Judging a Book by More Than its Cover Examining the Influences on the Independent Reading Choices of Middle School Students

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Examing the Influences on the Independent Reading Choices of Middle School Students


By

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This study examined the influences on the independent reading selections of adolescents in a rural middle school. Data was collected through student and teacher questionnaires, analyzing students’ independent book projects, and reviewing data from the school library. The findings showed that adolescents’ book choices are influenced by genre, subject interest, peer and adult recommendations, series books, and the cover. This research indicates that teachers should discover their students’ interests, have a wide selection of books in their classroom library, allow time during class for peer book discussions, and display books so that the covers are visible to create a positive book selection process for adolescents.
Judging a Book by More Than its Cover

Introduction

As a middle school teacher, it can be a daunting task to guide students in the selection of enjoyable and engaging independent novels. Having eighteen seventh grade students eyeing the shelves in the school library is a unique experience. There are students who quickly select a novel without assistance, there are some who may need to know where a specific genre or author is located, and even others act as though the idea of selecting an independent novel causes them excruciating pain. Within my year of teaching middle school students, I have had the privilege of observing their independent reading behaviors and even guiding their novel choice; I have found myself questioning what makes some novels an acceptable choice while others are readily turned down by my students? Or, are they really listening to teacher suggestions at all? Due to my experience with promoting independent readers this year, I was led to such questions that blossomed into an authentic area of research.

It is important to know how and why middle school students choose their reading material in order to better serve them as literacy learners (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Lawrence, 2009; Manuel & Robinson, 2003). These factors that influence a middle school student’s reading selections are important to teachers, staff, and librarians alike. During the middle school years, a significant drop in the reading motivation of students has been proven to occur (Nippold, Duthie, Larsen, 2005; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Farris et al, 2009). Gaining an understanding of what influences a middle school student’s reading choices may provide incite for secondary educators to intervene and decrease this drop in motivation and help students progress as
independent readers. Therefore, I will answer the question: what influences the independent reading choices of middle school students?

If educators do not seek to discover what impacts a student’s literature choice, they will not be able to consistently aid middle school students in the selection of reading materials and to promote a lifelong interest in reading. Furthermore, this topic needs to be explored because teachers and staff will not be able to guide young adolescents as independent readers or foster an environment that is conducive to extend independent reading. By exploring the factors that motivate middle school students to select certain literature, middle school students will be better served at a critical time in their literacy education (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Lawrence, 2009; Manuel & Robinson, 2003). Also, educators and librarians will have a greater knowledge and understanding of how to reach out to reluctant and struggling middle school independent readers. After conducting my research, I have discovered that the three most influential factors in the independent novel selection process of adolescents are genre or subject interest, peer recommendation, and a book’s cover.

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Larson and Marsh (2005), Gee (2001, 2009), and Larson (2009), literacy is the awareness of and participation in the authentic social practice of communicating with others and receiving communication from others through verbal, written, and technological means. Larson and Marsh (2005) state that literacy is a meaningful social practice used to express ideas to others through a variety of modes. Similarly, Gee (2001) defines literacy as: “the mastery of or fluent control over a secondary Discourse” (p.529). Gee views literacy as being able to master various forms of correspondence used outside one’s immediate home base, in a setting such as school. Gee (2009) also states that school must create an authentic and
meaningful context for all languages and literacy practices. Therefore, students must see the purpose in selecting appropriate independent novels to help them continue to grow as literacy learners. This means that students must have the opportunity to choose what texts they read independently and not just by teacher requirement (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Lawrence, 2009; Manuel & Robinson, 2003). Thus, it is essential to know how and why literature is independently selected by middle school students, as a means to increase their motivation and sense of authentic purpose for selecting novels.

Furthermore, the socio-cultural historical theory is applied to the definition literacy in terms of literacy as a shared and collective practice used to express ideas to others (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2006; Gee, 2001). Larson and Marsh (2005) argue that the socio-cultural historical theory must be a foundation for the definition of literacy because literacy is the participation and communication through various means with other people. In regards to independent reading, students are receiving information through written texts. Based on their text selections, students may receive a variety of ideas, which are different among genre and text types, and authentic purposes for receiving information, when students are given the opportunity to select their own novels. Similarly, Jenkins et al. (2006) implicitly depict the incorporation of the socio-cultural historical theory in the definition of literacy through their discussion surrounding the participatory culture. Jenkins et al. (2006) argue that there is a gap in literacy experience and skills when participating in a technological group or collaborative communication. However, some independent novels include technological connections for instance, clues surrounding the novel’s plot or additional reading are found online or through a fictional blog written by a book’s character. These technological connections seek to bridge these literacy gaps, which may be a factor in student selection of
these types of novels. Gee’s (2001) view of literacy as mastery of communication with others serves as a foundation for other author’s arguments that incorporate the socio-cultural historical theory into the definition of literacy. Gee (2001) argues that to have acquired literacy, one must have obtained mastery at that particular form of communication. While communication is ultimately a collective and collaborative process, as defined by the socio-cultural historical theory, it is evident that one must be able to effectively express ideas to others in order to have acquired literacy (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2006; Gee, 2001).

According to Larson & Marsh (2005), Jenkins et al (2006), and Gee (2001), literacy is acquired through repeated exposure and observation to language in various forms, experience using and self-correcting various types of communication, and developing the necessary skills for oral, written, and technological communication due to a need or a want to correspond with others. Literacy acquisition is rooted in the theory of linguistics, especially the developmental linguistic theory. Initially, the developmental linguistic theory supports my definition of literacy acquisition because it states that one acquires literacy initially as an infant in order to meet a need. Yet as multiple forms of literacies are acquired, the reason for acquisition can expand beyond necessity. My definition for literacy acquisition is informed through theorists who view literacy acquisition, to be made up of the viewing and using of different modes of communication, and inquiry-based learning that is self-directed, and brought on due to fulfilling a need or a want (Gee, 2001; Halliday, 1969). Gee (2001) argues that literacy acquisition requires repeated exposure to the form of communication and a desire or need to be able to communicate with an individual in order to meet the desired need or want. Similarly, Halliday (1969) argues that a child uses and attains literacy to serve one or more of the seven initial needs in his or her
life. Halliday’s (1969) argument ties into the developmental linguistic theory, which also states that children acquire literacy and language in order to meet a need.

Since literacy is acquired and continues to develop through repeated exposure to various forms of communication, reading and independent reading become obvious sources of literacy skill building. During middle school, some students’ desire to select independent reading novels declines, which could be a potential road block to their continued literacy acquisition and growth. If Halliday (1969) is correct that literacy is acquired to meet a need or a want, then educators must research and understand why children select certain independent novels if they want to help reluctant readers continue to grow as literacy learners.

**Research Question**

Since literacy is an authentic social practice that occurs when individuals communicate with each other through verbal, written, and technological means, this action research project asks, what factors influence the independent reading choices of middle school students?

**Literature Review**

There is a strong case supporting the need and importance of independent reading at the middle school level because this is a critical time in adolescent literacy development where students begin to lose motivation to read for pleasure (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Lawrence, 2009; Manuel & Robinson, 2003). As programs, curriculum, and teachers encourage reading for pleasure, students must make the decision of what novels they will read. In order to better comprehend why adolescents select the books they read and shy away from others, it is important to understand the factors that influence their reading preferences to aid in the process of motivating adolescents as readers (Swartz &
Hendricks, 2000; Lawrence, 2009; Manuel & Robinson, 2003; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Farris et al, 2009). Some motivators to select certain literature may be unintentional, while others are deliberate. It is essential to analyze all spheres of influence on students’ reading selections in order to better understand how to address the decline of adolescent students who read for pleasure (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005).

Importance of Independent Reading

Based on the research of Swartz & Hendricks (2000), Whittingham & Huffman (2009), Ivey & Broaddus (2001) and Lawrence (2009) it is evident that independent reading and student choice in regards to what they read are vital factors in the continued growth and development of a teenage literacy learner. The power given to a student to choose his or her own reading is an important step in his or her independence and literacy development (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). Whittingham & Huffman (2009) further defend the necessity of adolescent novel selection, stating, “It is important that students at all ranges of reading ability be given the opportunity to select books that stimulate their interest based on their own personal criteria. Choice in text selection empowers readers and thereby promotes literacy development” (p.131). Similarly, Ivey & Broaddus (2001) assert that independent reading can aid middle school struggling readers. The importance of independent reading or pleasure reading for adolescents, whether high or low level, is undeniable (Lawrence, 2009). In addition, Lawrence (2009) argues, “Correlational research on reading amount suggests that students who read more may learn more words and therefore have more sophisticated vocabularies” (p. 448). Reading comprehension and a wide-vocabulary base have an interdependent relationship. Therefore, students who read more have greater vocabulary knowledge and are able to comprehend more as they read. Due to the fact that independent reading is an essential component of literacy
development, this begs the question, “What influences readers and nonreaders at the middle school level?”

**Availability of texts and selection**

One significant and often overlooked factor in adolescent reading selection is availability of texts (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Corcoran & Mamalakis, 2009). The availability and the range of the selection of novels for middle school students can act as both an intentional and unintentional motivator in the student reading selection process. Most students at this age level do not have the freedom or ability to transport themselves to a wide-range of booksellers or book distributors, so the students are generally limited to books available to them at school (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Corcoran & Mamalakis, 2009). Thus, the access and availability to appropriate and engaging reading material is prime factor in the reading preferences of middle school students (Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Knoester, 2009; Corcoran & Mamalakis, 2009; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Ivey & Broaddus; 2001).

The usage of time in the book selection process was only discussed in Cavazos-Kottke’s (2006) study on adolescent males and is a limitation of other studies that discuss the influences on reading choices. Cavazos-Kottke’s (2006) study of the reading preferences of gifted and talented males notes, “The mean browsing time was 31 minutes, 48 seconds, with a range of 15 minutes to 72 minutes” (p.135). Time, the abundance of it or the lack thereof, is a large motivator in book selections. However, with only a limited range of information on this influencer, it is difficult to determine time’s full impact on independent reading.

Most studies and research that noted the availability and ease of access for adolescents to literature focused on a student’s ability to find novels at multiple locations (Knoester, 2009;
Knoester (2009) studied urban adolescents and the places from which they sought independent novels. Knoester (2009) notes, “All parents and students interviewed for this study reported having books and other reading materials in their homes. Each of the students said they had been to a public library with a parent in the last four months” (p.679). The availability of reading materials at home and the usage of the public library offer a wider range of independent novels from which to select. Furthermore, Knoester (2009) states, “Other places and methods mentioned for finding reading materials including borrowing from the school library, purchasing from a bookstore, borrowing from a friend, lending from a teacher, receiving as gifts, or purchasing from a grocery store” (p.679). Students’ access to a large range of reading choices gives them the ability to select a variety of choices or pick novels that they are more motivated to read. Unlike Knoester (2009), Ivey & Broaddus (2001) surveyed sixth grade students from both rural and urban schools and found that the students’ reading choices were limited to what was available in the school library. Without the means of transportation, adolescent students’ reading preferences can be influenced by the book selection available at the school library, which may be detrimental to the students’ independent reading patterns. Ivey & Broaddus (2001) and Whittingham & Huffman (2009) concluded that the availability of reading choices was a negative influence on the independent reading preferences of adolescents who used the school library as their main source for books. Ivey & Broaddus (2001) found, “In general, what middle school students like to read is difficult to find in school” (p.352). To further this point, Whittingham & Huffman (2009) stated in their research of 60 middle school students who only used the school library to access novels, “Based on the negative correlation for question one, participants indicated that they did not have access to a variety of reading materials” (p.135). While Corcoran & Mamalakis
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(2009) did not state the positive or negative impact of book availability as an factor in students’ pleasure reading, they did conclude that, “Students’ access to literature greatly affects their abilities and motivation to engage in reading” (p.139) The selection of texts available to middle school students, whether limited or plentiful, is a factor that motivates the book choice of adolescents. If the books students are interested in reading are not accessible to them, they may lose the motivation to read (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

Student interest

Students’ personal interests are a large motivator in the adolescent reading selection process. Whether students’ interests range from media and technology to character attributes, having a personal, vested interest in the literature a student selects increases their motivation to choose and ultimately read a novel (Knoester, 2009; Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Farris et al, 2009; Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2009; Davila & Patrick, 2010). Knoester (2009) found that there is a direct relationship with engagement, motivation, and connection in independent reading selections for urban adolescents. “For example, students seemed to love to talk about reading material if they enjoyed or found a connection with what they were reading” (p.680). Both Cavazos-Kotte (2006) and Farris et al’s (2009) study on male adolescents as readers drew the conclusion that texts participants chose to read and had a personal interest in were more engaging than school-selected texts. Cavazos-Kottke (2006) states, “Overall, texts identified as personally interesting had higher readability levels than texts associated exclusively with school, and this difference was significant for the whole sample” (p.139). Students are able to comprehend and read with a greater ease, texts that interest them on a personal level, rather than standard curriculum choices. Farris et al (2009) further illustrated this point by adding, “The results indicated that boys’ top five subject preferences in a school or
public library centered on animals, science, sports, literature, and biography. As literacy educators, we need to acknowledge the reading preferences and interests of boys in our classrooms and examine what types of texts are available to use that will encourage boys to read” (p.181). In order to promote and encourage independent reading, educators must be aware of students’ personal preferences in literature as well as what is available within the school library that matches these preferences. If most students have easy access to the school library, or may only have access to the school library, for independent book selection, it must follow that the school library should include books of high personal interest to the middle school aged reader (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Corcoran & Mamalakis, 2009). Similarly, the research of Swartz & Hendricks (2000) and Ivey & Broaddus (2001) concluded that adolescents, regardless of gender, would prefer to read a book of high personal interest and often chose independent novels that appeal to their outside areas of interest.

In Swartz & Hendricks’ (2000) study on adolescent special education readers, it was concluded that many students selected independent novels because they felt a personal inclination or even a desire to be like a character within a novel. However, what was not addressed in this study was how the students knew about the character or the character’s attributes when first selecting the novel.

While characters were not of the most highly reported personal interests of adolescent readers, Ivey & Broaddus (2001) did find that, “Of 31 students, 45% felt that trying out different books on a topic of personal interest in order to find the right book was the key to enjoying reading” (p.357). About half of the students surveyed in Ivey & Broaddus’ (2001) study began their independent reading selection process with a book that involved a topic they found intriguing.
Furthermore, a subsection of students’ personal interests that was heavily researched includes media, technology, and movies. While technology is becoming more and more present in the lives of adolescent readers, technology and media sources are bridging into novels through various means in order to interconnect teenagers’ various forms of literacies. Many adolescents select independent novels based on technological, media, and movie connections or advertisements (Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2009; Davila & Patrick, 2010; Swartz & Hendricks, 2000). Teenage readers like to select novels based on movies that are of personal interest to them (Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Swartz & Hendricks, 2000). As media participants, students enjoy literature that intermingles with texts of personal interests (Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Davila & Patrick, 2010). Swartz & Hendricks (2000) also found that, “Eleven of the students selected books because there was a movie or television show either about a particular book or that somehow related to a book. Three students, who indicated movies or television shows were a factor in book selection, stated that they would rather read the book before watching the movie or television show” (p.616). Congruently, Davila & Patrick (2010) concluded the benefits of reading books that drew upon television and movie connections, “Thus, like series, reading materials associated with television and film enable children to both engage with subject matter that they already find intriguing and capitalize on background information, which helps to make text more comprehensible to readers” (p.203). It seems to make sense, that if a book or television show is of high-interest to a student, that a novel based solely or loosely on the television or movie would be of high engagement to the adolescent reader (Fitzgerald, 2009; Davila & Patrick, 2010).

As active participants in the New Literacies and creators of literacies through various technological means, teenage readers use these devices and spaces to investigate and match
personal interests to book selections (Fitzgerald, 2009; Davila & Patrick, 2010). Fitzgerald (2009) found that about half of adolescents were influenced to acquire books that they had seen advertised online. Fitzgerald (2009) reported, “With time on their hands, teens gravitate to YouTube; 46% of the respondents watch online book trailers, and 45% purchased books after watching them” (p. 22). On a related note to the incorporation of technology, students are now using texts that incorporate a variety of media forms (Davila & Patrick, 2010). Davila & Patrick (2010) state, “This shift away from the cannon has occurred during a time in which children can simultaneously play virtual world video games, text their friends, and engage in social networking. Books are being published with multimodal capacities, allowing digitally enabled youth to extend their reading experiences via technology” (p.199). Adolescent interests are a large part of their selection process when it comes to independent reading. While personal interests vary between genders, it is evident that teenagers engage and select more literature that appeals to their personal interests.

**Genres and Series**

Genre and book series are motivating factors in the book selection process of adolescent independent readers (Manuel & Robinson, 2003; Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Wedwick, Wutz, & Fisher, 2006; Davila & Patrick, 2010). In particular, middle school students seem to gravitate towards fictional novels when they read. (Manuel & Robinson, 2003; Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Swartz & Hendricks, 2000). In their survey of Welsh middle school students’ reading interests, Manuel & Robinson (2003) discovered, “Fiction is the overwhelming favourite genre for both boys and girls in this study. Over 40% of both boys and girls nominated fiction-reading books-as their most preferred kind of reading. No-one rated fiction as their least preferred kind of reading” (p.69). In a similar fashion, Cavazos-Kottke (2006) studied the
reading selections of talented adolescent males and reported, “All five boys expressed a fondness for series fiction, a common finding in studies of adolescents’ reading interests” (p.144). While studying a different sub-section of middle school students, special education students, Swartz & Hendricks (2000) found collaborating information to that of Manuel & Robinson (2003) and Cavasoz-Kottke (2006), “At least one student mentioned a total of 13 different topics/subjects. Horror books topped the list as being a favorite type of book to read. Mysteries were next, with 7 of 24 students selecting this type of book; 6 of 24 students preferred action books” (p.612).

While Swartz & Hendricks (2000) delved deeper into the specific types of fiction students preferred to read, no other studies make mention of subsections of the fiction genre. Wedwick, Wutz, & Fisher (2006) discovered that book selection based on genre was an overwhelming motivating factor in middle school book selection. Davila & Patrick’s (2010) research dictated that genre as well as book series were prime factors in adolescent reading choice. While the power of genre and series is made mention in numerous studies, the degree of this power is not mentioned in current research. The fact remains that book genres and series play an influential role in book preference but investigation must be completed to find out how large a role it does play.

Peer Influence

Middle school is a time of social and emotional changes and growth, and peers maintain a strong power over choices and actions of adolescents. There is an ongoing conflict in information regarding whether or not teenagers’ reading choices are influenced by peers and if the influence is significant (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Knoester, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2009; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Corcoran & Mamalaks, 2009; Wedwick, Wutz, & Fisher, 2006). Research
indicates that half or more of teenagers surveyed were recommended “good” books by their friends and chose to read these novels (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Knoester, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2009). Swartz & Hendricks (2000) discovered that thirteen of the thirty one special education middle school students they surveyed were influenced to read a novel by peers (p.615). Similarly, Knoester (2009) reported that over half of the urban middle school students and parents surveyed commented that the adolescents began reading books or a series because it was suggested to them by a friend or older sibling (p.680). Furthermore, Fitzgerald (2009) found an overwhelming majority of adolescents who recommend high-interest books to peers, “As for recommendations, 49% always recommend books to their friends and 46% do so sometimes” (p.22). However, Fitzgerald’s (2009) study is limited because it is not mentioned if students read books based on peer recommendations.

Having conversations with peers about novels is a step toward motivating others to read. Evidently, if half of students are receiving and using peer recommendations as a source for novel selection, there are still half of the students that do not receive such recommendations or feel that peers do not influence their reading selections at all (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Corcoran & Mamalaks, 2009; Wedwick, Wutz, & Fisher, 2006). While Swartz & Hendricks (2000) found that some students read books based on peer recommendations, they also discovered students who refused to read peer suggested novels. “Sixteen of 31 students interviewed discussed a friend’s recommendation of a book as a possible reason to read or not read a book. Three of those sixteen students said that they would not read a book based on a friend’s recommendation” (p.615); the reason behind this is the students’ mistrust of their peers suggestions. Ivey & Broaddus (2001) also found that peer recommendations did have an influence, however, reported that it was not in the majority of significant reasons as to why
adolescents selected their independent novels. Conversely, Corcoran & Mamalaks (2009) reported, “Overwhelmingly, students indicated that they do not participate in sharing good books with their friends on a regular basis. In fact, 50% responded that they never tell friends about good books they have read” (p.140). While two different groups were surveyed, it is surprising to discover that there is such a discrepancy between students who do and do not suggest book titles to peers. Finally, Wedwick, Wutz, & Fisher (2006) mention that the strong, self-motivated readers of their studies do not rely on the recommendations of peers, but seemed more inclined to select their novels exclusively based on their personal opinion; however, they found that the group of readers that relies most heavily on peer suggestion is that of reluctant readers. The full extent of peer influence on middle school independent reading selection is still a debated topic.

**Adult Influences**

The majority of middle school aged students do not cite intended adult recommendations as a factor in their book selection process however, unintentional adult influence is evident. (Wedwick, Wutz, & Fisher, 2006; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Davila & Patrick, 2010; Farris et al, 2009; Whitingham & Huffman, 2009). Many adolescent students, when discussing what motivates them to choose certain novels, do not take adult recommendations or prefer not to have any adult influence. (Wedwick, Wutz, & Fisher, 2006; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Wedwick, Wutz, & Fisher (2006) ascertained from a group of eighth grade students they surveyed that adult recommendation played a very low role in influencing book selection. (p.23). Similarly, in a survey of urban and rural 6th grade students, Ivey & Broaddus (2001) learned that few students mention teachers or other adults as motivators in their book selection process. Manuel & Robinson (2003) reported, “Over 70% of girls prefer to select their own fiction independently; boys are less decisive, but well over half of them share the same view, with over 58% preferring
to select their own fiction unassisted by a teacher or another adult” (p.70-71). Adolescent students would rather select their own independent novels than have adults aid in the process or chose novels for them. Yet, not all adult influence is intentional or unavoidable for adolescents. Availability and accessibility are major factors in adolescent novel choice and therefore, adults do have some control over the book choice of adolescent students (Davila & Patrick, 2010; Farris et al, 2009; Whitingham & Huffman, 2009). Davila & Patrick (2010) comment on the unintentional adult control over literature available to students. While the control may be unintentional and unavoidable, it is still a persistent factor in the novels adolescents read. Furthermore, Farris et al (2009) observed, “They often selected a book by the same author or on the same topic that the teacher had shared in the read-aloud” (p.184). Whitingham & Huffman (2009) found in their study on sixty middle school students that when adults had conversations about their favorite books with students, more students felt inclined to read these aforementioned novels (p.132).

Adolescents do not view adults as acting as a part of their novel selection process due to their desire to maintain their independence and freedom of choice. However, adults, whether librarians, teachers, parents, or owners of bookstores, do inadvertently influence adolescent book choices. These unintentional influencers are due in part to accessibility and availability of books to adolescent students.

**Gender differences in independent readers**

A major portion of research done in middle school student literature selection revolves around the aspect of male versus female choice (Manuel & Robinson, 2003; Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Corcoran & Mamalakis, 2009; Farris et al, 2009; Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005). With
a great deal of information in this area, it is evident that gender issues interconnect to all other aspects previously mentioned that motivate students to select certain novels. Studies have provided data that indicates that adolescent males are avid readers and are eager to select novels independently (Manuel & Robinson, 2003; Cavazos-Kottke, 2006). Manuel & Robinson’s (2003) research on adolescent students concluded, “While there is little gender difference when it comes to non-readers, around three per cent more girls engage in reading for up to three hours per day. On the other hand, more than three per cent more boys read in excess of three hours per day, and most of these boys are reading for more than four hours per day; no girls are reading for more than four hours per day” (p.68). Correspondingly, Cavazos-Kottke (2006) studied a group of gifted and talented middle school males that were characterized as avid readers and read a wide-breath of texts. It is important to note though, Cavazos-Kottke’s (2006) research was limited to exceptionally intelligent students; not a representation of all types of learners.

However, not all research and studies suggest that adolescent males are motivated independent readers. In fact, many males are characterized as low-level or unmotivated readers throughout a variety of research and are largely discussed as unable or not wanting to read for pleasure (Corcoran & Mamalakis, 2009; Farris et al, 2009; Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005). In Corcoran and Mamalakis’ (2009) study of fifth grade students it was found that males represented the population of unmotivated and disinterested readers. Specifically they stated, “This question yielded the only notable differences between male and female student responses: six male students indicated they never enjoy reading while no female students expressed these feelings” (p.140). Farris et al (2009) discovered that adolescent males did not define themselves as readers. Farris et al (2009) also reported, “Research also points out that, overall, boys devote less time to reading, tend to be less confident readers, have less motivation to engage in reading,
do not especially value reading as a free time activity, and have less interest in reading than girls” (p.180). Like Corcoran & Mamalakis (2009) and Farris et al (2009), Nippold, Duthis, & Larsen (2005) studied male adolescents and noted that, “Boys were more likely than girls to report that they spent no time reading for pleasure” (p.98). However, there is a lack of research as to why there is a difference in motivation for reading and how that impacts students as independent readers at this age.

**Stereotyping and the effect on independent readers**

While research cannot conclude if overall middle school aged males are truly unmotivated readers or if that is just a prejudice developed against them, it is evident that males and females at this age are different types of readers (Davila & Patrick, 2010; Lawrence, 2009; Coles & Hall, 2002; Meece et al., 2006). Davila & Patrick (2010) and Lawrence (2009) report that girls and boys enjoy reading different materials, different genres, and different series; however, one type of reader is no less motivated than the other. Coles & Hall (2002) expanded upon this idea by stating, “Large numbers of boys are being labeled as having literacy problems, either in their skills or attitudes, or both. Many boys who in fact read voraciously texts and forms unrecognized by official school curricula see themselves as non-readers” (p.107). It is possible that males are just reading differently than females throughout middle school and their efforts go unnoticed.

However, it is also of great probability that adolescent males are engaging in a self-fulfilling prophecy put forth by adults who believe males to be unmotivated readers. Meece et al. (2006) stated, “Socialization processes that lead children to internalize and accept these gender stereotypes are largely responsible for gender differences in motivation and achievement”
Meece et al. (2006) and Coles & Hall (2002) argue that culturally, reading is defined as an activity for children and females. Therefore, males at this age could be internalizing the cultural beliefs or expectations of themselves as readers and fulfilling these stereotypes. While there is a great deal of research and information regarding this subject, it is inconclusive as to whether or not teenage males are truly disengaged readers or if they are merely satisfying cultural roles.

The areas that impact an adolescents students’ motivation to choose an independent novel need to be further developed through research, especially through studying adolescents as they select novels as well as their thought process in reading preference. Current research draws a variety of motivators for the selection process such as genre, peer or adult influence, availability, personal interest, and cultural norms; yet, there appears to be no overarching conclusion as to why middle school students are drawn to certain novels and refuse to read others.

Methods

Context

The research was conducted at a small, rural school in the Southern Tier of New York State. The school district was comprised of two school buildings, one that housed Pre-Kindergarten through second grade and the other that housed third through twelfth grade. In the building that housed grades three through twelve, there was a separation between grades three through five and grades six through twelve. The research in this study focused on the combined middle and high school of the district, which was made up of students in grades six through twelve and focused specifically on studying students, teachers, and faculty members in grades six through eight.
According to the 2009 New York State School Report Card (2009), each grade level at the middle school had 56-63 students, with 427 as the total number of sixth through twelfth grade students in the district. In the middle and high school, 137 students were eligible for free or reduced lunch during the 2008-2009 school year. Additionally, the school was made up of 97% Caucasian students and 2% African American students (New York State, 2009).

**Participants**

The participants included ten seventh grade students in a heterogeneous English Language Arts classroom. In this research group, five students were male and five students were female and ranged in ages of twelve years old to fourteen years old. Seven of the ten students were general education students, while the remaining three students had learning disabilities. The three students, classified as special education students, received additional English Language Arts instruction through a special education teacher in a resource room setting. One general education student was new to the district and started attending within the last five weeks of the school year. Nine of the students had the same English teacher, the researcher, for the entire 2009-2010 academic year and had completed three assigned independent reading projects during this time.

David (all names given are pseudonyms) was a thirteen year old boy who participated in the research study. He was a special education student who received testing modifications in the English classroom and additional English Language Arts instruction. Outside of school, David enjoyed sports, but did not participate in any organized teams. He was generally quiet and had few social interactions with other students in class but frequently participated in discussions.
Steve, another thirteen year old male in the seventh grade English Language Arts classroom, was also a special education student with a learning disability. He received testing modifications in the English Language Arts classroom; grading waiver on spelling, mechanics, and grammar on writing pieces; and additional English instruction. David was social with adults with whom he was comfortable and outgoing with a small group of friends within the classroom. He enjoyed reading, Star Wars, and video games outside of school.

Matthew, a thirteen year old male, enjoyed sports, hunting, and outdoor activities. He was very social within the classroom and got along with many of the students.

Charles was a young adolescent male who came to the classroom five weeks before the end of school. He was 13 years old and moved to New York State from the south. Although he was quite new, he made a number of friends within the class and liked to joke and socialize with other students during class.

John, a twelve year old male, was a special education student in the research group. He received testing modifications in the English Language Arts classroom; grading waiver on spelling, mechanics, and grammar on writing pieces; and additional English instruction. John was very social with adults and had a small group of friends he socialized with during class, including Steve. John claimed many times that he did not enjoy reading or writing. Aside from school, John liked to play video games and spend time with his friends.

Courtney was a thirteen year old female who was an avid reader. Outside of school, she liked to write, read, and was on the school’s track team.
A fourteen year old female, Jessica, was a cheerleader. She was very social both inside and outside of the classroom. Jessica enjoyed spending time with friends and reading outside of school.

Rachel was a thirteen year old, general education female student. She was quiet and shy within the classroom, but frequently socialized with a small group of friends outside of English.

Amy was a thirteen year old female who socialized almost exclusively with another student in the classroom. She was quiet and reserved, but polite.

Nicole was a twelve year old female who was involved with track at school. In the classroom she frequently participated and was close friends with Amy.

The faculty and staff participants who completed the research questionnaire included five females and two males. Of the seven participants, five were classroom teachers and included a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher, a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher, a seventh and eighth grade English Language Arts teacher, a sixth grade through twelfth grade Academic Intervention Services English Language Arts teacher, and a Special Education teacher who co-taught one section of English Language Arts at the eighth grade level and taught a 15:1 English Language Arts class. Two of the seven participants were library staff and included one part-time, sixth through twelfth grade librarian and one librarian aide. Two of the faculty and staff participants were new to the district this year; one was a first-year teacher. Four of the participants had eight or more years of teaching experience. All of the faculty and staff questionnaire contributors worked daily with middle school students. Additionally, the five classroom teachers assigned independent reading projects for their students, took their students
to the library multiple times a year, and had a classroom library with books that were appropriate for adolescents.

Laura was a part-time librarian for grades six through twelve. She came to school every other day of the week and completed her first year with the district. Laura created middle school book clubs in order to generate outside readers amongst the school’s adolescents.

Michelle was the librarian aide who worked full-time in the middle and high school library. She was an aide in the school library for several years and was well-known by students and staff.

Stacy was a twelve year special education teacher at the school. She was the grade-level special education teacher for the eighth grade and co-taught a general education English class and a special education resource room. She also taught a 15:1 English Language Arts class for eighth grade students. Additionally, she co-taught classes within other content areas including science, social studies, and math.

Robert was a teacher with multiple years of teaching within the school district. He was the Academic Intervention Services teacher for grades six through twelve. Robert instructed seventh and eighth grade students in an English skills support class every other day; sixth grade students on a daily basis. He also instructed high school students in additional English skills intervention every four days. In his classes, he required students to complete one independent reading project during the year.

Hannah was a seventh and tenth grade English teacher who had taught for twelve years within the district. She taught two sections of seventh grade daily and required her students to
complete six independent reading projects during the 2009-2010 school year. Hannah co-taught one of her seventh grade English classes with a special education teacher.

Josh taught sixth grade reading, English Language Arts, and math within the district. He taught at this district for several years and also taught English and Math Academic Intervention Services classes for sixth grade students. Josh co-taught one of his English classes with the sixth grade special education teacher.

As the researcher, I was a first year teacher within the school district. I taught seventh grade English, eighth grade English, and two sections of Academic Intervention Services English for seventh and eighth grade. I required my students to complete three independent reading projects during this year. I co-taught one section of eighth grade English with Stacy.

**Researcher Stance**

As the researcher, I was also a teacher in the classroom and colleague within the building. I was a first year English Language Arts teacher at the school where I taught one section of seventh grade English, three sections of eighth grade English, and two sections of Academic Intervention Services English. My initial certification was in English Language Arts grades seven through twelve. I was also currently attending Saint John Fisher College to earn my Master’s Degree in Literacy Education for birth through twelfth grade.

I was the English Language Arts teacher to the seventh grade students who were surveyed and performed document analysis on their independent book projects for the 2009-2010 school year. In addition, for one year I was the colleague of the faculty and staff personnel who completed questionnaires. I was in the same department as four of the personnel surveyed.
Method

Through the use of three data collection methods and by gaining student, faculty, and staff points of view, I collected data from three means in order to achieve triangulation to answer the question, “What influences middle school students in their independent novel selections?” I distributed questionnaires to ten of my seventh grade students and seven of my colleagues. The student questionnaire (Appendix A) was given to the students at the beginning of their English class from 8:20 a.m. until 9:00 a.m., although they were given as much time as they needed to complete the one page questionnaires and were allowed to work at their own pace. I read the survey aloud to students as they answered their questions. I then collected the questionnaires once the students were finished.

In surveying school personnel, I discussed and personally distributed the personnel questionnaires (Appendix B) to my colleagues. The personnel questionnaire was also one page and contained different questions from those of the student’s questionnaire. I requested that the faculty and staff questionnaires were returned within a week. The school personnel questionnaires were completed independently and on the staff member’s own time. Furthermore, as a middle school English teacher in the building where I conducted the research, I completed a questionnaire before reviewing or collecting data from students or personnel.

The second method of data collection used was a document analysis. As a requirement of seventh grade English Language Arts, students read one independent book a marking period and completed a project. I reviewed the students’ projects in my seventh grade English class and collected information regarding book titles, genres, and student demographic information. I analyzed the students’ final independent book selections which were assigned in the middle of April in 2010 and due at the end of May 2010. The requirements placed on this book projects
included: the book must be 120 pages long, be at an appropriate reading level, be a book the student has not yet read, be a work of fiction, and be a book that the student wants to read. In order to select these independent novels, students were given one class 41 minute class period to go to the school library and browse for books. When requested, students received assistance from the librarian, the library assistant, or their English teacher. However, the students also had the option to bring in a book from home, the community library, the classroom library, or borrow a book from another teacher in the building.

The final method of data collection used was reviewing the end of the year reports on books that were checked out from the combined middle and high school library. The school’s librarian supplied this document for this study. The document contained information regarding the numbers and types of books middle school students checked out from the school library. The data collected was for the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school year.

Credibility

I used three means of collection in conducting this research to ensure the credibility of my data collection, which is defined by Mills (2011) 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). Guba (1981) states that research credibility lies in having peer debriefing, practicing triangulation, and collecting authentic data. To ensure the credibility of my research I have continued to be reflective in my data collection through the use of my critical colleague in order to ask questions and receive suggestions regarding research. Furthermore, Guba (1981) suggests using triangulation “to compare a variety of data sources and different method with one another in order to cross-check data” (p.79-81). Using various methods of data
collection has also allowed me to ensure that the information I collect is reliable because there are various points of view from which to examine. Finally, I have analyzed what Guba (1981) calls “slice of life” data (p.79-81). The document analysis that I performed on the students’ independent novel projects is authentic, meaning a form of data collection that showcases student work as described by Mills (2011) because students chose these books as they normally would, not as a part of research (p.88).

**Transferability**

Guba (1981) states another essential component in action research is transferability, the understanding that the research one collects is specific to its context and cannot be over-generalized, but can be applied and compared to similar situations and settings (p.79-81). In order to maintain the transferability of my study, I described in detail the settings and participants of my study and my forms of data collection. This will allow for others to understand clearly the contexts of my research.

**Dependability**

Research must maintain dependability, “the stability of data” (Guba, 1981, p.79-81). To create dependability in my research I used what Guba (1981) calls that “overlap method” and used a triangulation of data collection methods (p.79-81). Also, I have maintained precise and accurate records of questionnaires distributed and collected as well as document analysis. I created an “audit trail” (Guba, 1981, p.79-81); a collection of my research that my critical colleague can examine and provide verbal and written feedback regarding my data collection.

**Confirmability**
Confirmability is defined by Guba (1981) as “the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected” (p.79-81). I created triangulation in my research by using three methods of data collection as well as adult and student perspectives. I also worked to put aside my biases in my research by completing my questionnaire prior to distributing or reading the questionnaires of others. In doing so, I ensured that the data I was collecting from my questionnaire was free from the bias of other personnel’s or students’ perceptions. Furthermore, there was the option in my questionnaires to write in other forms of motivations that I may have left out in order to increase answers for motivators that I may have been unaware of.

As part of this research, I obtained assent from the questionnaire participants and written permission from the students’ parents. Faculty, staff, and students received verbal explanations of my research as well as its purpose. Parents were informed in writing about my research and its purpose, as well as the methods I would be using. Parents then had the option to permit their child to participate in the study or to deny participation; ten parents and ten students gave permission and assent to participate in my research through the questionnaire. Faculty and staff signed permission documents which informed them of the research I was conducting and what purpose I was intending to fulfill; seven colleagues provided written permission and assent to participate in the questionnaire. To maintain the rights and privacy of the individuals who completed questionnaires and whose independent novel projects I reviewed, I have created pseudonyms for faculty, staff, and students, as well as by removing any personal or identifiable responses or marks from the data I have collected.

Data Collection
I used three forms of data collection—questionnaires, document analysis, and library data. To collect the data for my research I used ten student questionnaires and seven personnel questionnaires. I also reviewed seventeen seventh grade students’ independent reading projects. In reviewing these documents I collected information on the book title, the book genre, and demographic information on the student such as age and gender. Finally, I received data from the school librarian regarding the books checked out by middle school students during this school year. In analyzing this information, I was able to review what types of books middle school students checked out from the library during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school year.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze the data (Appendix C), I completed multiple steps and read through the data I had collected various times. For the student questionnaires, I created a document to compile the data for each of the questions. I added the total number of independent books read by the students surveyed as well as the reasons why they selected each book. I then ranked the reasons why each student had selected the novels in order from the most popular reason to the least popular reason. I then compiled a coded list of who had selected each reason for choosing the independent novels. I chose to code the answers for the students by gender and special education students or general education students. As I looked at the open-ended responses on the students’ questionnaires, I created a document that compiled the reasons for student selection of a variety of independent novels. Again, I coded each of these answers by gender and whether or not special education services were received.

For the staff questionnaires, I compiled responses for the questions, all of which were open-ended. In creating codes for the staff questionnaires, I compiled answers by gender, years
of experience, and whether the respondent was a classroom teacher or a staff member who worked in the library.

When I had compiled the lists of questions and answers and coded each for the two types of questionnaires, I began to sort for themes. I highlighted the answers to questions by themes and looked for reoccurring ideas or perceptions in both the student and staff questionnaires. I also looked for instances in which one group, student or staff, perceived something as a motivator for book selection and the other group did not.

In reviewing the independent novel projects, I created a list of books titles, researched where the books were obtained from, whether the book was a series, what type of genre the book was classified as, and whether the book was based on a movie or a television show. In compiling this information for each book, I also coded what gender the student was who completed the independent book project. I then added up the number of books in each of the classifications listed above and again, sub-divided these classifications by gender. After, I began to label trends I saw from the book projects’ data and compared these themes to those I had discovered in the questionnaires.

Through my analysis of the library data, I ranked the type of book that was taken out each academic year from most popular type of book checked out to least popular. Then, I looked for the most and least popular books checked out as well as any book types that showed a significant change in the number of check outs from one year to the next. Afterwards, I cross referenced the information I had collected from the library data sheets to that of the questionnaires and book projects.
By continuously cross referencing my data as I analyzed each type of document, I was able to get a better idea of what themes were apparent in each aspect of my data collection and how these themes related to each other.

**Findings and Discussion**

After examining the student and personnel questionnaires, analyzing the independent book projects, and analyzing the library documents, five themes appeared and were perceived to have a consistent influence on the independent book choice of middle school students. These themes include: genre/subject interest, peer recommendation, adult recommendation, books as a part of a series, and the cover of the book.

**Genre/Subject Interest**

Based on student questionnaire responses, the ten students surveyed read sixty independent novels during this school year. From these sixty independent novels, students selected thirty of these books because they liked the genre and twelve of them because the book was similar to another book they had read and enjoyed. However, from the personnel questionnaires, only three staff members wrote that students would select a novel because they liked the genre. Additionally, three staff members noted that students would select novels because they were based on a movie that interested them. Josh reported students would select a novel “because a movie is being made out of it.” Yet, based on the document analysis of seventeen independent book projects of middle school students, thirteen of the books chosen did not have a movie or television counterpart. In fact only three of the novels were based on movies, including: *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Speak*, and *The Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning*. In fact in Amy’s questionnaire response she stated that a book from
the Harry Potter series was the worst independent novel she read this year because “I have already seen the movie so it gave it all away.” Conversely, John wrote that he read his favorite book, *The Series of Unfortunate Events*, this year because “I watched the movie.”

Many students reported on their questionnaires that they selected their favorite independent novel this year because of an interest in the genre or topic. Courtney wrote that the best independent novel she read this year was *The Host* and she selected the book because “It’s the perfect genre, it has suspense, action, love, etc. It was perfect, I loved it.” Three out of the five girls and four of the five boys who completed the questionnaire reported selecting their favorite novel this year because of an interest in the genre and subject.

According to the document analysis of the library data and independent reading projects, middle school students most often selected fiction novels. Based on the library data from 2008-2009 for books that middle school students checked out from the library, 926 of the 1,184 books checked out from the library were fictional novels. The following year, 2009-2010, 908 of the 1,279 books checked out by middle school students were fictional novels. In 2008-2009, only 184 non-fiction texts were checked out from the library and in 2009-2010, 243 non-fiction books were selected from the library. This shows a possible growth in the interest of middle school students in non-fiction novels. Furthermore, the amount of graphic novels being taken out from the library rose as well. In 2008-2009, 54 graphic novels were checked out from the library by middle school students. In 2009-2010, that number almost doubled with 101 graphic novels checked out.

As analyzed from the independent reading projects, the most popular genre for books, in the seventeen student sample population, was realistic fiction, which was chosen by three
females and three males. Supernatural fiction, selected by one male and two females, and adventure books, selected by three males, were the second most popular types of fiction books selected. Other types of books selected for the independent reading project included: historical fiction by two male students, science fiction by one male student, sports by one male student, and mystery by one male student.

**Peer recommendations**

In the student surveys it was reported that ten students read a total of sixty independent novels during the 2009-2010 academic school year. Of these sixty independent novels, students reported selecting ten of the novels based on a friend’s recommendations. Based on the survey options that students chose for selecting an independent novel, peer suggestion was rated as the fourth most popular reason. Only two of the five male students who completed questionnaires reported reading an independent novel based on peer recommendation; both of the males were special education students, who rely more heavily on peer recommendations for books than their general education counterparts, according to research. Four of the five female students surveyed read books based on peer recommendations, totaling eight of the books they collectively read. Steve even wrote that he thought most middle school students selected their independent novels because an “adult, friend, or teacher say they should read the book.” Likewise, Matthew reported that students would select a book because “a friend tells them the books good.” Additionally, Courtney and Amy had similar responses, indicating the influence of peers on the book selection of middle school students.

On the staff/faculty questionnaires, all seven personnel members reported that middle school students were likely to select independent novels based on peer suggestion. With all seven
respondents reporting friend recommendation, this was the only response that was unanimously agreed upon. Robert even wrote, “Recommendations from peers/popular literature seems to be number one.”

**Adult recommendations**

Overwhelmingly, personnel questionnaires reported the perceived influence of teacher and librarian recommendation; writing this answer in as the second most popular perceived reason for middle school independent book choice. Six staff members stated that this was one of the essential factors in novel selection, with only Stacy, the special education teacher, omitting this from her questionnaire response. Stacy reported that she does help middle school students select independent novels by doing, “several independent reading projects through the year and my resource room and ELA students once a marking period I take them to library to choose a book for themselves.” Collectively, personnel reported on their questionnaires that they aided students in selecting novels as often as once per day, said by both librarian personnel, and as infrequently as four times per year. Additionally, Josh was the only staff member to write that parents had a factor in the motivation for book choice.

Conversely, of the sixty independent novels read by middle school students during the 2009-2010 academic year, four books were selected based on teacher recommendation, two based on librarian recommendation, and one was based on other adults’ recommendations. Jessica and Rachel reported selecting books based on teacher recommendations. Nicole was the only student of the ten surveyed to report receiving assistance from the librarian in selecting a novel. Additionally, Jessica was the only one to report reading a book based on another adult’s recommendation. Therefore, three of the ten students reported selecting books based on adult
recommendations, including teacher, librarians, and other adults, and these three students were female and none were special education student. These findings are significant because previous research states that special education students are more likely to select books based on adult recommendations. Furthermore, students reported that twenty one of the sixty books they selected were found by themselves without assistance. Nine students stated on their questionnaire that they found an independent novel by themselves; only one male, non-special education student did not report independently selecting a novel. In the open-ended response portion of the student questionnaires, none of the ten students reported that middle school students selected books based on any adult’s recommendation or that they had read their favorite or least favorite book based on adult recommendations.

Series

According to the analysis of the seventeen independent book projects, eight of the seventeen books selected were books in a series and nine were not. The eight books that were part of a series were selected by five males and three females and the nine non-series books were selected by six males and three females. Two of the nine personnel who responded to the questionnaire stated that books being a part of a series were a motivating factor in a student’s selection process. One student, Amy, wrote in that she also selected independent novels she had read during the year because, “I liked the series.” Five of the ten students in the questionnaire research group reported that their favorite books they read this year were a part of a series. These five students included two females and three males; additionally, two of the male students received special education services. The research population’s gender and special education status is significant because of the findings in previous research, which state that males are more
likely to enjoy series novels. Two students of the ten, Amy and Charles, listed a series book as their least favorite books this year.

Cover

Based on the personnel questionnaires, five staff members believed that middle school students select independent novels based on the appearance of the cover of the book. Michelle, the library aide, wrote, “…many by front cover appearance.” The only two staff members who did not list cover appearance as a factor in student selection were Josh and the researcher. Two of the personnel questionnaires stated students selected books based on the summary on the back of the cover or inside the book jacket; these two were female staff members, a teacher, Hannah, and a library aide, Michelle.

On the student survey, Charles, John, and Nicole reported that many middle school students select novels by the cover. Additionally, Rachel wrote in that many students find a book by, “scanning the bookshelf.” Also, Courtney wrote another reason she selected independent novels this year was “They looked interesting. (summary).” Courtney indicated that the back cover of the book, which included the summary, looked interesting. Therefore, five students made reference to selecting a book based on the front or back cover of the book. Two of these students were male, one in special education, and three of the students were female.

Implications and Conclusions

My research has uncovered several implications for me as a teacher. First, there are numerous factors, which motivate middle school students to select independent novels to read. While some factors influence certain populations of adolescents more than others, it is essential
for me as a teacher to use a variety of these motivators in order to promote independent reading and a love of reading among middle school students.

As my research and the literature reviewed indicate, many students are motivated by an interest in the subject of a book or by the genre of a book. While over half of the independent novels chosen by the students I surveyed were because of an interest in the genre or subject, most school personnel did not list genre as a factor that influenced adolescent book selection. There appears to be a disconnect between the actual enjoyment of certain genres by middle school students and adults’ perceptions of genre as an influence in book choice. This indicates that as a teacher, I should be aware of the genre interest of my students in order to recommend independent novels to them or to purchase novels for my classroom library. If I want to aid students in the selection of independent novels or provide them with a variety of novel choices, then I should be knowledgeable of what types of genres my students most enjoy reading, such as fictional and graphic novels as indicated by my research and research literature. Furthermore, I should not limit independent novel recommendations to books with movie or television connections since my research indicated that some students enjoy reading books with media connections while others avoid these types of books.

Additionally my research sample indicates that my middle school students who are receiving special education services and those who were female were more likely to select novels based on friends’ recommendations. If peer recommendation is a popular influence for adolescents in selecting independent novels, there should be time allowed during class for students to have conversations about books that they are reading. By allowing students to have time to discuss their independent novels, they can generate interests in other independent novels for their classmates. School personnel respondents in my research stated that peer
recommendation for books was a major influence in novel selection, however, it is important to recognize that not all students use or rely on peer recommendations to select an appropriate text and therefore other motivators need to be encouraged to promote independent reading.

Many of the students in my research sample did not select books based on adult recommendations and those who did were female; yet, a majority of school personnel stated that adults in school had a significant influence on middle school students’ book selections. It appears that there is a disconnect between the staff and student perception of motivators in independent book selection. Thus, I should recognize that my book recommendations may not be accepted by my adolescent students and that there are greater influences than adult recommendations for books for middle school students. This does not mean that I should stop aiding students in the book selection process because there are some students that do use adult recommendations when selecting independent novels.

My research proved inconclusive in regards to the influence that book series had on student novel selection. About half of all of the students surveyed or independent book projects analyzed were series books and were listed as the student’s favorite books read this year, while others did not list series as having an effect on their book choice. In regards to my teaching, my classroom library should be well stocked with series books because, on average, half of my research population selected series books. I should also be aware of popular series and new series books at the middle school level and be able to recommend these books to students. Additionally, when a student selects a series independent novel and enjoyed the book, he or she is more likely to continue reading with that series and continue to read independently. Therefore, in my practice it would be advantageous to find series books with which adolescents connect in
order to increase their motivation to read independently and to help them in the process of becoming lifelong readers.

While not a prevalent theme in literature reviews, based on my research and findings it is evident that the cover of a book is a motivator in adolescent book selection. Both staff and students in my research population listed cover, both the front illustrations and back of the book summary, as an influencer in independent book choice. In my future practice this means that I should find more creative ways to display books so that the covers can engage readers. I could create displays around my classroom using bulletin boards displays of book covers and book summaries in order to intrigue adolescent readers.

My goal throughout my research was to answer the question, “What factors influence the independent reading choices of middle school students?” To answer this question I defined literacy as the various forms of communication to express ideas to others. Through the socio-cultural historical theory lens I stated that literacy must also be a sharing of ideas and collective practices to express ideas to others. Therefore, independent book reading and the selection process at the middle school level is a literacy activity because knowledge or information is imparted to students as they read, share, and discuss their independent novels and choices in books.

According to independent book selection research, the availability of texts, student interest, book genre, and series books are influences in novel choice. The available literature also suggests that peer recommendation and gender influence are controversial areas of book choice motivation, with some literature and researchers stating that the influence by both factors is great, while others suggest that these factors have little to no influence on the middle school

My action research found that the most influential factors on middle school student book choice were the genre of the book, with fiction and graphic novels being the most popular; the topic of the book and if it was of interest to the individual student; peer recommendations for novels; and book covers. Through my research I found that the influence of books as a part of a series was important for some students and unimportant for others. Finally, I found that students were not heavily influenced by adult book recommendations, even though school personnel surveyed stated that adults were a major factor in student book selection. Regarding my future practice, I will be aware of my students’ interests, have a wide variety of fiction and graphic novels available in my classroom library, display book covers so they are readily accessible to students, and allow time for students to engage in conversations with their peers about independent novels they are reading.

I realize that there were limitations to my study, including the time constraints of the end of the year at school, and I intend to continue researching this topic to gain more insight into the independent reading selection influences of adolescents. Conducting further research by observing students selecting independent novels and interviewing them as to their novel selections will provide me further insight into my students’ reading choices. I will also consider a larger research population for my student questionnaires to see if gender or receiving special education services has a significant influence on factors in book selection. Additionally, since I was unable to conduct research in the area of text availability, this will be an area for future study that will inform my practice.
After analyzing my research and comparing it to the literature currently available on this topic, I was left with unanswered questions. First, I would like to know why book covers are not listed as an influence in the book selection for adolescents in current research but were a major factor in my research. Second, I pose the question of why there is a perceived influence in adult recommendation by adults even though my research and previous research suggests that adults have very little influence in adolescent book choice. Third, how can teachers use the research on this topic to inform their practices in promoting independent readers if adults have a limited influence on adolescent book choice? Finally, if availability is an influence on student book selection, how can teachers ensure that students have the time and resources available to them in order to select independent novels during the school day?

Research suggests the importance of independent reading in adolescents in building engaged and lifelong readers (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Lawrence, 2009; Manuel & Robinson, 2003). Through my findings and the literature on adolescent book choice, I have discovered that there is no one motivator in a student’s book choice. Instead, students select books based on a variety of factors which can change each time a student chooses a new book to read. In teaching, many motivators and influences can impact a child’s education both positively and negatively. Likewise, in an adolescent’s venture to select a new independent reading book there are many factors that can influence him or her in a positive or negative manner. It is therefore the job of educators, as those who work to build lifelong readers at the adolescent level, to continue to improve the book selection process for our students to make the process a positive one. We must also work to create environments in the classroom that are conducive to the adolescent book selection process through social interaction, displaying book covers, and providing a wide variety of texts. In
summary, the importance of promoting and supporting lifelong readers is crucial during adolescence, when students begin to lose motivation and interest in reading; therefore, educators must be knowledgeable of the factors that influence their students’ reading selections and use this information to foster a passion for independent reading amongst their students.
References


Appendix A

Name: _______________________

Circle one: Male          Female

What is your age? ___________       When is your birthday? ________________

What grade are you in? __________

1. Write down the titles of any books that you chose and read independently this year

2. How many books did you read independently this year? __________

3. Out of those independent books, how many did you read because it was part of an English class project? __________

4. Think back to why you picked those independent books this year. Please write next to the reason given, the number of independent books you selected this year based on that reason.
   ___ A friend recommended the book to me       ___ I found the book by myself
   ___ A teacher recommended the book to me       ___ I liked the author
   ___ A librarian recommended the book to me     ___ I liked the genre
   ___ An adult recommended the book to me        ___ The cover looked interesting
   ___ The book was similar to another book I read ___ Other
5. What other reasons did you choose the independent books you read this year?

6. How do you think most middle school students select which independent books they will read?

7. What is the best independent book you’ve read this year?

8. Why did you choose the book you listed above?

9. What is the worst independent book you’ve read this year?

10. Why did you choose the book you listed above?
Appendix B

Name: _______________________

Staff Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circle one:</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your occupation? ______________________</td>
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1. Please indicate how often you work with middle school students throughout the average school day and in what capacity.

2. Do you ever help middle school students select independent reading novels? If so, how often?

3. How many independent novels do you think the average middle school student reads a year?

4. Out of those independent books, how many did you think the average middle school student reads because it was part of an English class project?

5. How do you think most middle school students select which independent novels they will read? Feel free to list as many ideas as necessary.
Appendix C

Data Collection: Detailed Description

Method #1: Student and Faculty/Staff Questionnaires

Student Surveys: F=female, M=male

Responses to number of books read: 3 (M), 8 (M), 2 (M), 3 (M), 3 (M), 9 (F), 6 (F), 5 (F), 5 (F), 20 (F)

Number of books selected for the following reasons:

- 10- A friend recommended the book to me
- 4- A teacher recommended the book to me
- 2- A librarian recommended the book to me
- 1- An adult recommended the book to me
- 12- The book was similar to another book I read
- 21- I found the book by myself
- 10- I liked the author
- 30- I liked the genre
- 6- The cover looked interesting
- 1- Other

Faculty/Staff Surveys:

All seven faculty/staff members help students select independent novels

Responses to number of books the average middle school student reads: “It varies greatly. Some students reluctantly do the minimum, while others go through two in a week”; 4 for reluctant readers and 10 for higher level; 4; reluctant readers 3-5 and students who enjoy reading 15-20; 4-5 outside of class and 2-3 for special education students; 5; 4-5

Responses to number of books the average middle school student reads because it is required as part of an English class project: 3; 3-4; “again, depends on the student;” 3-5; “most, if not all;” 4; “for the reluctant readers, it is probably close to 100%. For the voracious readers, the required independent reading is half or less of what they read”

Method #2: Analysis of Students’ independent reading projects

17 students participated in the independent reading book projects and 17 book titles were collected.

Student #1: Male
Title: Journey to the Center of the Earth
Obtained from: Home/other
Series: No
Genre: Science Fiction
Movie/TV: Yes (movie)

Student #2: Male
Title: Promises to the Dead
Obtained from: Home/other
Series: No
Genre: Historical Fiction
Movie/TV: No

Student #3: Male
Title: A Day No Pigs Would Die
Obtained from: Home/other
Series: Yes (has a sequel)
Genre: Realistic Fiction
Movie/TV: No

Student #4: Female
Title: The Secret Circle
Obtained from: School Library
Series: Yes
Genre: Supernatural
Movie/TV: No

Student #5: Female
Title: Blue if for Nightmares
Obtained from: Home/other
Series: Yes
Genre: Mystery
Movie/TV: No

Student #6: Male
Title: Give a Boy a Gun
Obtained from: Classroom library
Series: No
Genre: Realistic Fiction
Movie/TV: No

Student #7: Male
Title: The Wee Freemen 2
Obtained from: Home/other
Series: Yes
Genre: Adventure
Movie/TV: No

Student #8: Female
Title: Cut
Obtained from: Classroom library
Series: No
Genre: Realistic Fiction
Movie/TV: No

Student #9: Male
Title: Stormbreaker
Student #10: Female

Title: The Vampire Diaries

Obtained from: Home/other

Series: Yes

Genre: Supernatural

Movie/TV: Yes (TV show)

Student #11: Female

Title: After the wreck, I picked myself up, spread my wings, and flew away

Obtained from: Home/other

Series: No

Genre: Realistic Fiction

Movie/TV: No

Student #12: Male

Title: Johnny got his gun

Obtained from: Classroom library

Series: No

Genre: Historical fiction

Movie/TV: No

Student #13: Male

Title: The Rookie Arrived
Student #14: Male

Title: *Defining Dulcie*

Obtained from: Classroom library

Series: No

Genre: Realistic fiction

Movie/TV: No

Student #15: Female

Title: *Speak*

Obtained from: Classroom library

Series: No

Genre: Realistic Fiction

Movie/TV: Yes (movie)

Student #16: Male

Title: *Embrace the Night*

Obtained from: Home/other

Series: Yes

Genre: Supernatural

Movie/TV: No

Student #17: Male

Title: *Series of Unfortunate Event: The Bad Beginning*
Obtained from: School library
Series: Yes
Genre: Adventure
Movie/TV: Yes (movie)

Data compiled from 17 independent book projects:
(All data out of 17 book projects):
Books selected from Home/other: 8 (5 males, 3 females)
Books selected from School Library: 4 (3 males, 1 female)
Books selected from Classroom Library: 5 (3 males, 2 females)

Genre:
Science fiction: 1 (1 male)
Historical fiction: 2 (2 males)
Realistic fiction: 6 (3 males, 3 females)
Adventure: 3 (3 males)
Sports: 1 (1 male)
Supernatural: 3 (1 male, 2 females)
Mystery: 1 (1 female)

Series?:
Yes: 8 (5 males, 3 females)
No: 9 (6 males, 3 females)

Movie/TV?:
Yes: 4 (2 males, 2 females)
No: 13 (9 males, 4 females)


2008-2009 books checked out from the middle/high school library by middle school students:

- Total: 1,184
- Non-fiction: 184
- Reference: 2
- Periodicals: 4
- Graphic novels: 54
- Fiction: 926
- Biographies: 14

2009-2010 books checked out from the middle/high school library by middle school students:

- Total: 1,279
- Non-fiction: 243
- Reference: 3
- Periodicals: 11
- Graphic novels: 101
- Fiction: 908
- Biographies: 13