about reading and how their reader identity changed after getting more choice in the books they read in the classroom. The research was conducted to answer the following research questions.

RQ1: How do students feel about themselves as a reader prior to the study and after?

- RQ1a: What do students like best, choice in reading or books selected by teacher?
- RQ1b: Why do students feel it is important to be readers?

RQ2: How do students select pick books that they are reading?

- RQ2a: What made students continue to read a book?
  - RQ2b: How do reader identities change after given more choice?
- RQ3: What do students like best, choice in reading or books selected by teacher?
- RQ1a: What do students feel makes someone a reader?

### Literature Review

Reading classes often lack the element of choice in a classroom, silent reading time and the ability to create strong reader identities that last a lifetime. The new common core standards have put more emphasis on other skills that students must be able to accomplish, by the end of the grade level and less emphasis is put on reading for enjoyment or pleasure.

Students in a classroom like having choices, and may not enjoy reading the same books. When students are required to read texts they are not interested in or not at their level they can form a negative view of reading and create a reader's identity that is not positive. To avoid a negative view of reading, students should be given the opportunity to read books they like, to read at a level they are comfortable reading, and to give them more choice.. Students are often less motivated to read because of teachers' instructional practices and the books they are told to read (Morgan & Wagner, 2013). According to Gambrell (2011), students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to make choices about what they read and how they engage in literacy tasks. Students will choose to conquer and enjoy texts that are challenging by nature when they have interest in the book (Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Choice in the classroom is a well-supported motivational practice where students can choose their own texts, the tasks they perform, and the partners with whom they work (Guthrie, Wigfield, Humenick, Perencevich, Taboada & Barbosa, 2006). Giving students choices will allow students to be more involved in the learning process.

According to Morgan & Wagner (2013), researchers have argued for reading choice for many reasons; they say its helps with motivation and keep them engaged with reading, support struggling readers, and improves scores on standardized reading assessments. Choice can be a positive, driving force for engagement in adolescent readers. Motivation to read can be defined as the likelihood of engaging in reading or choosing to read (Gambrell, 2011). The engagement perspective is linked to motivation and has a strong implication for practice (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). "This perspective articulates the differences between engaged and disengaged readers and focuses on the characteristics of the motivated or engaged reader. In keeping this perspective, engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to read for a variety of personal goals, strategic in their reading behaviors, knowledgeable in their construction of new understandings from text, and socially interactive about the reading of text." (Gambrell, 2011, p. 172).

Flowerday and Schraw (2000), interviewed teachers about the reasoning for student choice, the use of choice in their classroom and how it benefited their students. Allowing students to make choice positively affected their engagement, including their overall liking of a task, greater difficulty in a task, willingness to stay after to spend more time on an assignment (Flowerday and Schraw, 2000). "Teachers strongly agree that choice improved students' affective responses by increasing students' ownership, interest, creativity, and personal autonomy" (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000, p. 641). The study by Flowerday and Schraw (2000) reported that teachers feel choice helps student engagement, and it helps them with their decision making skills and self-regulation skills. Choice is an important lifelong skill that allows students to make decisions that affect them. One high school teacher from the Flowerday and Schraw (2000) study, stated,

“choice promotes involvement, matches students interest; there is less groaning. Choice also taps creatively, interest, and adds variety”(p. 639). Themes about giving choice received responses such as: responsibility, empowerment, motivated, enthusiastic, excited, sense of purpose, sense of control, and ownership.

An example of student choice is when teachers allow students the opportunity to choose their books is during silent reading time. Silent reading time is a specific time of the day that is dedicated to students reading a book of their choosing. This time allows for students to read daily, along with giving the opportunity to read anything they wish. Many teachers make time for students to engage in reading books they choose for a period of time to enhance literacy skills. Programs such as Sustained Silent Reading Time (SSR), or Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), or Daily Uninterrupted Reading Time, have proved to increase student enjoyment of reading and engagement in reading for pleasure (Pegg & Bartelheim, 2011). Classrooms where students have ample opportunities to engage in sustained reading provided the necessary foundation that is essential for supporting students in becoming motivated and proficient readers (Gambrell, 2011). Simply put, reading practices help students become better readers. “The best way to become a better reader is to practice each day with good fit books that are selected by each student” (Boushey & Moser, 2006, p. 173). A good fit book is the book that is at the best reading level, interest and engagement for a student.

“Reader identity refers to how capable individuals believe they are in comprehending texts, value they place on reading and their understanding of what it means to be a particular type of reader (Hall, 2012, p. 369). Readers’ identities are created over time as students gain more experience in school at home and in the real world. Students are placed into categories and develop part of their readers’ identity by teacher or peers based on test scores, reading level and engagement in texts (Hall, 2012). As teachers we need to understand readers’ identities and help them build positive identities. A positive identity is defined when a student feels good about themselves as readers. An example to build a positive identity is by giving students choice.

### **Method**

This study explored how each reader’s identities evolved when given time to read a book of choice during the school day opposed to the teacher picking a class book. The time frame for the study occurred over a six-week time frame. Participants read a book of choice and answered survey questions weekly about their choice of texts, opinions, attitudes and motivations about reading.

Nineteen fifth grade students from a small rural school in central Illinois participated in this study. The school is roughly 92% white, 3% Hispanic, 2% are mixed race, and .2% black. Approximately 28% of the students in the school are considered low income. Of the 19 students that participated in the study there were ten boys and nine girls.

This study examined student choice and motivational perspective when selecting literature. Based on the engagement theory, Tracey and Morrow (2006) stated that engaged readers who are intrinsically motivated to read are mentally active using metacognitive strategies to build understanding. I hope that students are engaged in their reading, and that they start to see reading as a life-long love, not a class subject that they dread. Research about student engagement confirms there is an indicator between an engaged reader and their reading comprehension achievement (Layne, 2009). Through the engagement theory and motivational perspective

students will hopefully change their attitudes about reading and not always associating reading with a grade or something you do just for school.

Additionally, the unfoldment theory was used as a framework for this study. The unfoldment theory is defined as student centered and uses the student's interest to help them learn (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). The unfoldment theory has been used to build a reading program based on children's interests and the use of activities and problem solving for learning. The unfoldment theory allows students to have a choice in what they read.

This study along with the theoretical framework will help the teacher reflect on the use of choice and silent reading time with readers' identity. The motivational theory and the unfoldment theory will be used to help code the results from the student's responses. The research was conducted to investigate student motivation when given the choice to select a book and how findings can be used to create a stronger reading environment to foster life-long readers.

The students were given 15 to 20 minutes every class period to read a book of their choosing. The students kept track of the book they read daily. Students were not told what book to read or if they must stay with the same book the entire time. They were just encouraged to pick a book that interested them. Every Thursday students were given a questionnaire with different questions about their feelings while reading. Then students were given a test that was given on Thursday because of an extra thirty minutes during an advisory period. The students were given the questions using Google forms. The students logged onto the computer and answered the questions either by answering yes or no or in short answer form. The Google form answers were then sent to me. I was then able to review all the responses from each student.

The following questions demonstrate examples of some of the questions the students were asked:

- ❖ Describe yourself as a reader.
- ❖ How did you pick your book this week?
- ❖ What does it mean to be a reader?
- ❖ What makes someone a reader?
- ❖ Why do we need to be readers?
- ❖ Are you a reader?
- ❖ What makes you stick with a book?

The responses to these questions were then coded and analyzed to check for themed patterns. Glesne (2006) stated that data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Open coding was used to analyze the data. "Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data" (Glesne, 2006, p. 152). The question responses were coded immediately after the questions were given. Specific labels assisted in categorizing and sorting data. "During open coding the data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 62).

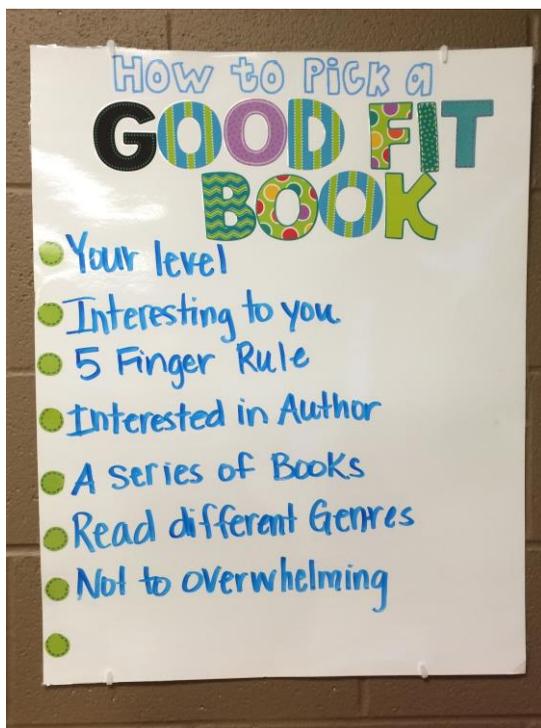
The process of coding the data began by first reading all the data. Then the research questions were present as I reviewed the data. Responses were then cut and placed under similar stacks. Then the stacks of responses were aligned with the research questions. After they were sorted based on research question, the responses were separated again based on similar responses. These codes were then translated into my findings section.

## Findings

Before the research began, students were given very little choice in the books that they read in the classroom. The texts used in the classroom were selected by the teacher and the district as books to use class wide. Students read non-fiction articles, novels, short stories and stories from a basal for their reading class. The first survey was given to students before they had more freedom in their choice of books they got to read in the classroom.

One of the first questions asked students how they would describe themselves as a reader. The major themes found were students believed they weren't readers or they were readers because they read fast or they read long books. None of the students responded with an answer that showed that they truly loved reading. Student 1 gave an honest opinion of how he felt about reading, "I don't enjoy reading because my mom and teachers forced me to stick my nose in a book." Several students answered, "I read fast." They based their description of themselves as a reader as how fast they can read and finish a book. Student 2 noticed that she enjoys classroom texts better than her picking a book out for herself. Student 2 stated, "I like reading the class text better because I do not know what to read and nothing seems interesting." This demonstrated that the student was unfamiliar with reader's identity because she did not feel comfortable and did not know how to select a book that would be of interest to her. Five responses out of 19 stated that the students thought that they were good readers. The intent for the study was change their identities to make them all enjoy reading. Additionally, for students to know that positive reader's identity was not defined by how could read fast, but that they genuinely loved to read for enjoyment and pleasure.

Prior to being given more choice time in the classroom, students were asked the questions, "What do you like best, choice or reading a book picked by the teacher?" The students replied with 17 liking choice and 2 liking the books that the teacher picked. One student stated, "I choose because I know what kind of books that I like." A second student stated, "It feels good to get stuff you like not what other people like."



Before students began selecting their own books, I wanted to know how students in my class chose books. When asked in the surveys how they selected a book they are reading for fun, students provided a variety of answers. After analyzing student responses, students selected books by authors they liked and genres they liked. This illustrates students understanding of the genre or type of books they have enjoyed in the past. Continued analysis found that student selected books based on a friend's recommendation. Typical recommendations were from series books. "Student 4 said it was a really good book." "My sister recommended "The Hunger Games" to me. "I read the back to see if it sounded good." I am reading all the books by Laura Ingles Wilder." Students shared a variety of methods that worked for them to select a book.

Before the first week of research approached, the students received information about what it meant to pick a good fit book. They were told that a good fit book is a book that they are interested in and is not too easy or too difficult. The students along with the classroom teacher brainstormed ideas together to come up with our definition of a good fit book. Students brainstormed the following ideas. Students decided that reading at their level was a book that they felt comfortable reading. The student decided that the five-finger rule said that if a student reads 2-3 pages of a book and can find more than 5 words that they do not know the meaning of then the book is too hard. We as a class decided that if they did not know about 2-3 words then that book was a good fit. This lesson was taught to help guide students when picking books of their choice.

As weeks progressed, students started reading more in class. They were reading books that they chose, and were not required to do anything but read. Every week students were given questions that helped me find out more about their thoughts about reading. As a researcher, I inquired to know what students thought a reader was and what made someone a reader. They came up with themes such as they read all the time, they have feelings towards the text, they can read well, and they enjoy reading. "You want to read all the time." A second student commented that a reader can get caught in their book and does not get distracted. "Most reader's get caught in their book that they are reading." Five of the 19 students mentioned that a reader gets emotional with the book. Student 6 believed that as she read books they could feel bad for a character, or get angry that something happened to a character. Student 6 also stated that she felt like she was part of the book by going through everything with a character. "A reader has emotion for all the characters in the book and can imagine what is happening in the book." This research demonstrated that students believe that reading can be for fun, and that it is not just to learn new information.

When students were asked why they needed to be readers, the main theme students stated was that reading would be useful in the future. For example, one student stated "So we can be smart when we are older, and we can teach other people how to read." Students said that they will need to be able to read for a job or what profession they will be going into. "All jobs require reading. If you don't know how to read, you won't go far in life. We need to be readers, so we learn new things. Also reading gives us things to do in our free time." The students who thought they would need to be good reader's for their future jobs stated, "They need to be able to read documents for jobs." A second student believed we need readers for jobs, said, "all jobs require reading." "My mom works at State Farm and that involves a lot of reading." Students even connected reading to jobs that have a unique type of reading. "If you are a baker you need to know how much flour you need to put in your cakes mixes and bread baskets." The second theme from the study found that students suggested that words are all around them and they need to be able to read them. "So we can read cereal boxes, billboards, books, instructions, health information and the back of food products." The overall consensus between students was that reading is important for life. Reading is going to be needed in the future, and reading is needed now. It is a skill that they will always need.

At the beginning of the study, students were asked if they were readers. The first day of research 10 students stated that they were readers, and 9 students stated that they were not readers. At the end of the research the students were asked the same questions. The results changed significantly. Eighteen students replied that they were readers, while only 1 student said that he/she was not a reader. The results from this study indicated that, students were able to find that they were readers. Additionally, they did not have to be the fastest reader, or read the longest books, but that they could be a reader by just reading a book they enjoy. During this 6 weeks, the 19 students that were involved in the research read 33 books combined as a fifth grade class.

When the students were asked: (a) how they felt about reading, (b) if they were a reader and (c) what makes them a reader, their reader identity changed drastically. Students' answers at the beginning were themed in groups including: reading fast, reading long books, or not interested in reading. By the end of the study, students' answers changed. Themes at the end of the study included: feelings about how reading turned more into how reading made them and that students enjoyed reading because they had choice in what they got to read and knew how to pick a book that would be good for them. "What makes me a reader is that, I love reading as much as I love sports." A second student who at first said they were a reader cause they read fast changed their answer to, "I like laughing at the funny parts of a book, being interested and liking books." The student at the beginning who said reading fluently made them a reader, changed to say they were a reader because they liked reading mystery books. A student said, "I liked reading a good fit book at silent reading time. "I am a reader because I enjoy reading and I stay focused on one book. I get lost in a book." The way students explain how they are readers have changed more to what they enjoy about reading.

When students were asked why they stuck with a book and why they did not stop reading a book, the main theme was that it fit them, or it kept their interest in the book. Other students made comments that the type of book kept them reading, for example if a book was funny, or exciting or suspenseful. "The anticipation if they will win the big game or what will happen next." One student stated that they stick with a book if they like the genre, "It needs to be exciting and suspenseful." A second student stated that a book that is creative keeps them reading. "If a book has a lot of detail it keeps me interested. Also, when the author makes up creative characters and a good setting." The number one statement that students said when asked why they stuck with a book was "I picked it." "If it fits me then I like it." The students were able to apply their strategies of picking books to help them stay on one book and enjoy it.

Overall, the research findings outlined that students were able to change their reader's identity. Students could relate to their texts, and were able to pick a book that fit them. Student's responses about reading changed from the beginning to the end to show that they found themselves to be more active in their reading process. Students were connecting with texts and enjoying what they were reading because they had a choice and were given time to read.

### **Discussion/Implications for Classroom**

When completing this research, students were only given six weeks to answer the questions and get used to the new setting in the classroom. One limitation of this study is time. More time conducting this study could prompt more detailed responses about readers identify and reading choice. Longer time for this study may have allowed students to provide more in depth responses and more opinions about reader identify.

As a result of this study, I will begin my year my asking students how they feel about reading, have them describe themselves as a reader, and why they think reading is important. I want to also set goals with them as readers, something that they want to improve on during their year in fifth grade. I think this will give me a good idea into what my students already come to my class knowing about themselves as readers and what we can do to make them stronger life longer readers.

I will also be giving my students time in class every day to read a book of their choice. Along with reading a book of their choice, I will make it a priority to talk to each student every week about what they are reading, why they choose it, and how they are enjoying it. I want to make

sure that I am forming a relationship with my students in help them reach their goals and create strong reader identities.

Through the research, I've seen the positive effects in the classroom on students reader identities and the value of giving them choice has had on the students. "Students need to be surrounded with books of all kinds and given the opportunity to read them every day. Conversations about reading-what is being read and what students are getting from books-need to be an ongoing event" (Miller, 2009, p. 34).

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lauren Meier** is a fifth grade teacher at Heyworth Elementary School. She has taught reading and writing to all the fifth grade students for the last 5 years. She graduated from Illinois State University with her degree in Elementary Education in 2010, and graduated with her Masters in Reading in 2015 From Illinois State University as well. Lauren Meier loves doing reading novels, in her classroom and reading literature that her students enjoy. Lauren is always looking for new approaches to help her students become life-long readers and writers.

Students discussed their identity as a reader and described what it means to be a good reader.. This study wanted to discover how a fifth grader's reader identity could change over a six-week period with more choice reading time. "I don't read good." George "I hate reading." Students in a classroom like having choices, and may not enjoy reading the same books. When students are required to read texts they are not interested in or not at their level they can form a negative view of reading and create a reader's identity that is not positive. To avoid a negative view of reading, students should be given the opportunity to read books they like, to read at a level they are comfortable reading, and to give them more choice.. Download Citation on ResearchGate | Free Choice Nominals and Free Choice Disjunction: the Identity Thesis | The main point of this chapter is the thesis that free choice (FC) effects such as those in (1) constitute a unitary phenomenon empirically, and call for a uniform explanation conceptually. I will also argue that such a unified explanation is possible within an... I will also argue that such a unified explanation is possible within an alternative-based framework. Do you want to read the rest of this chapter?