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Reading Motivation:
The Difference Between Boys and Girls

By

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

Supervised by

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Abstract: This research paper examines the different factors that motivate girls and boys to read. Current research claims that boys and girls have different preferences, which is a large cause of the “gender gap” in schools. Other researchers claim that boys’ resistance to reading is due to the type of texts used in school, which is primarily fiction. Action research was conducted, where five fifth graders chose three texts that they would like to read, found that boys and girls have similar reading preferences, but varies from person to person, not gender. This implies that students need opportunities to choose texts not based on gender, but their own preferences and interests.
Introduction

Many scholars believe that boys and girls are motivated by different factors in school and literacy learning (Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, & Shapiro, 2007; Corpus & Lepper, 2007). While differences in literacy learning may be impacted merely by sex differences, it is probable that gender norms (learned by participation in a culture) dictate students’ interests, preferences, and motivation. People learn ways of engaging in activities through participation in a variety of cultures and discourses (Pacheco & Gutierrez, 2008), and what is taught to boys is often very different than what is taught to girls. Since girls and boys are socialized to like certain things and act certain ways, this most likely impacts their motivation and attitudes towards the literature they are exposed to in school, learning activities, et cetera. There are disparate interests between boys and girls regarding literacy learning (and specifically, reading) that educators must be conscious of and take into account when choosing literature and designing lessons.

Ways of participating in the culture of a student’s home can be seen in school, as well. Historically, fictional narrative stories have been one of the most dominant texts in both the home and schools. Some scholars believe that this type of text is more appealing for girls than boys, and this belief corresponds to the commonly accepted notion that boys should like and read nonfiction, informational texts. (Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, & Shapiro, 2007). These beliefs further perpetuate the gender stereotypes that exist in society and schools, limiting the learning opportunities for both boys and girls.
Research Question

The purpose of this literature review and research is to investigate the following question: What are the different factors that motivate girls and boys to read? The effects of gender stereotypes, preferences for certain types of materials, and attitudes towards teachers and school on reading attitudes will be investigated through a review of literature and research.

Theoretical Framework

Literacy and gender are learned in a similar way. Literacy is a constructive process, as outlined by the sociocultural theory, where children acquire the skills, practices, beliefs, and language necessary for participation in a discourse by observing the interactions and activities in which others partake. Gee (2001) claims that literacy is the “control of secondary uses of language” (p. 23). Drawing from a sociocultural framework, Gee explains that a primary discourse is acquired, not learned, through exposure to the cultural norms of the society in which one is raised. This knowledge is enhanced and reinforced through formal learning. Similarly, stereotypical gender norms are observed and practiced by children. This process of learning what interests, preferences, and activities make them a “girl” or a “boy” is also constructive, through interactions peers and adults who model gender stereotypes.

Larson and Marsh (2005) have a similar understanding of literacy. They describe literacy as “something people do” and “an activity between thought and text” (p. 10). Literacy events experienced prior to entering school have a significant impact on the
child’s development and attitude toward literacy. According to Goodman (2001), children begin to develop literacy skills through functional literacy events experienced at home and in the community. Literacy events include reading books at home, oral storytelling, and discussions about stories/characters.

This relates to Heath’s (1982) study of three communities in North Carolina, in which it was found that children in non-mainstream communities approach school activities and tasks differently, depending on their culture’s value and use of books. This view on books directly relates to the child’s literacy acquisition. Students from some discourses, such as upper- or middle-class whites, enter school with a great deal of exposure to books. Others, such as the urban working-class, had little use for books, as stories were instead told orally. Heath found that children from different communities “responded differently to school tasks because they have learned different methods and degrees of taking from books” (p. 91). This is one example of where the sociocultural theory can be seen, as children are enculturated into particular literacy practices. When children are exposed to more quality literature and literacy activities, they tend to do well in school. This relates to the question of reading motivation in that the literacy practices that girls and boys partake in prior to entering school will have a huge impact on their literacy preferences and attitudes, and ultimately success in school and beyond.

The preceding definitions of literacy are consistent with the Cultural Historical Theory, as described by Pacheco and Gutierrez (2008). They explain that people live culturally, and that traditions and understandings are socially inherited by participating in a culture. Gender is also socially constructed, as boys and girls learn what toys they
should play with, things and colors they should like, and how to act “feminine” or “masculine.” Corpus and Lepper (2007) state that traditional socialized practices tend to emphasize dependence and interpersonal relationships for females, while focusing on independence and achievement for males. Ways of living and acting are learned and reinforced every day by parents, older family members, friends, and people in the community. These gender norms are also seen in literature, from narrative picture books to nonfiction texts, further reinforcing the current gender norms. Educators must look beyond cultural and gender stereotypes in order to create learning opportunities that expose their students to all types of books and reading materials, and also help them appreciate the value of reading and literature.

Literature Review

The question being addressed through this research looks at what factors motivate girls and boys to read. After reviewing literature and research on reading motivation, the findings can be generalized into four major themes. Children’s reading preferences seem to be impacted mainly by the culture and literacy practices the child is exposed to prior to school. Preferences of reading materials and activities while in school often stem from the gender norms learned through participation in culture. Additionally, attitudes about reading are affected by children’s confidence in their reading abilities and the incentives to read.

Socialization of Gender
The influence of gender norms has a direct impact on students’ participation in certain educational activities that are deemed feminine or masculine by society. This is all learned through conditions and experiences children encounter at home, at school, and in society. Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, and Shapiro (2007) explain that boys and girls are socialized into preferring one text genre over another. Socialization “creates a homogenization of children’s gendered literate identities and reinforces traditional notions of what normal boys and girls like to read” (p.53). There is a common belief that girls and boys have very different preferences, but the following research challenges this notion and shows that they have more in common than what was previously believed. Personal preferences drive children’s reading choices more than stereotypical preferences, though these personal preferences are most likely impacted by the gender socialization in the students’ cultures.

Chapman et al. (2007) conducted a study to determine which types of books students would choose for themselves, then for other boys and girls. The results did not support the assumption that boys like informational books while girls prefer narratives. However, when choosing books for others, both boys and girls reflected gendered stereotypes. Both groups picked informational books for the boys, and narrative stories for the girls. Interestingly, the boys in this study relied on a socially constructed understanding of gender, rather than their own reading preferences, when selecting books for other boys. Merisuo-Storm (2006) noted that “boys are more apt than girls to closely guard the gendered boundaries of their reading, and girls cross gender boundaries more freely than boys” (p. 113). Boys do not want to appear “un-masculine” if they like to read and write, especially genres or books that are “for girls.” Siann,
Lightbody, Stocks, and Walsh (1996) found that both girls and boys relied on gender stereotypes when picking high school courses of study. Boys tended to choose courses with technology, and girls chose language arts based courses. Fascinatingly, they also noted a trend in Asian girls enjoying courses in science or information technology.

Marinak and Gambrell (2010) state that gender is one of the most powerful facets of literacy and reading motivation. They claim that gender stereotypes are evident as early as first grade. In their research, they found stronger opinions from boys about which books are more appealing to each gender. Boys were more likely to label themselves as “non-readers” than girls, who spent more of their leisure time reading. Shumow, Schmidt, and Kackar’s (2008) findings were consistent with this, noticing that when out of class, girls read more than boys. Reading motivators for girls were frequently those with affective gratification, and girls reported that they often used books as relief from boredom.

Marinak and Gambrell also reported that girls are “more open than boys to the experience of an unpleasant emotion, such as grief or anger, when reading” (2010, p. 132). Girls expressed a greater interest in hearing their teachers read books aloud every day. Higher levels of external motivation, interest, and reading in a social context were seen in girls, though there was no gender difference seen in self-efficacy. This discrepancy between girls’ and boys’ reading attitudes and behaviors perpetuate the “gender gap” seen in many developed nations. This is problematic because it is impossible for students to reach their full potential as literacy learners without the intrinsic motivation to read.
Preferences of Materials and Activities

There are a vast number of books and other reading materials that fit the interests of every reader. A major problem in school, however, is that students are often limited in their reading choices, or do not have access to the materials that would interest them. While some students may prefer books about popular culture or comic/graphic novel formats, many teachers dismiss these interests and continue to utilize traditional, more “educational” texts. Additionally, the pleasure of reading is often overshadowed by the amount of “boring” and tedious projects and discussions about the book.

In the study conducted by Chapman et al. (2007), the children listed several reasons for picking books. These were visual appeal, topic interest, humor, literacy judgment, tactile quality, gender, observations (about the book), and connections (to their experiences). Girls chose both informational and story books for themselves, and overall, chose more books than boys did for themselves. They found that boys chose more books that they could connect to, had visual appeal, an interesting topic, or some humor. They concluded that these children did not use genre (non-fiction, informational books versus fictional narratives) as criteria for choosing a book (Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, & Shapiro, 2007).

Merisuo-Storm (2006) noticed similar text preference criterion for boys. She states that books need to connect to boys’ interests, and that boys enjoy books with humor. She also states that, in her findings, boys’ text interests followed stereotypical gender preferences, specifically that they prefer texts that have a purpose, as in “getting
information, making things, and helping others.” Some examples of purposeful “life reading” texts she lists are media, music lyrics, internet sites, and magazines. She also concluded that boys like stories that are “slightly gross.” Likewise, Doiron (2003) listed boys’ preferred book topics of sports, science, space, vehicles, and jokes. Asselin (2003) found that boys are interested more in visual media (nonfiction Internet and magazines) about sports, games, and electronics. Further, boys tend to focus on the action in a book, whereas girls concentrate more of their attention on relationships and character development. These findings align with gendered stereotypes, which are proving to be a driving force behind girls’ and boys’ preferences.

While both girls and boys read many types of books in Merisuo-Storm’s (2006) study, the boys were more selective readers. Interestingly, boys and girls rated the same three types of books as their favorite, only in a different order. Boys’ top pick was comics, followed by humor and adventure. Girls ranked adventure as their favorites, then humor and comics. Both boys and girls shared their disinterest in poetry, ranking that lowest of all genres. Stories and fairytales were also unpopular for boys (Merisuo-Storm, 2006).

Cavazos-Kottke (2005) describes a different view on reading preferences. For many students, there is a barrier between school and the real world. Rather than capitalizing on students’ interests and experiences, many teachers exert the “pedagogy of control” (p. 181) and restrict the reading choices in classrooms. He states that the problem with boys’ reading habits is not so much that they “quit reading altogether, but rather that they engage in literacy practices that many teachers and classrooms are
reluctant to embrace” (p. 181). Many teachers and school librarians feel the need to redirect students to what, in their opinions, are the “best” books (Doiron, 2003). There is a clear disconnect between what boys enjoy about reading and the kind of reading that teachers deem valuable. Once their academic and recreational reading can converge, boys will be able to rediscover a passion for reading.

In Cavazos-Kottke’s (2005) study, he noticed that many students, particularly boys, were not eager readers even though they had the necessary skills. Despite the fact that their backpacks were filled with magazines, newspapers, and Internet print-outs, very few of the boys would label themselves as “readers.” Although they were reading certain media print materials, boys could not identify as readers because the materials they chose to read were not valued in school. Asselin’s (2003) findings are consistent with this, stating that “boys are put in a difficult position when there’s a clear message that reading in school matters more than reading out of school” (p. 53). Many teachers fail to see that students are exercising their freedom of choice by choosing books and materials that they are interested in and enjoy reading.

Asselin (2003), using the deficit perspective, explains that school constructs gender divisions around reading. She describes how “boys are faulted for not being willing to engage in fiction, choosing to participate in sports instead of choosing to read, and basically not following school rules about what and how to read” (p. 53). Doiron (2003) also noted that most of the reading choices that children are presented with in their classroom libraries are fiction paperbacks. When the children in his study went to the library, many preferred informational texts. He noticed that students checked out
twice as many information books as fiction novels, and boys chose over two-thirds of all the information books checked out. While girls chose more books overall, there was a definite gender difference in the amount of informational books chosen for independent reading. In fact, the girls in this study were three times more likely to choose fiction texts (Doiron, 2003).

Schools that overemphasize fiction texts and book-based learning prevent students from becoming fully literate. Asselin believes that students need diverse reading experiences so that they are “able to tackle a wide range of texts in a range of different media, intelligently and critically” (2003, p. 53). Consistent with this finding, Worthy (2002) states that “students who can proficiently read a wide variety of materials and formats will be better prepared for the real-world reading tasks they will encounter in their lives (p. 568).

Comic books have always been popular with both boys and girls. However, this literary form has been a source of much controversy, as comics have not been seen as a valuable or educational text. Norton (2003) investigated the appeal of comic books after noticing a major trend for millions of preteen children in North America. While she looked primarily at Archie comics, Norton found that up to 40% of boys, and 60% of girls, enjoy reading comic books. Norton interviewed parents, teachers, students and student teachers about the merit of comic books. Teachers and parents generally agreed, considering the reading of comic books to be a waste of time, despite the fact that the students were actively engaged in the text and found pleasure in this reading format. They cited reading chapter books and homework as more worthwhile activities.
While a majority of the student teachers interviewed did not think that comics were very educational, and found the pictures to be distracting, others saw opportunities for critical thinking. Norton found these pictures not only engaging to students, but also aided comprehension and made the texts more accessible to English language learners. Interestingly, Archie comics were also full of irony, puns, and other linguistic features. One student teacher stated that “any reading is better than no reading” (Norton, 2003, p. 141).

Students had similar views about comic books. Students reported that they often shared comic books with their friends and discussed the events and characters, who they thought were interesting and funny. However, when asked if comics were a legitimate text, one student said that it “depends on if it’s supposed to be fun or not” (Norton, 2003, p. 141). When students are having fun while reading, they have a sense of control over the reading process. They can make predictions and construct meaning using their background knowledge and experiences. Conversely, there is little room for interpretation of the texts that are “studied” – students are trying to find the “correct” meaning and looking up unknown words. These texts and tasks provide little joy for reading, and show students that reading is uninteresting and hard work. Students are not perceiving reading school texts to be “fun” (Norton, 2003).

Graphic novels are a relatively new text format growing in popularity among students of both genders. Graphic novels appeal to students in a number of ways, including the comic-like format with pictures, dialogue, and narrative captions. Teachers and parents disregard the merit of graphic novels in the same way they dismiss comic
books, believing that reading these texts is not “real reading” (Graphic novels, 2006). Graphic novels are a format, not a genre, and can be fiction or informational. These texts include basic literary elements such as plot, setting, theme, and characters. Even classic texts, such as Shakespeare, are being written in the graphic novel format and finding their way to libraries and classrooms. This format certainly does not make reading easy, but they do interest readers of all abilities.

One major benefit of reading graphic novels is that the pictures can aid and enhance comprehension for all readers, including struggling readers and English language learners. These texts are often used more for pleasure reading than a focus text in the classroom. However, this pleasure-driven recreational reading is not only motivating, but essential as it provides students with indirect vocabulary learning in addition to aiding comprehension. Success with graphic novels will yield more positive attitudes towards reading, as well (Graphic novels, 2006).

People who read regularly do not usually struggle with reading, writing, grammar, or vocabulary, as these skills are often acquired or practiced in recreational reading without much conscious effort. Struggling and reluctant readers do not voluntarily engage in recreational reading. As Snowball states, “reluctant readers will not read just for the sake of reading” (2005, p. 43). Graphic novels provide an interesting, multimodal approach to reading. Once an interest for reading is established, teachers and parents can encourage students to explore other types of texts (Friese, 2008; Snowball, 2005).

Like comic books and graphic novels, popular culture receives little validation in the classroom and in school libraries. Instead of bringing popular culture into the
classroom, traditional texts and modes of learning continue to uphold their status as “proper” and “challenging” (Norton, 2003). Friese points out that there is a common belief that libraries “are repositories for the ‘finest’ of culture and knowledge” (2008, p. 69). However, educators cannot assume that children of the 21st century will engage in and learn from 20th century literacy and instruction. Students in the 21st century love popular culture and media, just as generations before have. Students engage with popular culture through a variety of avenues, including movies, toys, music, video games, and websites. Many characters seen on television and in movies are now featured in books and comics. By including the popular culture texts that students read and enjoy in libraries, educators can show students that they are acknowledging their identities as fans of popular culture, and that they belong in libraries, too (Friese, 2008).

One of the perceived problems with books that feature popular culture characters is that these texts are merely produced for profit (Friese, 2008). While these books do not hold Newbery and Caldecott medals, this does not mean that they are completely lacking in content or quality, as is the common belief. Since popular culture comics, magazines, and other texts feature characters and themes that children already know and connect with, they can increase motivation to read thus the development of literacy skills. Since these texts are accessible to children due to their engaging nature, students can direct their own discussions and critiques of the texts without the support of a teacher. Additionally, as Friese (2008) points out, “these materials can act as a springboard to more advanced texts.” When teachers, parents, and librarians figure out what each student actually wants to read, they can then use common themes, topics, or
similar characters to introduce other reading materials that fit the student’s reading preferences (Friese, 2008).

Popular culture is clearly interesting and relevant to children. If educators do not provide opportunities for students to engage in and critique these “light reading” texts, they will not see the purpose of different kinds of texts. Students need opportunities to read for a variety of purposes, for example, using popular culture texts while reading for pleasure and scholarly work when conducting research. It is essential for students to see that one type of literature is not more important than another, but certain materials are more appropriate for accomplishing a specific task (Friese, 2008).

The type of activity is also a huge factor in motivating students. Reichert and Hawley (2009) surveyed teachers in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain, South Africa, and Australia to find the best practices for boys. The favorite activity categories were gaming, motor activity emphasis, role playing/performance, open inquiry, teamwork/competition, personal realization, responsibility for outcomes, intrinsic subject matter, and novelty/drama/suspense. These teachers noted that the most effective lessons incorporated several of these elements. One of Reichert and Hawley’s (2009) central findings was that boys will disengage from the lesson if the material presented is too easy, hard, or uninteresting, or if the delivery of the lesson is ineffective. This disengagement is most often seen through passive inattention or disruptive behaviors (Reichert & Hawley, 2009).

Gender preferences and engagement are connected to the content of the text, as concluded by Graham et al (2008). When a student has a negative motivational
orientation, such as when reading a book they are uninterested in, less attention is
given to the reading of the text, and comprehension suffers. This was found to happen
more in boys than girls, in a study where students self-assessed their interest and
engagement in texts of their first choice, then second choice, conducted by Graham et
al. (2008). The boys were more likely to have an avoidance orientation toward a task
they did not want to complete, finding ways to avoid the reading rather than complete it.
This is important to consider when choosing books for students.

Asselin (2003) found that girls are able to socialize around texts easier than
boys. Many of the girls contributed to discussions about reading, while boys tended to
remain quiet. Since a great deal of the texts boys read are not valued in the classroom,
teachers never hear about boys' views of reading. This proves that choice is a powerful
motivator in reading and literacy development, and teachers must allow students to
select their own reading materials about topics that interest them.

Shumow, Schmidt, and Kackar (2008) found a difference between reading in
class and reading outside of class. They state that outside of class, students of both
genders are more intrinsically motivated and in control of their reading. However,
reading in class yielded a more positive and goal-oriented experience. Shumow et al.
also cite parents' education and social class as factors that impact reading motivation in
and outside of school (2008). They claim that parents who have college educations are
more likely to read with their children than parents who ended their formal education at
high school. Further, there is a greater variety of reading materials in the homes of
children with college educated parents.
In their study, Shumow et al. (2008) found that the students whose parents had college degrees were almost twice as likely to read outside of class. Further, the students with parents who had Master’s degrees were over 3.5 times more likely to read outside of class. While social class did not have an impact on out of school reading, it was listed as the sole characteristic researched in this study that impacted reading in class. Interestingly, they found that students in working and middle class communities read more in school than students in upper class and poor communities. The average time spent reading in class in the Shumow et al. (2008) study was seventeen minutes, also noting that over 28% of the students in this study reported no reading at all in class.

Based on the preceding research, it is evident that students must be offered some degree of choice in reading materials and activities. Not every student is going to fit the stereotypical gender preferences for texts, like what was found in the Chapman et al. (2007) study, and teachers and parents must respect this. While teachers can offer suggestions of “good quality, educational texts,” these will not necessarily interest or motivate their students to read. Also, discussing every detail, character, and theme in a text can take away much of the enjoyment students find in a text. In order to teach students and bring them to their full reading potential, a love of reading (thus motivation to read) must be established first.

Attitudes about School and Teachers

Attitudes have a huge impact on school life and success. There are many factors that affect attitudes, both within the students as well as external factors. Some of these
factors include the students’ age, gender, and reading and writing skills. Interests and previous experiences also influence a student’s perceptions of school and learning.

Motivation is complex and multidimensional, as described by Coddington and Guthrie (2009). These researchers investigated the difference between teachers’ and students’ perceptions of student motivation. A student’s self-efficacy and their perceptions of how difficult a task will be have a huge impact on motivation, both in and outside of school. In fact, Coddington and Guthrie state that perceived difficulty is the “strongest motivational predictor of reading achievement” (2009, p. 244). Generally, children have positive self-concepts and confidence in their abilities during the first couple years of schooling. After two or three years, however, these self-perceptions begin to reflect actual academic performance more accurately. This is consistent with the findings of Shumow, Schmidt, and Kackar (2008), who list the difficulty of a text as a significant factor of reading motivation. Struggling readers disengage from reading both in and out of school, and find ways to avoid reading even when the text is manageable.

In the Coddington and Guthrie (2009) study, boys believed that they were more competent in science and math, while girls reported higher levels of efficacy in language arts and writing tasks. When looking at students with lower levels of initial reading skills, including phonological awareness and comprehension, they found that these struggling boys became more discouraged, thus having a negative motivational change, than the girls. As a result of this study, Coddington and Guthrie determined that teachers and students had similar perceptions about student motivation in regards to self-efficacy and reading difficulty. Overall, the girls believed that they were more motivated and efficacious in reading than the boys perceived themselves to be. Interestingly, there was
a higher correlation between perceptions of boys and teachers than girls and teachers. While boys and teachers perceived student abilities based mainly on achievement outcomes, girls seemed to base their perceptions on other factors (Coddington & Guthrie, 2009).

Marinak and Gambrell (2010) have a similar findings on motivation and self-efficacy differences between boys and girls. Using the expectancy-value theory of motivation, they believe that motivation is “strongly influenced by one’s expectations of success or failure at a task as well as the value or relative attractiveness the individual places on the task” (p. 130). At all grade levels, girls held more favorable attitudes toward reading. Stability in reading attitudes over time was also greater for girls than boys. In their study, average reading boys and girls in third grade were equally self-confident readers. However, the boys were less motivated to read. The boys also expressed disinterest in reading aloud, even those who did not struggle with reading. They found that the low reading motivation in boys is highly associated with the value they place on reading tasks. Marinak and Gambrell state that, to boys, school is seen as a “means of achieving something else” (2010, p. 131). They view reading as something done presently at school, not an activity in their future lives.

Attitudes have a significant impact on student performance on reading and literacy activities. Marinak and Gambrell (2010) found that girls performed better than boys in reading achievement at grades 4, 8, and 12. They explain that girls “learn to read earlier, comprehend narrative and expository texts better, and have higher estimates of their reading abilities than boys” (p. 130), which may cause this difference in reading achievement. They also believe that boys tend to overestimate their
academic abilities, while girls underestimate theirs. This is inconsistent with Coddington and Guthrie’s (2009) findings on self-efficacy in school subjects, particularly that girls saw themselves as more motivated and able in language arts tasks than boys.

Shumow et al. (2008) suggest that age has a huge impact on reading attitudes. While reading attitudes depend highly on the context (academic versus leisure reading), attitudes toward reading significantly diminish when students reach middle school. Marinak and Gambrell (2010) found this trend earlier in boys, explaining that in fourth grade, there is a significant decrease in boys’ attitudes toward reading, both academic and recreational. In their study, Shumow et al. (2008) found that girls were 1.65 times more likely to read outside of class. They estimate that both boys and girls spent an average of forty minutes on leisure reading per day, which is considerably less than the time spent watching television.

Shumow et al. (2008) state that “the attitudes toward reading held by young adolescents has been described as one of overall indifference when compared with the attitudes of elementary school students (p. 100). This change in attitudes may be impacted by the limited reading choices and activities presented in middle school as compared to elementary school, as well as a lack of connection between the book topics and students’ lives and interests. Additionally, adolescents have endless choices of how to spend their leisure time when not in school, including various technologies and media (Shumow, Schmidt, &Kackar, 2008).

Teachers play a huge role in a child’s attitudes about school. Their attitudes have an enormous effect on children’s, especially in the first few years of school. If teachers profess a love of literature and show this in their classroom, students will soon love
literature, as well. Attitudes are contagious. Reichert and Hawley (2009) report that, according to students in their study, relationships with teachers is critical for engagement and motivation. Students said that the best, most effective teachers were lighthearted, patient, and had a good sense of humor. These teachers were also fair, committed, and confident in their students. Interestingly, teaching abilities and intelligence were not mentioned.

In a study conducted by Carrington, Francis, Hutchings, Skelton, Read, and Hall (2007), teacher’s gender seemed to have "little apparent bearing on the children’s level of academic engagement or the perceived quality of their classroom experiences" (p. 411). They found that the boys in this study were slightly more engaged when being taught by a man than a woman (80% versus 71%). Carrington et al. (2007) suggest that the teacher’s gender was an unimportant issue to the majority of these children.

Impact of Praise and Rewards

Praise has a direct impact on a child’s self-efficacy, and as Corpus and Lepper (2007) explain, it has more of an impact on girls. Graham et al. (2008) believe that self-efficacy is domain specific. They state that girls have higher levels of self-efficacy in reading, English, and social activities, while boys have higher self-efficacy in mathematics and sports. They also reported that, overall, boys tended to have higher levels of self-handicapping than girls. Consistent with this is Reichert and Hawley’s (2009) finding that boys disengage from the lesson when the material or delivery is not right for them. The students who become disengaged also develop negative motivational orientations towards these tasks. Corpus and Lepper (2007) explain that
when these negative attitudes arise, students (boys in particular) give a limited amount of time and effort to a task such as reading a text that is not on a topic of interest. This contributes to the poor reading performances seen nationally.

Chen and Wu (2010) also looked at the effect of rewards and praise on reading motivation. They explain the effort of teacher and parents to motivate students to engage in reading activities by offering rewards for reading. These rewards include praise, but also tangible rewards like prizes, certificates, and privileges. While some researchers believe that this reward system, once removed, undermines students’ intrinsic motivation, Chen and Wu think that rewards can be effective when used properly. They list the type of reward, expectancy of the reward, and attributions made for receiving a reward as factors that play a part in the effectiveness of the reward. Students who attribute their reading success to luck tended to be less intrinsically motivated than those who attributed their success to factors such as hard work. Chen and Wu’s (2010) findings suggest that the reward type and reward attribution had an effect on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The other factors did not predict reading motivation in these students, but they believe the reward process might explain the inconsistency of intrinsic, extrinsic, and global reading motivation.

Conversely, Worthy (2002) claims that children do not consider rewards or incentives for reading to be important. Additionally, these rewards “give the impression that reading is a chore not worth doing unless it is rewarded” (p. 568). The way teachers treat reading (school subject versus valuable life activity) can negatively influence students’ views toward reading.

Conclusion
In conclusion, social norms and gender stereotypes seem to be the prime motivating factor in literacy learning. Gender “norms” in a society teach children what is normal for a boy to like as opposed to what girls enjoy and engage in, across many contexts from interests to preferred book genres. Chapman et al. (2007) and Merisuo-Storm (2006) urge teachers to provide reading materials that are purposeful and meaningful to the students. Both boys and girls should be encouraged to read a variety of genres. They explain that neither gender of student should be encouraged to read certain genres over others. Chapman et al stress that “a scarcity of access to informational text is particularly problematic if educators expect children to thrive in an Information Age” (2007). Similarly, Shumow et al. (2008) explain that “reading is a foundational skill in a technological society. It is essential for the future academic, vocational, and personal success of students” (p. 118). Readers of both genders, even reluctant readers, tend to connect better with recently published series books, books based on television series or films with familiar characters, and other literary genres such as specialty magazines, comics, and cartoons (Merisuo-Storm, 2006), but most importantly, it must be the student’s choice.

Methods

Context

Research for this study occurred in a literacy tutoring program at a private college in western New York. The five participants in this study are students of this literacy program and live in or around the Greater Rochester area. Students, with recommendations from parents and teachers, enroll in this program to work on literacy
skills such as reading, writing, and word study. Tutoring sessions in this literacy program are held weekly, lasting for ten weeks during the college’s spring semester.

Participants

The participants in this study are students from the literacy tutoring program. These students have been in this program for about a month, though some of them have participated in the tutoring during previous semesters. Bone (all names are pseudonyms) is an eleven year old student enrolled in the literacy program. He is a white male who currently reads at a Level W. This reading level was determined by using Fountas and Pinnell’s Benchmark Assessment, which is one assessment used in the literacy program. Repto is also a white male reading at a level W, and he is ten years old. Bone and Repto are in the same small group for instruction in the tutoring program. Nia is a ten year old black female. She is currently reading level K and L texts. She is being tutored one on one. Elizabeth is another black female who is being tutored one on one, and she is currently reading level U texts. Finally, Paul, a ten year old Pakistani male, is reading level R texts in a one on one tutoring experience.

Researcher Stance

As a researcher, I worked in a small group tutoring setting with Bone and Repto. I met these boys in February and at the time of the action research, had worked with them for one month. Research was completed during a spring semester while obtaining my Master’s Degree in Literacy Education. The remaining three participants were being tutored one on one by graduate students in the same Literacy program. Their tutors are peers and friends of mine. I selected these students to participate in this study because
they are in fifth grade like my students, but offer perspectives from girls and minorities. I currently have a bachelor’s degree and have teaching certifications in Childhood and Special Education (grades 1-6).

Method

During this study, I looked at the kinds of books that students choose for themselves and reasons behind selecting these types of texts. Students were brought to the children’s section of the library at the college library and given about fifteen minutes to choose three books that they were interested in reading. During the selection process, I walked around with three other observers and conducted brief interviews with the students about the books that they were looking for and picking. Questions that were asked include:

- What types of books are you looking for?
- Why did you choose this book?
- What books do you normally like to read?
- Did you find the books that you were looking for or is there one that the library doesn’t have?

After choosing three books, students completed a short questionnaire Appendix A) about each book. This provided additional information about the book selecting process that might not have been stated during the brief interviews conducted by the observers. Students answered questions about the genre of book, the topic, if/where they heard of this book or author, and other factors that may have influenced their book selections.
Quality and Credibility of Research

During the course of this research, establishing and maintaining credibility was essential. To ensure credibility, I provided the other observers with the same questions to ask each student. Then, I had a discussion with the other observers shortly after the research process. This allowed me to gain a general idea of all of the participants’ selection process, even though I may not have had a chance to speak to each of the five participants personally. Also, the other observers shared their observations about certain behaviors that I missed, which may have a great influence on their selection process.

Transferability, as outlined by Mills (2007), is the ability for a reader to understand and use the information gained in this study in their own situations. I ensured this by emphasizing the fact that all of these participants are using their own interests and criteria for selecting books. Each participant has their own interests, values, and abilities that influence their decisions for selecting a book for themselves, and this is transferable to any other situation. Students often read only books chosen by a teacher, and many times these texts do not fit the students’ interests. Dependability of this study is ensured because it will show that each participant selects texts based on their own interests and set of criteria, though patterns may emerge, and this finding will be consistent if this study was conducted again.

One underlying assumption in this research is that the students will find books that interest them in this college library. Though the children's section does offer a range of texts, the participants may have an interest in texts that are not as common or
more difficult to find. Another assumption is that the participants will choose books based on the categories I listed in the questionnaire (genre or topic that interests them, interesting title or cover picture, recommendation from someone, at their reading level, etc.). I have provided an area for the participants to share more information about why they chose a certain book in case they used certain criteria not listed in the questionnaire.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants

Prior to conducting research, I collected informed consent from both the participants and their parents, as the participants in this study are all minors. The consent forms indicate the title of the research, a basic explanation of what the study includes, and outlines the rights of the participant if they choose to take part in this study. It also clearly states that choosing not to participate will not affect the students in any way (specifically regarding their tutoring experiences). Both parents and students were informed that their names would not be included in this study, and the participants had the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms, ensuring confidentiality. In addition, any identifying marks (such as real names on papers) were removed from documents and artifacts collected over the course of this study.

Data Collection

Information collected for this study was done in a number of ways. First, my fellow observers and I performed active observation while the participants were choosing their books, and wrote down these observations in the form of field notes. During this observation time, observers conducted brief interviews (which were audio
recorded) with the participants to gain insight on their selection process. After participants selected their texts, they completed short questionnaires (one per text selected) about the criteria used to choose each book (Appendix A). When this session was over, the observers and I had a discussion to share any field notes, including behaviors and comments, during the observation part of the study. Then, audio recordings of the interviews were collected and analyzed along with the questionnaires and field notes.

Data Analysis

After the book selecting process, the observers and I had a discussion about general things we saw, behaviors noted, and any commonalities between the participants’ selection process. I read through the questionnaires over five times. The first read throughs gave me a general idea of the students’ book choosing preferences, then successive read throughs allowed me to see the themes emerging from this. I created charts for each question on the questionnaire, which organized the data and reinforced themes. I listened to each audio recorded interview twice. These findings were compared to the observation forms filled out by the observers.

Findings and Discussion

The results of this action research were consistent with many of the sources used for the literature review, particularly the findings of Merisuo-Storm (2006). Participants chose fiction texts, and these books had common themes of adventure and humor. Participants were also more likely to select a book that they were familiar with, either by knowing the author or through recommendations, than browse unfamiliar texts
and read book summaries. While each participant had their own interests and came from different backgrounds, they indicated similar criteria for choosing books. The audio recorded interviews provided more information about the participants’ selection process and text preferences in general than the questionnaires. Interestingly, the participants verbalized different reasons (and more in-depth explanations) for choosing books during the interviews than what they answered on the questionnaire.

**Selection Criteria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for choosing book</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The title sounded interesting.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The book summary was interesting.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I liked the picture on the cover</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This book is at my reading level.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know the characters in the book.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have read other books by this author.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It got an award.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone recommended this book to me.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (read the book before; watched movie)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for choosing books</th>
<th>(interviews/observation)</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The title sounded interesting.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The book summary was interesting.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I liked the picture on the cover</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This book is at my reading level.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know the characters in the book.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have read other books by this author.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Though only Paul and Repto indicated that they had read other books by the same author on the questionnaire, all five of the participants articulated this to the observers. Similarly, each of the participants mentioned something about looking for books that someone had recommended to them or they knew someone reading it. Three of the participants shared with the observers that the picture on the cover impacted their book choices, while only one participant indicated this as one of the reasons for choosing a book. Only two of the participants cited the title as a reason for choosing the book. Most of the participants in this study did not use the book summary, awards received, or reading level as criteria for selecting their books. In an interview, Elizabeth was the only participant who said that she selected a book she believed to be at her reading level.

The five participants chose texts that they believed were written for both boys and girls. Two of the boys selected books that they thought were written for boys, and Elizabeth chose one that she believed was a “boy book,” which she deemed as such because it dealt with killing animals and guns. Elizabeth was also the only participant that chose a “girl book,” which was a book about a queen. The third book she chose was written for both boys and girls. Bone and Paul each chose two books that were written for boys and girls, and one for boys. Repto and Nia selected all three books that are for both boys and girls. Merisuo-Storm (2006) found that “boys are more apt than girls to closely guard the gendered boundaries of their reading, and girls cross gender boundaries more freely than boys” (p. 113). The findings in this research seem to
support this, though most of the texts chosen were believed to be written for both boys and girls.

**Genres of Fiction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre/theme of books selected</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adventure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy/Humor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic novel/Comic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fables or myths</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Fiction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Fiction and Fantasy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this action research, all fifteen of the texts participants selected were fiction. The texts ranged in theme or format, from graphic novels to adventure books, but each was fiction. Some patterns emerged, with three of the five participants sharing an interest in both adventure and comedy. Two of these participants were males (Bone and Paul), and the third was female (Nia). This finding is consistent with Merisuo-Storm’s (2006) study, where boys and girls rated the same three types of books as their favorite (adventure, humor, and comics). Comics were listed as the top choice for boys in Merisuo-Storm’s findings, and both Bone and Paul chose graphic novels for one of their three books. While observing, I spoke with Repto and Bone who were browsing Jeff Smith’s *Bone* series (one particularly liked by the participant Bone) and other graphic novels. Elizabeth and Nia did not choose nor look for graphic novels.

Historical fiction was a common interest for Repto and Nia. Repto chose a historical fiction book, as indicated on the questionnaire, and Nia reported this interest during an interview, though she did not choose one in this study. Nia’s tutor in the
literacy program also reported that they were using a historical fiction text for guided reading. Science fiction texts were selected by one boy and one girl (Bone and Nia). Contrary to Asselin’s (2003) conclusions about boys being uninterested and unwilling to engage in fiction (Asselin, 2003; Doiron, 2003), these findings suggest that the text preferences for these participants are based more on personal choice than gender differences.

**Preferred Book Topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic of books selected</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Creativity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character and Values</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Languages and Culture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies and Recreation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Experiences and Relationships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Culture (Twilight)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (battle/fighting)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topics of the books chosen also did not reflect gender stereotypes. Two boys chose books about arts and creativity (Bone and Paul). Characters and values was the topic of books chosen by two boys and one girl (Bone, Paul, Elizabeth). One boy and one girl (Paul and Nia) selected books about life experiences and relationships. Paul and Nia also picked out books with a science topic. The findings in this study are contrary to Asselin’s (2003) claims that boys prefer action in a book, while girls focus their attention on relationships and character development. Overall, the participants in this study selected an equal number of “girl books” and “boy books.” Interestingly, none
of the participants chose books with topics about sports or technology. Other topic categories listed on the questionnaire but not selected by participants were health and safety, holidays and seasons, and social studies.

On the questionnaires, the participants indicated that they made connections between five of these books and other texts they read. Three of the texts selected could be connected to the world, and these texts were selected by the girls. Only Paul selected one book that he thought connected to his life. Each of the three boys selected at least one text that they could not connect to their life, other texts, or the world. Matthew could not think of any connections to the books he chose.

**Familiarity with Authors and Books**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I found out about this book from…</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A family member</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A book review</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A website</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading other books from this author</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one – I found it myself</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (saw at school library)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the main criteria participants used during the action research was looking for authors with whom they were familiar. I noticed this while walking around and talking with the participants, which was corroborated later by each of the other observers during our discussion. Each observer indicated that the participants had read other books by the same author for at least one of their choices. During my discussion with Repto, he stated that when looking for a new book, he usually starts by browsing other books written by authors he likes.
Bone chose books in a similar fashion, looking first at books in his favorite series, then other books by that author. I spoke with Bone while he was looking through Jeff Smith’s *Bone* series, and he was trying to find the third book in the series, the next book he needed to read. This book was not available in the library at the time, so Bone decided to skip that book and selected the fourth book in the series.

There were a few other ways in which the students were familiar with the books they looked for and/or chose. Nia chose one of her books because she saw her brother reading it. She selected another one because she had seen it in her library and thought it looked interesting. Elizabeth shared with an observer that she selected a *Twilight* book because she “loved the movie.” Repto even chose one book that he had previously read. These participants selected these two texts because they had characters and themes that the participants connect with and already know they enjoy, which can increase reading motivation and therefore opportunities to practice/improve literacy skills as Friese (2008) points out. Based on the questionnaire and interviews with the participants, these children were choosing texts that they were familiar with, whether they saw it somewhere or enjoyed other books by the author.

The participants also relied on recommendations for book selections. Recommendations came from teachers, friends, and family members, as indicated on the questionnaires and during the interviews. All five participants chose at least one book that was recommended to them by a friend, whereas three selected books that teachers had recommended. Two of these participants were boys, and one was a girl. While talking with Repto, I tried to suggest a few books to him, as he had some difficulty
deciding on his three books. I recommended books written by authors he liked and also ones that he was not familiar with, but he was not interested in my suggestions. He had a couple of books in mind that his friends has recommended to him, and ended up picking one of those books. Another was recommended by his teacher, and the third was a book that he wanted to read again.

Paul also selected two of his books that were recommended by his teachers and friends. The third book that he chose was another book by a familiar author. Elizabeth chose one book based on a suggestion from a friend, and another was suggested by a teacher. Two of the books Bone chose were suggested to him by friends. Nia selected one book recommended by a friend. The other two were suggested by her tutor/observer. Nia's tutor/observer noted that she did not know what books to pick, was “very passive” and chose the first two books that the observer recommended to her.

While these participants took teacher recommendations into account, this finding suggests that friends have a bigger influence on children's reading choices.

Implications and Conclusion

The literature and action research examined the different factors that motivated boys and girls to read. One major theme has emerged: students need to choose the texts that they read. While some of the research presented had common themes and views on girls’ and boys’ preferences, it has become apparent that each child has his or her own personal interests, attitudes, and preferences. These factors, while they may be influenced by societal gender norms, create a unique child with particular reading motivators. Based on the findings from the literature review and action research, there
does not appear to be a clear distinction between the factors that motivate girls to read and those that motivate boys. In fact, the participants in this action research seemed to have more in common than different in the texts they selected for themselves.

There were a few limitations during the course of this research. If this study were to be conducted again, I would bring the participants to a community library. While the college library had a decent selection of books, it is quite limited compared to a town library. At least three times during the study, the participants and I could not find a specific text that the participants had in mind to choose. In addition, there was no computer available at the time that could be used to search for books on a library database.

Another limitation in the action research was the set-up of the questionnaire. In reviewing the completed questionnaires, I found that few of the participants checked any categories listed in the right column (see Appendix A for question/answer set-up). This was also noted by some of the other observers, stating that the participants may have thought the answers listed in the right column were for a different question.

One final limitation was the clarity of the instructions given to the participants prior to beginning the research. One student started by browsing the picture books, and decided to look through chapter books after he noticed the other participants looking only at chapter books. Fascinatingly, he limited his selection of books just because none of the other participants were looking at picture books. While I instructed the participants to choose “any book,” I did not clearly indicate that “any book” could include picture books, chapter books, etc. Fascinatingly, he limited his selection of books just because
none of the other participants were looking at picture books. Another student was very passive in her selection process, and did not really look for books on her own until her observer urged her to after suggesting two books (which she chose as two of her three books). However, the participant may not have many opportunities to select her own texts and is used to teachers choosing the books she reads. An implication of this may be that some students need to be explicitly taught how to browse and select recreational books.

In order to effectively teach both boys and girls, teachers must reframe reading as both an enjoyable and necessary activity. Boys need to understand that reading has a variety of purposes, both functional and recreational, and that engaging in this activity does not make them feminine. The reading done in school must have a purpose and personal value to the students, as many students, particularly boys, tend to reject the literacy practices that seem irrelevant to their lives (Coddington & Guthrie, 2009). Moreover, reading strategies (and interventions) must consider what the students value in reading. Rather than dismissing literacy practices that students find meaningful and engaging, educators must better understand and embrace students’ preferences (Norton, 2003).

Teachers and parents cannot restrict children’s reading choices to only those deemed “educational.” Worthy (2002) states that it is essential for teachers “to ensure that students have access to high-quality, conceptually challenging literature, but it is also important to address students’ preferences in order to capture attention and engagement, and thus, foster learning” (p. 569). There is certainly a time and purpose for educational texts, but in order to create lifelong learners, we must respect students’
preferences and give them opportunities to select their own reading materials. Books used for instruction should be diverse, including fiction and nonfiction books of various formats. These types of texts must also be available in classroom and school libraries. Students will be more prepared for reading tasks in the real world when they are proficient in reading a wide variety of texts.
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social and cultural resources students bring to the classroom (pp. 60-77).

Newark, DE: International Reading Association.


