Series Books and Their Effect on Reader Development

Dana Randisi

St. John Fisher College

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters

Part of the Education Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation


Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/20 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Series Books and Their Effect on Reader Development

Abstract
This study was conducted to determine the impact that series books have on developing reading skills and motivation. Data was collected through interviews with three teachers, observations of three secondgraders' book choices, and analysis of three different book series. The data showed that book series are widely read across grade levels and are useful in developing comprehension and fluency skills. The study implies that book series can provide many benefits to developing readers, but that it is important to use the appropriate level of book with each reader to prevent higher-level readers from holding themselves back. The research also shows that book series that expand beyond printed text into popular culture can provide further motivation for students to read.

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
MS in Literacy Education

Department
Education

First Supervisor
Joellen Maples

Subject Categories
Education

This thesis is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/20
Series Books and Their Effect on Reader Development

By

Dana Randisi

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

Dr. Joellen Maples

School of Arts and Sciences
St. John Fisher College

December 2010
Abstract

This study was conducted to determine the impact that series books have on developing reading skills and motivation. Data was collected through interviews with three teachers, observations of three second-graders’ book choices, and analysis of three different book series. The data showed that book series are widely read across grade levels and are useful in developing comprehension and fluency skills. The study implies that book series can provide many benefits to developing readers, but that it is important to use the appropriate level of book with each reader to prevent higher-level readers from holding themselves back. The research also shows that book series that expand beyond printed text into popular culture can provide further motivation for students to read.
Series Books and their Effect on Reader Development

One of the biggest problems facing teachers and schools today is motivating students to read (Pitcher et al., 2007). Often times, the students least interested in reading are those who need the most help with reading skills. Do these students need more help because they are not interested in reading and do not have much experience with it, or are they less interested in reading because they struggle with it? Many reluctant readers are drawn into reading when they are interested in the material (Pitcher et al, 2007). Teachers need to find a way to cater to students’ interests and incorporate these interests into reading time, while still working on skills involving fluency and comprehension.

Some of the most popular reading material available comes in the form of book series. These series start with beginning readers, such as the Curious George books, and continue all the way into adult reading material. Series are readily available in a variety of genres, from science-fiction to mystery. This selection gives students an even broader spectrum to choose from based on their interests. By reading a series, students become familiar with characters, the setting, and the general framework of the story with the details of the plot changing from book to book. They will also be motivated to continue reading other books in the series by their desire to find out, “What happens next?” A familiarity or bond may be drawn with relatable characters, making readers more invested in what other events will take place.

By introducing students to a book series, a teacher or literacy specialist cannot only increase the students’ desire to read, but can utilize the elements of a series to teach fluency (the ability to read smoothly and accurately) and comprehension (understanding what is read). Through my study of the use of series in cultivating capable readers, I hope
to give educators, families, and students a place to look when searching for reading material for reluctant readers.

The purpose of this research was to determine if and how the reading of book series impacted the development of reading skills and motivation. The research was conducted through teacher interviews, student observation of book series choices, and analysis of the features of various series. Through a review of the available literature on the topic and my own research, I found that series books have varying impacts, depending on the structure of the series and the type of reader engaging with them.

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to fully understand the effects of reading book series on the literacy development of readers, it is necessary to first define what literacy is. Freebody and Luke (1990) define literacy as “a multifaceted set of social practices with a material technology, entailing code breaking, participation with the knowledge of the text, social uses of text, and analysis/critique of the text” (p. 15). They break literacy down into the different roles that the user will play. Code breaking is the “basics”: understanding the “relationship between spoken sounds and written symbols” (Freebody & Luke, 1990, p. 8). This concept is the groundwork on which the rest of literacy is based; without being able to understand the basic properties, one cannot be literate. The text participant’s role involves taking meaning out of the text, not simply decoding basic letter-sound relationships. In order to find this meaning, text participants must use context clues and their background knowledge in conjunction with the words. The next role, the text user, involves understanding the purpose of text and how it can be used in social interactions. This skill goes beyond the classroom, as people are expected to know how to use and
interact with different kinds of texts in different social settings. The final role, the text
analyst, involves the task of critical literacy. One must be able to critically analyze texts
and to understand the point of view from which it was written. People need to be aware
of the different functions that texts serve and who the text favors or silences. These four
roles work together to create a literate person; they all play very different parts but each is
necessary and works with the others in order for a person to be considered literate.

In reading a series of books, the reader participates in each of these roles. Like
with any reading material, the student plays the role of code breaker by interpreting the
letters and symbols on the page. At the next level, that of text participant, the student
begins to use not only their personal background knowledge, but also their understanding
of the format of the series to begin comprehending. As a text user, they begin to interact
with the text in a sociocultural manner. Perhaps they find other readers of the series and
engage in discussions, or link what they have become familiar with to other happenings
in their world. Finally, all of these components combine to make the reader a critical
thinker about literacy. They become able to see events in the series from different points
of view, and gain a feel for how true to life the events or characters are and how different
readers might interpret things differently.

Beyond understanding what literacy is, it is also necessary to understand how
literacy is acquired. Goodman (2001) believes that there are three guiding principles that
explain literacy acquisition in children. One of these principles, the relational principle,
refers to the construction of meaning found in language (Goodman, 2001). Even at a
young age, children learn to use contextual cues and pictures to find meaning in what
they are reading or hearing. Tone of voice and body language give the listener an idea of
what meaning is trying to be conveyed to them (Kucer, 2005). In reading a series, with its familiarity of plot and characters among other features, reluctant readers are able to take what they have learned from reading previous books in the series and applying it to what they are currently reading to better comprehend.

Another principle that is developed, the functional principle, helps children gain an appreciation for literacy taking place around them and is strongly influenced by sociocultural factors. How the society or household that a child is raised in feels about literacy will have a direct impact on how the child feels about literacy (Goodman, 2001). This correlation can be found in the amount of and type of literacy exposure children are getting at a young age, but also in how they hear adults around them talking about literacy. Parents and other adults in a child’s life can make or break a child’s literacy future. If a parent models a positive outlook on literacy and school in general, children will see reading, writing, and speaking as positive parts of their lives. Adults serve a dual role, both “demonstrating the dimensions of language to and for the child as well as mediating and supporting the child’s attempts to use language” (Kucer, 2005, p. 267). Children will not only be affected by what they hear adults saying about literacy but by how much literacy they see the adults in their lives practicing. Parents also play the role of providing a scaffold, or structure, of literacy in the child’s life to support literacy (Kucer, 2005). What the adult provides combined with what the child provides based on their exposure to literacy, helps the child become more adept at learning the skills needed to become literate. Many popular adult books come in the form of series, and are enjoyed for much the same reasons as they are by children and adolescents. Adults also benefit from the features of a series that aid in comprehension and fluency, and parents can not
only encourage their children to read a series but can demonstrate the benefits by participating in it themselves. Open lines of communication should exist and discussions could be held where the parent discusses with the student why they enjoy reading a series.

A third principle is the linguistic principle, which looks at how language is organized and how that organization changes in certain situations (Goodman, 2001). At a young age, children begin forming hypotheses about how language works. They develop a set of rules about spelling and punctuation based on what they have seen so far in their lives relating to these things. Bruner (1990) believes that children come “prewired” for language; however, if this is the case, children still need all other factors such as adult mediation and instruction to bring out their ability to learn language. This capability will not just appear; the role of adults, and society, must not be overlooked. It is this influence that will allow the child to grow as a literate learner. Beyond spelling and punctuation, children also form an idea of how written language works in the form of stories. They have an idea of how a traditional story is organized (beginning, middle, and end), and need to adapt this idea in certain situations when a story structure differs. In the case of a series of books, the organization often stays the same, with details changing within a general framework. By becoming familiar and comfortable with this framework, reluctant readers are better suited to read and comprehend a story.
Research Question

Because literacy is acquired through the relational, functional, and linguistic principles, each vital to the success of a literate student, this action research project asks the following question: what are the benefits of reading a book series to aid in the fluency and comprehension of reluctant readers?

Literature Review

In the attempt by educators to provide reading material that will build stronger readers, research has begun to look at this use of series books at all levels of reading. Typically, the reading of book series has been done under the umbrella of “wider reading,” which is generally done “individually within and outside school as a result of…interests, choices and personal recommendations” (Westbrook, 2007, p. 147). Though somewhat limited, previous research relating to the use of book series in developing a literate student have shown a number of different aspects of these books that need to be considered (Coles & Hall, 2002; Johnson, 2010; Butt, 2003; Sweeney, 2009; Westbrook, 2007; Mackey, 2001; Mackey, 2006; Hopper, 2003; Sekeres, 2009; Ross, 2009; Williams, 2008; Kragler, 2000; Groenke & Maples, 2010). Some of these findings have weighed the pros and cons of this type of reading material: do they promote enthusiasm for reading, as well as fluency and comprehension skills, or do they hold students back from moving on to higher-level thinking (Hopper, 2005; Mackey, 2001; Mackey, 2006; Sweeney, 2009; Ross, 2009; Westbrook, 2007; Coles & Hall, 2002; Butt, 2003; Sekeres, 2009)? Other studies have looked at book series from a marketing standpoint (Sekeres, 2009; Mackey, 2001; Johnson, 2010; Mackey, 2006). Finally,
researchers have looked at how students interact with and use series books, versus how teachers view their use (Williams, 2008; Hopper, 2005; Kragler, 2000; Westbrook, 2007). Each of these topics has been looked at in various studies throughout the research, and provided opposing viewpoints on the usage of book series. The research presented the topics of the benefits and hindrances of series, series as marketing tools, and the viewpoints of both teachers and students regarding series.

**Series Benefits and Hindrances**

Research has shown that students who read book series, particularly reluctant readers, become more engaged and enthusiastic about reading, and are encouraged to continue reading once they begin a series (Hopper, 2005). Mackey (2001) asserted that an ongoing series will “demand, and indubitably receive, a serious commitment from readers” (p. 168). Book series hold “the potential to explore extended stories” (Mackey, 2006, p. 150). By continuing to read a series of books based on the same characters, readers are invited to become invested in these characters’ relationships and lives (Sweeney, 2009). Similar to characters in a television series, characters in book series take part in character development; they inevitably end up somewhere based on the choices that they made in previous installments. Years down the road, readers will look back at these series books and while they may not remember the formulaic plot details, they will remember the character traits that make each character stand out to them (Mackey, 2006). Some series are able to venture away from the formula at times; Sweeney (2009) found that in the *Alice* series, “the writing is at times more nuanced and the issues it tackles are more complicated” (p. 3). This break from convention allows the story to be told from different points of view and these perspectives are often differing
from each other, as opposed to The Babysitter's Club books, which offer “homogenized views of what being female means” (p. 4). Therefore, the Alice books show that it is possible for a series to stay within the world that has been created from book to book, a world that the reader is comfortable with, while providing them with a wide spectrum of characters and personalities.

Readers also become comfortable with the structure of series books. Ross (2009) asserts that repeated readings of a familiar format add complexity, much as playing video games or rewatching movies allow the viewer to “puzzle out what they missed the first time around” (p. 652). By becoming familiar with the story structure, readers are better equipped for new challenges that will come their way with more complex readings. Mackey also compares reading a book series to watching a television series in terms of formula and character development. The reading of twenty-six books in the Beverly Gray book series is equivalent to watching the complete television series, Felicity, and both readers and viewers can learn many of the same components. Mackey (2006) points out that “a young person immersed in reading the 26 books of the series, however, would be perceived by many adults as more wholesomely and reasonably occupied over such an extended timeframe” (p. 152) than the person engaged in the television series. By becoming engrossed in a book series, young readers may be more likely to put down the video games or move away from the TV and begin to think of reading as an activity that they would willingly do during their own leisure time. Many times, these books must fill in some expository, redundant information in each book for new readers who have picked up the series in the middle. Readers who are familiar with the structure are aware that they can reread these sections for clarity or reminders, or they can skip that section
Mackey (2006). Mackey (2001) also found that readers have more opportunities to build interest in the stories, as well as making ties with the author, which could give them another opportunity to branch out in their reading to other titles. Authors also encourage readers to come back for more by ending the stories on cliff-hangers, and carrying the plot over to the next story in the series; readers will then want to continue reading to find out what happens next (Mackey, 2006). The weddings that take place in *The Baby-sitters Club* and *Alice* series allow for further stories to be told; stepsiblings are added and new families are formed, setting up for future plot lines (Sweeney, 2009). Series books can still be enjoyed even without these cliffhangers; the formulaic nature of the books allows for readers to skip around from book to book, oftentimes influenced by availability of past titles. Reading the series in order is a luxury but not a necessity; Mackey (2006) found that “fragmentation is regularly a significant component of the reading experience” (p. 152).

In addition to becoming more engaged readers, many researchers have found that students gain a number of important reading skills by engaging with series books (Ross, 2009; Hopper, 2005; Westbrook, 2007; Mackey, 2006; Coles & Hall, 2002). Ross (2009) found that series allow for not just enjoyment, but also the use of high-level cognitive skills. They teach the rules of fiction, and engage readers in “the cognitive skills of reading, rule following, decoding, and pattern recognition” (p. 652). Research has shown that reading some series “demand high-level reading skills, and also include intertextual references” (Hopper, 2005, p. 116). Westbrook (2007) also found that the reading of popular series books leads to the acquisition of inference and deduction skills. The formulaic nature of series allow readers to control their own pace to follow unfolding
events; since the reader is aware of what the outcome will be based on past knowledge of the series, they are able to speed up to see how the conclusion is reached, or to move on to the next, highly anticipated book in the series (Mackey, 2006). Research has shown that girls in particular often read popular fiction, especially series, which they then share and discuss with their peers (Coles & Hall, 2002; Johnson, 2010). By making reading a social activity, they are then better equipped for the type of literacy practices done in schools (Coles & Hall, 2002). Series books also help set students up to be better prepared for other types of literacy as they grow as readers. Ross (2009) asserts that reading these books allow students to “progress through developmental stages of learning the codes and rules” of reading, acting as “‘training wheels’” for readers (p. 653).

In opposition to these views, some researchers have found that students who read series books are not developing as readers because of the books’ formulaic structure and lack of originality (Ross, 200; Butt, 2003; Sekeres, 2009; Johnson, 2010; Sweeney, 2009). Ross (2009) notes that librarians and teachers often look down on series books because of their “lack of realism, their tendency to instill false views of life, their poor literary value, their assembly line methods of production, and their success in the marketplace” (p. 641). These books are seen as offering little to no literary value but instead being produced because of how quickly they can be put out on shelves and sold for a profit. Butt (2003) noted that, despite their popularity, series books are the “literary equivalent of junk food—predictable, filling, but lacking nutrition” (p. 280). Butt believes that it often becomes difficult to distinguish one book in a series from the rest, as the author has simply swapped out one element for another. By filling out a preset formula, the books do not offer the reader any variety or the chance to be truly excited about what
will happen next, because they already know if they have read another book in the series. Sekeres (2009) asserts that series books simply contribute to the homogenization of reading; they offer technically new stories but similar plots and characters, both within and across series. Sekeres points out that the Hannah Montana book series, for example, explore recurring themes through various typical teenage problems; a new problem is encountered in each book, with the same lesson taught by the end. Readers of series are simply reading the same story over and over, without opening themselves up to any new ideas or writing styles. By sticking only with what is familiar, they will limit themselves from moving up in the world of reading and trying new things. According to Johnson (2010), romantic teen series retell the same story and theme, and “reproduce the normalcy and desirability of the traditional view of female fulfillment achieved through relationship-centered roles of partner and caregiver” (p. 60). Readers fall into a pattern of reading series because they are looking for a particular societal “norm” which has been implanted in them by previous readings of these and similar series. Due to this, they fall into a cycle of reading the same types of stories and do not expand their views and knowledge.

Sweeney (2009) has found that all too often, characters in these series offer “banal forms of white, middle-class heterosexuality” (p. 4), with token minority characters added into the mix. Through her study of weddings in young adult series books, Sweeney also finds that these books are “not just one more example of this cultural homogenization at work, but in some ways are the perfect crystallization of heteronormative values” (p. 4). By engaging in reading a series, the reader may also become trapped in the ideals that series is trying to portray. The American Girl series
follows a number of different characters from different time periods, but with the same story titles and structures, and “each doll’s story line explores a character trait that ‘American girls’ should have, such as courage, confidence, compassion, or persistence” (Sekeres, 2009, p. 407). Sekeres asserts that the American Girl series is so firm in the picture of an ideal “American girl” that there is a limit on the amount of imagination that can come out of reading the series based on such preset values. Research shows that although these stories may be engaging at first, they eventually fall into a pattern of simply the same story repeatedly retold (Sekeres, 2009; Butt, 2003; Johnson, 2010). The reader knows exactly what will happen even before they begin to read (Butt, 2003).

Butt (2003) also states that once the reader has gained an understanding of the pattern, it becomes possible to skip books in the series and still comprehend what is happening, which “is neither a satisfactory nor an accomplished form of literature to be offering readers” (p. 282). Skipping books in the series may take away from the emotional investment that normally goes into the reading of an entire series. When reading a series out of order, the reader is still able to know the outcome of the situation based on the formula from other books, but it would be more satisfying to fill in the gaps (Mackey, 2006). Both Sweeney (2009) and Butt (2003) have found that despite new adventures and experiences taking place across the books, rarely does any character growth occur. Characters all speak with generally the same voice, and their conduct does not seem to be affected by experiences that they had in prior books in the series. Mackey (2006) points out that the specific events cannot be changed, as they carry over from book to book, but in a realistic light, the characters would grow from those events. Butt (2003) points out that the book *Holes*, by Louis Sachar, offers similar literary qualities as
the *Lemony Snicket* series, but concludes the story and does not require anticipation of a next installment. However, Butt recognizes that even though more interesting, challenging books are available to young readers, they do not necessarily encourage the same levels of enthusiasm as the popular series do.

**Series as Marketing Tools**

An important factor in determining whether a series will provide benefits or hindrances to readers is their desire and motivation to read it. Many readers are being drawn into series whose life is prolonged by its venture into popular culture. The increase of attention on the use of series books with developing readers can be attributed to the extension of the series beyond just books into a merchandising phenomenon. The publishing of books as series came about as a response to public demand of new titles; initially, a chapter “would appear in a periodical or a weekly newspaper, with the entire edition available for sale upon its completion” (Sekeres, 2009, p. 402). Research has found that, especially in today’s age of multiple literacies, book series are expanding even further into brands, increasing the way that readers can interact with characters (Sekeres, 2009; Mackey, 2001; Johnson, 2010). According to Sekeres (2009), branded fiction extends the idea of multiple literacies; we have moved from books to spinoffs, movies, and the Internet, as well as material possessions displaying the brand. Even when the book series ends, a movie may come along which will continue to extend the life of the brand. It is now possible to know characters outside of books, which “is a significant and influential change in a child’s literate imagining” (Sekeres, 2009, p. 412). By extending the life and story of a character, the brands are creating new ways for readers to become engaged with the words on the page. Book characters can now be referred to
as market children and the reader makes a conception of this character through a wide range of products, not just the words on the page.

By becoming a brand product, according to Sekeres (2009), these series now “promote a broader conception of story and character through all the brand products” (p. 400). However, they may also limit their availability based on who has access to the products that extend beyond the book. The Skeleton Creek and The Amanda Project series have tie-ins to the Internet that are essential to the understanding of the books. In the case of Skeleton Creek, which tells half of the story through a character’s videos online, “the book doesn’t work without the videos, and vice versa” (Groenke & Maples, 2010, p. 40). The Amanda Project has a website “run” by the characters in the book that offers clues and other interactive activities relating to the book. In this case, “while technology does not supplement the storyline in The Amanda Project, it becomes an integral part of the reader’s extended experience of the text” (Groenke & Maples, 2010, p. 41). While these books serve as great ways to tie-in students’ increasing use of technology with reading print, Groenke and Maples (2010) point out that these technologies are not always equally available to all readers. Thus, a series like Skeleton Creek becomes immediately unavailable to a portion of the population because they will be missing half of the text without being able to watch the videos online. Groenke and Maples (2010) also note that The Amanda Project has a section of its website devoted to selling clothes and other merchandise relating to the books, encouraging readers to become further enveloped in the series by spending more money. The branding of book series needs to consider whether it is really being done for the purpose of helping readers become more motivated to continue reading, or for the purpose of making more money.
It is important to note that while branding may mean an increase in the number of books written each year, it oftentimes decreases the amount of unique books being put out, for the sake of making a profit. Publishers need to ensure that extending the brand does not affect the quality of writing. A different author writes each installment of *The 39 Clues* series. Because of this disjointed writing, the plot framework and characters stay the same but personalities change slightly depending on the voice that the particular author chooses to write in (Sekeres, 2009). Finishing the last book in a series no longer necessarily means that the story has ended; Mackey (2001) notes that “the story develops a life of its own” (p. 179) through such material as spin-off series, television shows, movies, Websites, as well as dolls, clothing, sleeping bags and other material possessions. Oftentimes, these extensions of the series lend themselves to other interpretations of the story or world that has been created through the original series. To the contrary, Johnson (2010) feels that the replication of storylines through spin-offs and alternate timelines in a brand narrows the ideas presented, in terms of both plot and societal norms, and only serves to make a greater profit.

Sekeres (2009) asserts that readers can now “manipulate the market child…in ways that expand the imaginative potential of the character” (p. 403). Though many book series are being extended into television shows, there is also the phenomenon now of the opposite--a book series created out of the television show. For example, the Hannah Montana television show has spawned a number of books, whose major purpose is to extend the brand so that it can continue on well after the show has ended (Sekeres, 2009). This benefits not only the reader who has become invested in the Hannah Montana world, but the company behind Hannah Montana who will continue to bring in a profit.
The Internet serves as a powerful tool for increasing readers’ enthusiasm for book series, particularly when waiting for the next installment to arrive. Mackey (2001) studied online discussions between readers in anticipation for future texts in the series, and noted that those discussions were “a testimony to the continuing power of extended reading” (p. 181). Often, these online discussions extend beyond simple comprehension of the story; Mackey asserts that readers share insight into character motivations or purposes, which shows that “young people have paid close attention to the tone as well as the contents” of the series (p. 177). Mackey (2006) compares book series reading with viewing television shows on DVD; both forms of entertainment offer the ability to view multiple times and engage in commentary with other fans, particularly on the Internet on discussion and chat boards.

The Internet has also changed the scope with which the reader views the series. In the past, the reader’s interest could stay right inside the world created in the series; there was no attention paid to how or why the story was created. Now, interest in the author and their background has increased, as “we are generally more attentive to back stories in today’s culture” (Mackey, 2006, p. 159). Online guides to the series offer a number of questions for readers to think about pertaining to the series. For example, guides for the Philip Pullman *His Dark Materials* series provide large, open-ended questions for all of the books, which encourages readers to keep reading and look at the big picture, understanding how the books come together to tell one epic story. Contrarily, more specific guides such as one for the single installment *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* cause a more restricted view of that series as a whole (Mackey, 2001). The Internet also allows readers to become involved in fan fiction, which gives them the chance to extend
the series on their own through creative interactions between characters or blending of plotlines from various books in the series (Sekeres, 2009). The Internet allows series to grow into “solid and elaborate text-worlds” (Mackey, 2001, p. 182). Students who become invested in a series and are longing for more access to it now have other places that they can look to continue to immerse themselves in the world that has been created. Not only can they gain extended information about the characters that they have been reading about, but they have the opportunity to use their own creativity and imagine other things that may happen to these characters in the form of fan fiction. Reading a series and having access to the brand in other ways will foster the reader’s dedication to the series and allow them to connect to it in other areas of their life.

Series As Viewed By Students and Teachers

Despite the popularity that series books have with readers, many teachers are reluctant or unsure of how to use these and other popular reading material in the classroom. Groenke, Gibson, Allen and Bell (2010) found that when given the opportunity and access to books, middle school students chose to read book series. One student enjoyed reading the Alex Rider series, after which he “expanded his reading genres and has discovered that other types of books are action-packed and that they also allow him to create movies in his mind” (Groenke, et al., 2010, p. 11). Being drawn into one series that contained a lot of action allowed a once reluctant reader to continue reading other action-packed series. Williams (2008) found that economically disadvantaged black students often were influenced by their peers and adults in their book selections, and often chose series based on the recognition of the name. These same students showed “the actual series appeared to be more important than a specific book in
a series” (p. 59). Even though the series that were chosen varied between genders, Williams found that both boys and girls were frequently choosing books from a series when given a book club selection that also included individual titles. According to Hopper (2005), series that are turned into films dominate students’ reading choices, as they are able to follow the characters that they have come to know further into the universe of the series. Research has also shown that “below-average readers seemed to find a particular series…and stick with it rather than venturing out into different books” (Kragler, 2000, p. 136-137). The familiarity offers these students reading materials that they are comfortable with, so that rather than just not reading, they will always be able to find something that they not only enjoy, but know they can read as well. Westbrook (2007) asserted that readers often preferred series books based on “equity of access to texts, the stimulation of imagination and ownership of texts” (p. 152). Students become immersed in the world created in the series to the point where they feel like they know the characters; they have spent enough time with them to be able to understand why and how they act the way they do. By having this understanding of characters, readers may feel that they are part of that world as well. Williams’s (2008) research showed that in an offering from a book club selection, sixty percent of the books belonged to a series that “included a continuous character, format, or setting” (p. 53). These books are promoted due to their popularity with readers, and that familiarity is such a vital component of the readers’ choices of these series.

Of the teachers that Westbrook interviewed about their use of popular reading in the classroom, half engaged in serial reading themselves as both children and adults. They were unaware or unfamiliar with how to use these titles in their own classroom,
despite knowing the benefits from their own experience. Westbrook’s research showed that teachers who ventured to use series and other popular texts in the classroom liked the way that they could witness students interacting with the texts, while still engaging in authentic instruction in the classroom (2007). Westbrook found that teachers commonly used “shared talk, formative assessment in reading journals and the recommendation of related texts” (p. 153) as a way of looking at students’ reading patterns across a series. These same teachers enjoyed not having to formally assess wider reading because it then stays an enjoyable activity, rather than teacher-controlled, which will encourage students to continue engaging in series on their own time and outside of school. The reluctant readers who choose not continue reading or are not comfortable with reading, especially on their own time, are the ones who most benefit from the use of series books. When they find a book that they feel comfortable reading and comprehending, they will be more likely to continue reading other books with the same characters, setting or formula because they know that they will succeed at it. This motivation will then hopefully add to their continued enjoyment of reading and extend the possibilities of what they choose to read. Groenke, et al. (2010) found that providing students with access to series books in their classroom was the first step in getting students to read. Once they read a book and formed a connection, they “become immersed in the characters’ worlds, and anxiously wait to see what their favorite characters are up to in each novel” (Groenke, et al., 2010, p. 12). Teachers need to make the first step in having these books available for students to start reading, so that they get hooked and will want to continue reading.

Though so far limited in its scope, research on the use of book series both in and out of the classroom has raised many interesting questions (Coles & Hall, 2002; Johnson,
2010; Butt, 2003; Sweeney, 2009; Westbrook, 2007; Mackey, 2001; Mackey, 2006; Hopper, 2003; Sekeres, 2009; Ross, 2009; Williams, 2008; Kragler, 2000; Groenke & Maples, 2010). There appears to be a clear division between those who see the use of series and other popular reading material as beneficial for students, particularly reluctant readers, and those who see it as a hindrance to development. Book series also raise the issue of whether these series are being published for the benefit of the readers or the benefit of the pockets of the publishers. Finally, teachers and students often have differing views on if these titles are appropriate and beneficial for classroom instruction. Further research is needed in all areas to gain a better understanding of the use of series books for young and adolescent readers.

Method

Context

Research for this study took place with teachers and students from a number of school districts in western New York. Elise (pseudonym) is a seventh-grade Special Education teacher in a rural school district, which consists of a primary school, an intermediate school, a middle school and a high school. According to the New York State Report Card for the 2008-2009 school year, the middle school had an enrollment of 451 students, with an average class size of 18 students. 96 percent of students at this school were Caucasian. Nineteen percent of students in this school were eligible for free lunch.

Zach (pseudonym) is a high-school reading teacher in a large suburban school district, which consists of thirteen elementary schools, four middle schools, and four high schools. The high school that Zach teaches at had an enrollment of 1235 students in the
2008-2009 school year, according to the New York State Report Card. The average English class size in this school was 22 students, and 25 percent of students qualified for free lunch. 76 percent of students at this school were Caucasian, with 14 percent African-American and seven percent Hispanic or Latino.

Janine (pseudonym) teaches fourth-grade in a suburban school district in western New York. This district consists of four elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. The elementary school that Janine teaches at had an enrollment of 503 students in the 2008-2009 school year, according to the New York State Report Card. In this school, 24 percent of students were eligible for free lunch. 77 percent of students were Caucasian, with 15 percent African-American and six percent Hispanic or Latino.

Participants

Elise is a Caucasian female in her late twenties in her first year teaching seventh grade Special Education. Last year, she taught eighth grade Special Education in the same school district. Prior to that, she was a teacher at a children’s center specializing in working with students with disabilities. Elise did both her undergraduate and graduate studies at a college in Rochester, New York. She holds a BA in English, with certification in Childhood Education, grades 1 through 6, and Special Education, grades 5 through 9. She also holds an MS in Adolescent Education, with ELA and Special Education.

Zach is a Caucasian male in his mid-twenties in his second year as a high school reading specialist, working with students in grades nine through twelve. Prior to this, he worked as an Autism Specialist on a Special Education campus in another suburban district in Monroe County, and as a reading specialist at a different high school in the district he currently teaches in. He received his undergraduate degree from a state school
in western New York in Elementary Education and Special Education, and received his MS in Literacy (Kindergarten through sixth grade) from the same school. He also holds a teaching degree in Secondary Math Education.

Janine is in her eleventh year teaching fourth grade at the school in which she is located. Prior to that, she taught at another suburban district in Monroe County as a paraprofessional. She holds a Bachelors degree in Theatre, Business Management and Psychology, as well as a Masters in Elementary Education. Prior to teaching, she worked in professional theatre as a stage manager and a company manager.

Lewis (pseudonym) is a second grade, Caucasian, male student who attends an elementary school in a suburban school district in western New York. Lewis is currently attending a tutoring program sponsored by St. John Fisher College. Megan (pseudonym) is a second grade, Caucasian, female student who attends an elementary school in a different suburban school district in western New York. She attends the same tutoring program as Lewis. Alicia (pseudonym) is a second grade, African-American, female student who attends an elementary school in an urban school district in western New York, and also attends the same tutoring program as Lewis and Megan. All three students are reading independently at a Level C on the Fountas and Pinnell scale and reading instructionally at a Level D on the Fountas and Pinnell scale.

Researcher Stance

I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College, obtaining my Masters in Literacy, Birth through 12. I also hold a BSEd in Childhood Education, grades 1 through 6, and a BA in History. As a researcher, during my student observations, I was a privileged, active observer, as I was able to “withdraw, stand back, and watch what is
happening during a particular teaching episode, moving in and out of the role of teacher, aide, and observer” (Mills, 2011, p. 75) while overseeing the observation part of my research. The participants were under the guidance of their tutor during this time. Therefore, I was able to observe children’s book choices during a time in which I was not responsible for the students’ instruction, but they were able to share their thought processes with me as they chose different reading material. Also as a researcher, I conducted structured formal interviews. Each teacher was asked the same set of questions, though some additional questions arose based on their responses. I tape recorded and took notes during the interviews of Elise and Zach, and acted as a passive observer while they were answering, allowing wait time and not supplying them with leading thoughts or comments. Janine’s interview was conducted through email, with the same set of initial questions that was asked of Elise and Zach.

**Method**

During this study, I collected data in a number of ways. I conducted interviews with teachers from three different levels of instruction (elementary, middle school, and high school). I questioned them about the use of series books both in and out of the classroom and their thoughts on the benefits and hindrances of these books. I looked at what series they use in their classroom instruction, and what series they recommend for students to read independently, as well as their reasoning for the use of these books. I also looked at their views on series books that are developed into a “brand,” such as movies, television shows, and other merchandise, as well as books that are created as tie-ins for these parts of popular culture. Finally, I discussed with them their thoughts on the
benefits and hindrances that series books have on fluency and comprehension in readers, particularly reluctant readers.

The second part of my study involved working with students and their choices about series books. I observed the series book choices made by three second-grade students. I presented them with a wide variety of series books, ranging from *Curious George* to *Junie B. Jones*. I gave students time to look through the books, looking at the covers, pictures, text size and length, as well as any other features that may stand out to them. I then asked them to tell me which books they would be interested in reading independently, which books they would want read to them, and which books they were not interested in. Finally, I asked them for reasons why they put each book in each particular group.

The final observation that I made was of the series books themselves. I took a series recommended to me at each grade level and read a number of books in each series. I compared the qualities and characteristics of the series. I looked at such factors as predictability, reliability (do characters and other important plot factors stay accurate from book to book), and engaging endings (does the reader want to continue reading). I also looked at whether the books could be read as stand-alone titles or if they need to be read in order.

In my study, I needed to ensure the trustworthiness of my research. This was done through Guba’s “Criteria for Assessing the Trustworthiness of Naturalistic Inquiries” (Guba, 1981). These criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Mills (2011) defines credibility as “the researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that
are not easily explained” (p. 104). To achieve this, I shared my research with a colleague to gain a second opinion on the research that I collected. Their feedback helped me see my research in a new light and raised new questions about my topic. I also practiced triangulation, collecting multiple forms of data in order to cross-check my findings. Finally, I collected artifacts such as audio recordings of my interviews and actual series books as “‘raw’ or ‘slice-of-life’” data (Mills, 2011, p. 104).

Mills (2011) defines transferability as “qualitative researchers’ beliefs that everything they study is context bound and that the goal of their work is not to develop ‘truth’ statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people” (p. 104). I achieved this by collecting very detailed descriptions about the subjects of my study, including the participants and the schools that they attend or work in. By doing this, I ensured that the readers of my work will be able to compare and contrast my study within other contexts should further research occur.

I also needed to ensure dependability in my study. Mills (2011) defines dependability as “the stability of the data” (p. 104). I ensured this by collecting multiple forms of data in order to provide different points of view and so that “the weakness of one is compensated by the strength of another” (p. 104). I also made accessible the data that I collected, including written accounts of all interviews and observations, along with audio recordings of the interviews and field notes, all of which were examined by my critical colleague. I also shared my research with my participants prior to publishing it in the form of a member check to determine that they felt that they were accurately represented (Guba, 1981).
The final criteria to determine the trustworthiness of my study was confirmability. Mills (2011) defines confirmability as “the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected” (p. 105). I ensured this by collecting multiple forms of data, to confirm my data through comparison. I also practiced reflexivity, in which I reflected on my own biases, and the effect that these had on the questions in my research.

Before collecting my research data, it was important that I gain consent from the individuals participating in my study. I achieved this by giving each adult participant a consent form, explaining the purpose of the study and their rights as a participant. I also explained to them that all information will be presented with a pseudonym provided for their name and asked for permission and authorization. For the children participating in my study, I provided each of their parents with a parental consent form, again explaining their child’s rights as a participant and the purpose of the study. I also gained verbal assent from the children, thereby gaining permission for use of their data in my research. All participants’ names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Data Collection

As discussed earlier, I collected data in three different ways. I conducted interviews with teachers at the elementary, middle school and high school levels. These interviews looked at teachers’ views on and uses of series books. I collected audio recordings of these interviews, with one collected through email, as well as took field notes and transcribed the recordings. I also observed the book choices of three second grade students. Students were provided with a number of books series and asked to pick which books they were interested in reading, having read to them, and not reading at all. I took field notes while observing them interacting with the books, and conducted informal
interviews when necessary, recording the students’ responses as to why they made the selections that they did. Finally, I looked at the makeup of particular series books. I compiled a checklist of data that I was looking for in the books, and took note of what qualities each series possessed. I also took notes on these aspects of the books.

Data Analysis

After collecting my data, I coded the information collected in my interviews with the teachers. Coding refers to “the process of trying to find patterns and meaning in data through the use of surveys, interviews, and questionnaires” (Mills, 2011, p. 129). I studied the responses given in my interviews and found themes throughout the data. I then sorted the data collected from my observations and analysis of the book series into these themes.

Findings and Discussion

After coding and analyzing my data, three themes emerged regarding series books. These themes were familiarity of characters and plot, motivation for readers, and the development of reading skills. These themes were consistent with the themes found in the literature relating to book series.

Familiarity of Characters and Plot

All of my data sources showed the importance of becoming familiar with the characters and plots of series books; this familiarity would lead to comfort, something often necessary for a pleasurable reading experience. When discussing her students’ independent reading choices, Janine, the fourth-grade teacher, noted that “once they have found a series or a genre they enjoy, they tend to stick with that” (personal interview, October 24, 2010). This statement supports the earlier claim that students who read book
series, particularly reluctant readers, become more engaged and enthusiastic about reading, and are encouraged to continue reading once they begin a series (Hopper, 2005). She also found that her lower level readers tended to benefit from the use of series books because once they find one that they are comfortable with and really feel like they know, “there is a set of books they can go to for awhile [sic]” (personal interview, October 24, 2010). Elise, the seventh-grade Special Education teacher, took note that she found that series with similar or the same characters repeating from book to book were beneficial for her students, “because then they kind of feel like they get to know them better” (personal interview, October 9, 2010). Both teachers found that becoming familiar and comfortable with the characters, setting, and structure of a book series was very beneficial, especially for their lower level readers. It provides them with the confidence to want to continue reading because they were successful at reading these books. As the literature showed, reading series allows students to “progress through developmental stages of learning the codes and rules” of reading, acting as “training wheels” for readers (Ross, 2009, p. 653). Once they have become familiar with how a particular series works, they will hopefully gain the confidence to then move on to higher-level texts.

Familiarity with the series was the biggest reason given by Lewis, Megan and Alicia during their time choosing between series books. All three students were given time to look through selections from various series and discuss whether or not they would want to read the book, and give reasons as to why or why not. All three students consistently mentioned that they had read other books in some of the series when deciding whether they were interested in reading these particular titles. Lewis chose the Junie B. Jones and Curious George books because he had read them before. He
commented on the fact that Junie B. Jones “is silly”, showing familiarity with the character and the series. He also mentioned that he “really liked [Curious George books]” in the past so he would want to read this one as well (observation, October 19, 2010).

Megan also demonstrated familiarity; however, she determined both books that she wanted to read and books that she didn’t want to read because she had read them before. Megan was familiar with the Junie B. Jones and Amelia Bedelia series and stated “these were bad”, so she was not interested in reading these titles. On the other hand, she had read the Henry and Mudge and Nate the Great series and stated “these ones were good” (observation, October 19, 2010), and chose the titles from those series that were provided to read.

Alicia also chose two series based on previous experience reading them. She wanted to read the Junie B. Jones title because she read titles from the series before and “this was funny to read” (observation, October 19, 2010). She also chose a Nate the Great title because she had read others before and she thought they were good books. Though familiarity was not the only reason that Lewis, Megan and Alicia gave for the titles that they chose to read, it was a common factor for all three students and was stated more often than any other influences on their book choices.

The three book series that I chose to analyze all showed varying levels of familiarity offered to the readers. The A to Z Mysteries contain a formulaic plot structure. Each book in the series offers the same main characters and sequence of events. The books feature third graders Dink, Josh and Ruth Rose as “three smart kids who solve crimes and mysteries” (A to Z Mysteries, 2005, para. 2). These three are the main characters who stay consistent from book to book; other supporting characters appear in
various books and some only appear in one. The books showcase the three main children solving a new mystery in each installment, and similar descriptions of them in each book. For example, Ruth Rose’s clothing choices are consistently described in each book. One book states: “As usual, she was dressed all in one color. Today it was purple” (Roy, 1997, p. 6). Another states: “She liked to dress in one color. Today it was green, from her T-shirt to her high-tops” (Roy, 1998, p. 2). Each book also starts with a map of the location that that installment’s mystery takes place in. The extreme familiarity of the A-Z Mysteries offers young readers a comfort level in which they know generally what will happen in each story and the characters stay static from book to book, the way that the reader originally encountered them.

Both the Harry Potter series and The Hunger Games series offer familiarity to their readers, but in a different way than the A-Z Mysteries. Each of the books in these series is a continuation of the same story. They are similar to a television show or miniseries, with each book acting as the next installment and you need to keep watching (reading) to find out what eventually happens in the end. But despite changing plot structure from book to book, the series still hold on to the idea of familiarity. They each contain continuity in terms of both plot and characters. Both series tell a developing story over the course of all of the books in the series (seven total for Harry Potter and three total for The Hunger Games). They refer to events that previously happened in prior books, which have an effect on what will continue to happen. These references act as reminders to the reader of what they have already read. The main characters also stay the same throughout the series, with new characters developed as books continue. However, the main characters do not stay static. They develop and the readers learn more about
them as they continue reading. For example, in the first book of *The Hunger Games* series, Katniss and Peeta are established as the main characters since the action focuses mainly on their time spent in the arena. In the second book, *Catching Fire*, most of the attention stays on Katniss and Peeta as they reenter the arena and fight in the Games. However, new characters are added and play key roles, such as their fellow Hunger Games competitor Finnick. Finnick will go on to play a major role in the third book, *Mockingjay*. Also in *Mockingjay*, as the action moves away from the arena, other characters that had been briefly touched on in the first two books become more fleshed out, such as Gale. Similar things happen in the *Harry Potter* series. Harry, Ron and Hermione are the three main characters throughout all seven books, but as they move through the saga, they encounter new characters, both friends and foe, who begin to play major roles in the story. Hermione and Ron also gain their own storylines in the later books, instead of just acting as Harry’s sidekicks. By building on to the characters that the reader meets in the first book, these series help us feel like we really know the characters. This is especially beneficial for struggling readers because they feel comfortable moving on in the series because they are familiar with the characters and the story and will be comforted by the fact that they are reading something that they know they can be successful with.

**Motivation for Readers**

The data that I collected also showed the theme of the role that book series play in the motivation of readers. Elise noted that her students particularly enjoy reading the *Shadow Children* series and the *Harry Potter* series. She found that “it seems like the kids really like books that are kind of fast moving and have a lot of action in them, and
are a little bit more suspenseful so it kind of keeps them interested in what’s going to happen next” (personal interview, October 9, 2010). These particular series provided the students with the motivation to continue reading the next book in the series because they were so drawn into the story that they wanted to find out what would happen. She also stated that, for her reluctant readers, she particularly recommends series because “it’s nice to have other books in that series that you know are going to be similar interest level or reading level for them so it’s always nice to have that instead of having them start all over to find a book” (personal interview, October 9, 2010).

Zach, the high-school reading teacher, felt similarly about book series, stating that “if I can find one book that interests them that will get them on the road to reading more books, that’s pretty ideal” (personal interview, October 20, 2010). Many times, reluctant readers don’t want to read because they become frustrated with finding a book that is right for them. Becoming engrossed in a series makes them want to continue reading. Motivating reluctant readers is the most important aspect of Zach’s job as a reading specialist and he stated that “I’m willing to do almost anything to do that so if that means that the Glee book is going to sell a kid on something, then I’m willing to do that” (personal interview, October 20, 2010). Though book series based off of television shows and movies is not Zach’s ideal reading choice, he is willing to encourage them if it gets his students motivated to read. He also grudgingly praised the Twilight series for providing his students with motivation: “It’s a horribly written series; however, talking about catching a student, it really has so I can’t really knock it that much” (personal interview, October 20, 2010). The extreme popularity of this series has really hooked readers and kept them reading long past the first book. The Twilight series is also an
example of one of the series in which “the story develops a life of its own” (Mackey, 2001, p. 179). It has extended into a popular movie franchise, which keeps readers immersed in the world that the author, Stephenie Meyer, has created.

Janine had conflicting views about the roles that book series play in motivating readers. For her lower readers, she sees the benefits of series because reading them “gives them the element of choice, especially when it is a series that does not need to be read in order” (personal interview, October 24, 2010), such as the A-Z Mysteries. It helps her students find books at their level and not become frustrated with choosing a book from all of the possibilities offered to them. However, when it comes to her higher level readers, Janine believes that “they often tend to get locked in a series, and are at a point in their reading development where they are not always pushing themselves to grow as readers” (personal interview, October 24, 2010). Though they are motivated to continue reading the books in that particular series, Janine worries that it may stifle their development as they get stuck in a cycle of only reading those books and not pushing themselves to try something new.

The book series that were analyzed for this study show characteristics of motivating students to read them, particularly the Hunger Games and Harry Potter series. The A-Z Mysteries are written as stand-alone titles, with each story wrapping up nicely at the end and not influencing future titles in the series. The main motivation for this series comes from the familiarity aspect, and coming to know the characters and setting well enough that you are comfortable with what you are reading. This type of series is particularly beneficial for lower level and reluctant readers.
The *Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* series provide a different type of motivation. These books need to be read in order, as they tell a developing story throughout the course of the series and end with an aura of suspense or a cliffhanger, leaving the reader wondering, “What will happen next?” *The Hunger Games*, for instance, ends with Katniss and Peeta returning to District Twelve and preparing for their new responsibilities and pressures as the victors of the Hunger Games. *Catching Fire* ends with Gale telling Katniss that “there is no District Twelve” (Collins, 2009, p. 391). This sets up the story for *Mockingjay* and the rebellion against the Capitol that Katniss will lead. Each of the first six *Harry Potter* books end with Harry finishing a year at Hogwarts and returning to the Dursley’s for the summer. But even though the school year has ended, the main storyline continues with the battle between Harry and Voldemort looming and building toward their final confrontation in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. The suspense and ongoing storylines in these two series motivate readers to continue reading and becoming so engrossed in the storyline that they want to pick up the next book in the series to eventually reach the conclusion. The literature showed that online discussions between readers took place in anticipation for future installments in many series, and these discussions were “a testimony to the continuing power of extended reading” (Mackey, 2001, p. 181). Readers get excited about a new chapter in the continuing saga that they have become engrossed, much as they would anticipate new music or movies.

**Development of Reading Skills**

The effect of reading book series on reading skills was a major theme that emerged from the data. Elise discussed the popularity of book series developed from
television shows or movies, as well as series that were then made into movies or
television shows. She noted that these types of media “helps them paint those visuals
because I think that visualization is something that the kids sometimes struggle with so it
gives them a starting point to kind of picture the action and what’s happening” (personal
interview, October 9, 2010). Janine agreed with Elise, stating that “it allows for great
conversations about visualizing, particularly when their vision doesn’t match up with the
movie” (personal interview, October 24, 2010). Visualization and using your imagination
are such important aspects of reading that having the movie or television show to refer to
or compare to can help build up students’ ability to visualize. On the other hand, Elise
sometimes feels that “it kind of stifles their imagination because they don’t really have
the chance to create it for themselves. It’s kind of somebody else’s interpretation of it,
and not their own” (personal interview, October 9, 2010). The decision regarding the
value of the movie or television show may be where the conversations that Janine
referred to could come into play, with discussions about how people often see things
differently than others do. The extension of a series into the media can be an extremely
powerful tool, as long as it is being used in a way which promotes higher-level thinking.
Getting students involved in conversations with their teacher and their peers about what
they saw in their head versus what they saw on the screen can help them see how to use
their imagination and visualization when reading books that haven’t been filmed as a
movie or television show. As seen in the literature, it is possible to get to know characters
outside of books, which “is a significant and influential change in a child’s literate
imagining” (Sekeres, 2009, p. 412). It may awaken the ability to visualize that the student
may not have known was even there.
All three teachers discussed using book series to develop and observe comprehension skills in their students. In terms of the benefits of formulaic series which provide the exact same plot structure in each book, Elise feels that “it depends on if the kids are able to make prediction questions and ask themselves questions as they read. I think that if they’re used to the same formula, then they kind of might stop doing that as much because they kind of know what’s going to happen next” (personal interview, October 9, 2010). The *A-Z Mysteries* are good example of this kind of book and of this potential problem. Because of their formulaic structure, they may hinder students from asking prediction questions because the reader knows the roles that the characters play and the order of events that lead to the solution of the mystery. Janine agreed, saying that “as students get older, I want them to discover problems, solutions, characters, etc., on their own and have to really think about their reading” (personal interview, October 24, 2010). Zach also agreed, saying “I am always a fan of being able to wow a student and take them off guard because that’s really where the good conversations go and when you really test their comprehension is when something really changes in the book” (personal interview, October 20, 2010). The teachers agreed that the use of these formulaic series was not beneficial to their higher level readers because it stifles their comprehension by allowing them to memorize a formula which applies to all of the books in the series. The literature also showed that “below-average readers seemed to find a particular series…and stick with it rather than venturing out into different books” (Kragler, 2000, p. 136-137). This comfort level can be damaging to readers at all levels, as they are not being challenged. Series such as *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* allow more room for students to make predictions and be taken off guard. Because the stories do not follow
the formulaic plot, readers go in with the mindset that anything can happen and need to rely on context clues and their knowledge of previous events in the series to make predictions as to what will happen next.

However, when it comes to their lower level readers, the teachers saw benefits of using the formulaic series. Janine finds that by already being familiar with the characters and setting, “we can be looking at more advanced reading skills such as character traits, writer’s style, etc.” (personal interview, October 24, 2010). Zach uses the Orca series and the Bluford series with his lower level readers and stated that “for my special education population that I work with, it has been really nice, especially for the students with autism who like to have a similar context and construct for everything that they do” (personal interview, October 20, 2010). These series do hold benefits for some readers, who need that base knowledge of characters and plot structure to continue reading.

Zach and Janine also touched on the influence of series books on fluency development in readers. Zach noted that by reading a series and becoming familiar with the writing and story, “students already have some confidence with the previous books so they’re going into the next one and are able to attack it with some background knowledge which is necessary” for fluency (personal interview, October 20, 2010). Janine agreed with this, stating that reading the series “improves their fluency as they are reading, as the basics are familiar to them and it improves their reading confidence” (personal interview, October 24, 2010). This familiarity will allow readers to approach a new book with the confidence necessary to be successful at reading.

The teachers that I interviewed, along with the observations about the book choices of second graders and the analysis of three book series, showed evidence of the
themes of familiarity, motivation and development of reading skills in the use of book series for readers. These themes were consistent with those found in the literature.

Implications

Based on the research that I have collected on the subject of series books, I have found that the benefits of these books depend on a number of factors, including the particular series and the reader. What is beneficial for one student may not have the same advantages for another; reading level, experience and reluctance to read all play a part in determining whether or not a series will be valuable for each student.

The research indicates that formulaic series, which follow a straightforward plot structure and are predictable in nature, are better suited to lower-level readers, as it provides them with an opportunity to generate stronger fluency skills. By settling into the routine of these stories, students will become more comfortable with reading, as they will know what is coming and be better able to concentrate on the words on the page. These series will also provide stronger comprehension skills for lower-level readers, as students will be able to take the structure that they have become comfortable with and more easily find meaning in the story. Once they have developed these reading skills, they will learn to apply them when they move on to higher-level reading material.

On the other hand, the research shows that these series provide significantly less benefits for higher-level readers. These titles can cause readers to fall into a pattern of not challenging themselves and pushing themselves to their full potential. Stronger readers who read these formulaic series will rely on their predictable nature to determine what is going to happen in the story, and will not generate other strategies to apply to their comprehension. Therefore, when they move on to higher-level texts, they will not have
developed the skills necessary to fully comprehend what they are reading. There is also the possibility that these readers will not move past the formulaic series, because the comfort provided by them will allow the reader to fall into a pattern of sticking with texts that they know they will be successful at reading.

Finally, my research has shown that extending the life of a book series into popular culture and the media can provide benefits for readers. As a story extends beyond just one book, and even beyond book form itself, readers become more engrossed in it and more eager to find out what will happen next. Reluctant readers may be more likely to engage in reading the series if they have encountered the story in other forms of media, such as a movie or television show. They become familiar with the characters on more than one level and may feel that they are more invested in the story that is trying to be told. Series that extend beyond the printed page may also help students better comprehend the story. These media adaptations are especially beneficial for visual learners who, upon seeing the story told on the screen, will better be able to envision what is happening in the book now that they have a picture in their mind. Teachers can also take this opportunity to encourage students to compare what they pictured in their head as they were reading and what was shown on the screen. This can lead to discussions about how people see things in different ways and how that can change a readers’ perspective on the story.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to determine if popular reading material, in the form of book series, provided any benefits or hindrances to readers, not only in their
desire to read but in the development of essential reading skills. Between my review of literature related to the topic and the research that I conducted, I found that series books are beneficial but can place some limitations on readers depending on their reading level and the type of series that they are choosing to read.

Since research on this topic is limited so far, my study left me with some unanswered questions that I would be interested in finding out more about. In terms of book series and popular culture, I wonder how often the media versions or extensions of the books change from the original source material and the impact that this has on the reader’s understanding of the story. I would also be interested in finding out more about the ways that teachers implement the use of series books in their classrooms. Are they being encouraged just as independent reading, or are they also being used as read-alouds or as part of a unit or author study?

As with any research, my study was faced with some limitations. The students that I had access to for the observation of book choices were all from the same grade level, and therefore did not give me an overall picture of how series factored into the decision making of readers at all grade levels. I was also unable to spend time observing how teachers and students interacted with series books in an actual classroom setting. The interviews and observations that I conducted were all done either during personal time or in a tutoring setting.

The information that I gathered during this study, both from my review of the literature and my own research, gave me a new outlook on book series. I came into the study not realizing the widespread reach that this books could have on readers, and the skills and motivation that they could provide readers beyond what a standalone book
could. I hope to use the knowledge that I gained from this study to inform future classroom instruction and to be better able to help students choose appropriate reading material for both their level and attitude toward reading.
References


Appendix A

Teacher Interview Questions

Background – title, years taught, district, other positions held, educational background

What books are your students reading in school?

What books do your students choose when they read independently?

Do you encourage the reading of book series for your students? Why or why not?

What do you see as the benefits of using series books for readers, particularly reluctant readers (in terms of fluency, comprehension, any others)?

How do you feel about book series that are developed from popular culture, such as TV shows?

What are your thoughts on book series that are developed into TV shows, movies, marketing products (ex. American Girl dolls)?

Do you find that students go back to read the series if they see the movie/TV show first?

Do you think that book series that follow a straightforward formula in terms of structure are good for young readers? Why or why not?

What, if any, book series do you recommend to your students? Why?

What, if any, book series do you wish students would stay away from? Why?
Appendix B

Book Choices for Student Observation


### Appendix C

Criteria for Analyzing Series Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>A to Z Mysteries</th>
<th>Harry Potter</th>
<th>Hunger Games</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formulaic plot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspense/cliffhanger ending</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity of plot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity of characters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand-alone or in order?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>