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Examining the Effects of a School-wide Reading Culture on the Engagement of Middle School Students

Erika Daniels
California State University San Marcos
San Marcos, CA

Michael Steres
Rincon Middle School
Escondido, CA

Abstract

This case study examined a middle school where a new administration had made school-wide reading an immediate and significant priority. The study investigated how and why the culture shift to school-wide reading appeared to influence student engagement. Existing research suggested that students must feel motivated about their learning to be successful academically. Anecdotal reports from teachers suggested that student engagement had increased because of a school-wide focus on reading. In-depth interviews were conducted with a random sample of students and teachers and were categorized according to emerging themes. Three factors emerged: making reading a top priority, modeling by and support from adults in the school, and the creation of motivating learning environments. One notable finding was that the majority of the students and teachers felt that time devoted to silent reading through a structured, systematic approach and the emphasis on school-wide reading contributed significantly toward creating a family of readers within the school.

Middle school teachers know that their students create both joys and challenges on a daily basis. Young adolescents possess distinctive qualities that influence their actions and choices. Although young adolescents' cognitive abilities are steadily increasing, they are not yet practiced in using the skills efficiently (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997). That dichotomy between their existing and potential cognitive abilities frustrates many middle school students, and it requires educators to adapt and adjust their practices.

Although state and federal mandates require that public schools demonstrate measurable and sustained academic achievement, it is not enough for schools to offer a challenging curriculum and rigorous work. Teachers can plan brilliant lessons and closely monitor student progress, but the students need to care enough to engage with the curriculum and complete the work. Although academic achievement requires students to

have solid literacy skills, it is not enough for middle school teachers to limit their efforts to encouraging and promoting reading. Not all students will read and learn just because they are instructed to do so if they do not find relevance in what they are learning.

Effective middle grades teachers know they need to create motivating learning environments to ensure their students learn the curriculum and achieve academically. When students are engaged in school, they try harder. When they try harder, they achieve more (Dweck, 2002). Simply put, motivation matters.

This article presents the results of one middle school's efforts to improve student engagement through an increased emphasis on school-wide structured reading. Although there are many factors that contribute to student motivation (Daniels, 2010), the school in this case study chose to focus on building student interest in school through reading. To understand why the school made the decisions it did; an understanding of the motivation research is essential.

Motivation in Middle School

Motivation or lack thereof is a primary issue in young adolescents' learning and achievement in school. Middle schools traditionally struggle with motivating their students to care enough to learn and then to demonstrate that learning on measurable assessments (Alspaugh, 1998). For a number of reasons, engagement and achievement decline as students transition to middle school (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008), which adds to the challenge for their teachers. It is incumbent upon middle grades teachers to create classroom environments where students decide they want to engage and that they can learn. This study focused on the position that motivation is internally generated but influenced by external factors (Csikszentmihlayi, 1990). In other words, the context of middle school plays a role in the academic choices of young adolescents (Daniels, 2010; Gee, 1999).

Sociocultural Theory

Context is "everything in the material, mental, personal, interactional, social, institutional, cultural, and historical situation" that influences the meaning people make (Gee, 1999, p. 54). The activities in which students engage, the interactions they have with peers and adults, and the physical characteristics of their learning environments all contribute to their motivation to learn and their desire to engage.

Context, in sociocultural theory, consists of cultural artifacts such as language, technologies, social interactions, communication, and any other elements in the physical environment that influence learning, meaning-making, and cognitive development (Wertsch, 1991). These artifacts allow people to identify with specific groups (Gee, 1999). For example, when in front of their classes, teachers often use formal language that requires respect and attention. When teachers are at home with their families, their language is often more casual to reflect the familiarity they have in that context. Because meaning-making and understanding are shaped by social and cultural forces, a student is often influenced by the school context (Au, 1997), which makes sociocultural theory an important lens through which to explore motivation. The social interactions and communication that takes place among learners in a school context influence the decisions the students make about engaging (Hedegaard, Chaiklin, & Jensen, 1998).

There are two primary elements of the motivation research that influence contextual student engagement; they are self-determination theory (Deci, Koestener, & Ryan, 2001) and expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Autonomy as an Influence on Intrinsic Motivation

Research indicates that autonomy is an integral part of motivation (Deci et al., 2001). The dictionary defines autonomy as being independent or not controlled by others. Human beings need to feel that they are in control of their actions and decisions—that they are able to determine for themselves the course of their lives. When they feel that what they do or what happens to them is actually in someone else's control, they lose motivation (Deci, 1995). In these circumstances, most people do not see the point of engaging or exerting effort because it will not make a difference to the outcome. When teachers apply an understanding of autonomy to middle school, they are more likely to include students in class or school decision-making. Those students are more likely to be inherently motivated because they feel in control of their environment (McCombs, 2002). Middle grades students are more likely to work diligently if they see that their voices are valued and incorporated into what happens during the school day, because they do not feel as if things are being done *to* them (Daniels, 2010)—an idea that is the crux of the reading program at the school in this case study.

Wigfield and Eccles (2002) found that young adolescents' rapidly developing cognitive skills lead them to crave decision-making opportunities. Although much of their lives is dictated by parents and teachers, they need to have some say over what they are asked to

do, even when it is as simple as deciding what book to read or where to sit in class (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005). Middle school teachers know that their students are social beings and are learning to navigate among their peer, academic, and home worlds. The social aspect of school is an integral part of the students' lives and one in which many students feel autonomous because they choose with whom to associate and how to interact. In this respect, sociocultural theory and the autonomy element of motivation research mesh.

Gee (2007) found that academic content is not simply "facts and principles … it is a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices" (p. 27). It is no wonder, then, that students without a solid understanding of those social practices are not motivated to learn in or engage with certain academic disciplines. If they do not know how to engage with an academic discipline, they lose their ability to control their own participation because they are not able to do what their teachers ask or expect. Sociocultural theory enhances our understanding of autonomy and the motivation research because students whose proficiency with academic disciplines mirrors teachers' expectations often achieve more academic success.

One factor inhibiting middle school students' motivation is the feeling that they rarely control any part of what happens to them during a school day. They receive class schedules from the counseling office, assignments from their teachers, and feedback about their self-worth from their peers (Perlstein, 2003). While teachers cannot give students unfettered control over everything that happens during a school day, those who create motivating learning environments at least teach students how to control their reactions in situations that, otherwise, may be uncontrollable. Teaching autonomy over personal reactions fosters intrinsic motivation.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found "Everything we experience—joy or pain, interest or boredom—is represented in the mind as information. If we are able to control this information, we can decide what our lives will be like" (p. 6). This is a powerful realization for young adolescents. When they realize they can control how they react to and process what happens to them in school, they begin to feel empowered and in control. They may not be able to control who their teachers are or what assignments they receive, but they can learn to control their reactions and attitudes. For students at this case study middle school, the control they had over what to read fostered a desire to read more. This sense of autonomy increased their motivation and encouraged them to work more diligently (Deci et al., 2001).

Expectations for Success

Part of feeling autonomous means believing that one has control over success and failure. For young adolescents, their beliefs about their abilities and expectations for success influence their motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). If they expect to be successful, they will exert more effort (Dweck, 2002). If they believe they will fail no matter what, they often refuse even to try (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). Teachers' beliefs about students also affect academic achievement. When teachers have high expectations and believe their students will be successful if given the right support and scaffolding, their classes usually perform at higher levels academically (Payne, Rueda, & Dembo, 2008). Students know whether their teachers believe they can be successful and will live up or down to those expectations. A student's motivation is often directly linked to their perceptions of their teachers' attitudes (Daniels, 2010).

Since "most enjoyable activities are not natural, and they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make" (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990, p. 69), teachers often provide the impetus for that initial effort. If students know that their teachers believe in them, they are more likely to take a risk with their learning. The teachers in the case study middle school came to view their students as successful readers, which, in turn, led the students to view themselves in the same way.

The effects of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) are well-documented. Self-efficacy is defined as "individuals' beliefs in their abilities to execute specific behaviors" (Anderman & Anderman, 2010, p. 156). When students believe they have the skills required for the task at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), they expect they will succeed. When they expect success, they are more likely to exert the effort necessary for the task. Because a person's beliefs in his abilities connect to his willingness to work diligently (Dweck, 2002), teachers who believe in their students foster engagement.

Motivation to Read

The context in which students are expected to read and the choice they have over their reading influence their desire to read. When educators acknowledge the social practices connected with reading, they build a sociocultural context that encourages the act. Teale and Gambrell (2007) found that "principled action on the part of teachers and administrators" (p. 737) created more engaged readers. Students know what teachers and schools value by the amount of time they devote to any given activity. When schools commit time and

resources to reading, their students become better readers (Gambrell, 1996).

Just giving students time to read is not enough, however. In secondary schools, there is less and less room for student choice in what they do, see, and experience (Stairs & Stairs- Burgos, 2010). This inhibits their desire to engage because autonomy (or control over one's own actions) is an essential component of motivated behavior. Too often, school curriculum is divorced from students' actual interests, and they are required to learn concepts or skills over which they have no control (Bean, 2002). Allowing students to choose what they want to read goes a long way toward enhancing their desire to read (Stairs & Stairs-Burgos, 2010). "With the power of silent reading, the reader is on his own; he can propel himself through the text" (Hunt, 1996/1997, p. 281).

Leaving a reader alone with a text is more effective when specific conditions also exist: (a) the reader possesses the requisite skills to make sense of his reading (Beers, 2003); (b) the engaged reader knows what strategies must be employed to make meaning and uses those strategies purposefully across a wide variety of texts (Teale & Gambrell, 2007); and (c) the reader needs to be interested in the text, regardless of its style, level, or complexity. As Hunt (1996/1997) found, "Strong interest can frequently cause the reader to transcend not only his independent but also his so-called instructional level" (p. 280).

A review of the motivation and reading engagement literature points to a variety of conditions that either foster or inhibit students' desire to read. A desire to understand those conditions in action was the impetus of this study.

The Study

In another study (Gambrell, 1996), a survey of teachers found that creating interest in reading was a top research priority. The middle school discussed in this article had experienced increased student desire to read during the preceding three years, and we were interested in identifying the reasons for the students' evident engagement with reading.

The intent of this study, therefore, was to explore how the adults at one middle school developed a school-wide reading culture, which led to increased student engagement with reading. We asked the question: *Why and how did Parkdale Middle School's creation of a school-wide reading culture increase student engagement?*

Our results pointed to several conditions that the teachers and administrators implemented in order to increase students' desire to read for pleasure. We believe this study adds to the existing body of literature by identifying what specific aspects of a structured silent reading program led to increased student engagement.

Description of Middle School

This case study (Stake, 1995) was conducted at Parkdale Middle School. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant anonymity. The principal, Mr. Gaffney, made reading a priority for all teachers and all students. Nearly all of the teachers promoted reading within their classrooms, regardless of content area, and they received extensive support to do so from the administration. The middle school was located in an urban area of Southern California where the majority of students, 68%, were non-White. Students were also either living below the poverty line, English language learners, or both.

A Culture of Reading

When Mr. Gaffney became principal of Parkdale Middle School in 2006, his priority was to create a "culture of reading." His commitment to fostering a climate in which all members of the school were expected and encouraged to read manifested itself in a variety of ways: (a) dedicated, specified time to read during the school day; (b) student choice in what they read; and (c) school-wide support for teachers and administrators to also read during the school day and to talk about their reading with students. Each teacher maintained a classroom library. English teachers provided time to read silently every day in class, during which students were able to read their books of choice. Because the teachers felt supported, or mandated in some cases, by the school administration to promote reading in their classrooms, the act of reading took on increased importance and urgency.

For 15 minutes every day, everyone on campus read silently. All teachers, regardless of content area, were expected to have a bookshelf of young adult books and were given financial support to purchase the books. The principal regularly gave book talks in English classes and asked students about their reading when he saw them on campus. Finally, Mr. Gaffney devoted frequent staff meetings to teaching faculty how to talk about books with students.

Participants

Participants in this study were the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students and their teachers at Parkdale Middle School. All of the 1,356 students attending the middle school experienced the school-wide reading culture, and 108 participated in the study through either classroom discussions and/or individual interviews. Of the 85 adults working on campus, 17 teachers and administrators also participated in the study through a series of focus group discussions.

Eighteen students were selected for individual interviews with the researchers through a stratified random sample. Ninety additional students participated in class discussions facilitated by the researchers, for which the teachers were not present. The stratified random sample ensured that participants represented all three levels of English classes: gifted, regular, and structured. Gifted classes served students identified as gifted as well as high-achieving, non-identified students. Regular classes served students performing at grade level according to the previous year's standardized assessments. Structured classes served students identified as performing two or more years below grade level, as determined by the state's standardized assessments.

Teachers were randomly selected to participate in one-on-one interviews by pulling their names out of a bucket. Once we chose the teachers' names, we verified that all three levels of English and one other content area were represented.

All participation was voluntary. Students and teachers understood they did not have to participate and that they could stop the interview at any time. Not participating would have no social or academic impact because we provided discreet, alternative activities.

Researchers

The research team included a professor in a university college of education and a teacher at Parkdale Middle School. Mike, a Parkdale teacher, conducted all of the interviews and focus groups. We felt this would encourage honesty and detail from the participating students and teachers, because he was a trusted, integral member of the faculty. Many students spent time in his classroom after school, and he maintained professional, collaborative relationships with his colleagues. Because we were interested in understanding the participants' lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to identify what led to increased student engagement with reading, we felt that Mike's established credibility would be beneficial.

Data Collection Procedures

Once the participant groups were identified, we conducted one-on-one interviews with the students. Interviews were open-ended, but the same questions were asked in the same order (see Appendix A). Based on students' responses, the researchers often asked follow-up or clarifying questions that were not on the original list.

After the interviews were completed, we joined three different English classes for focus group discussions. These discussions centered on any changes in the students' reading habits and abilities since entering middle school and their perceptions of the reading initiatives undertaken during their time in middle school. Although the reading initiative permeated all content areas, we conducted the focus groups in English classes to ensure that a random sample of students was represented and that no student participated more than once.

Finally, classroom teachers participated in the interviews. Two teachers from each grade level discussed the structured reading program and shared their observations concerning changes in students' attitudes. Congruent with the student interview protocol, the same questions were asked in the same order (see Appendix B). This study sought to understand if and how a culture of reading influenced student engagement with reading—a question best explored qualitatively.

Researchers have made a strong case for the power of qualitative research (Charmaz, 2000; Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). People construct meaning from their lived experiences, and this meaning was essential to our understanding of why students at Parkdale Middle were more engaged with reading after three years in the reading culture created by the school's faculty.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative analysis is the means of taking an experience apart and finding meaning in each part (Polkinghorne,1988; Stake, 1995). To that end, we transcribed the interviews and then read through them looking for emerging themes that illuminated the students' and teachers' experiences with the reading culture and/or explained why most people on campus were reading more (in terms of both the number of books read and time spent reading). We reviewed the responses independently, at first. Next,

we compared our findings and discovered that we had identified 80% of the same themes. Within those commonly recognized, we looked for recurring ideas and grouped those themes into categories (Charmaz, 2000). We chose to conduct this analysis by hand instead of using a commercial software package because the study emphasis was to learn about the participants' lived experiences. We wanted to make sure that we immersed ourselves in the interview and focus group transcripts without the mediation of a software package.

Results

We knew Parkdale Middle School boasted a strong culture of reading, and we were intrigued by the participants' perceptions of this culture. Although the actual vocabulary was different between students and teachers, the content of their responses was strikingly similar. They pointed repeatedly to three conditions that permeated Parkdale's environment and contributed to their desire to read. The conditions noted were: (a) making reading a top priority, (b) modeling by and support from the adults in the school, and (c) the creation of motivating learning environments. The conditions were a mixture of specific actions by Mr. Gaffney and outcomes of those mandates. In terms of reliability, the conditions cited by our participants echo what Gambrell (1996) found in another study with disengaged readers.

Making Reading a Priority

It would seem axiomatic that progress in any area requires a commitment of time. Time—to read, to think about reading, and to choose books to read—was a common theme in the students' and teachers' responses. Mr. Gaffney made reading a priority; he emphasized during faculty meetings that reading was important and that all members of the school were expected to read on a consistent and continual basis. To make sure reading occurred during school, he mandated that all English classes devote a minimum of 15 minutes each day for self-selected, silent reading. Essentially, he made reading a priority by giving everyone the time to do it.

This was the beginning of a major paradigm shift for the school. As one veteran teacher commented:

> Prior to the current principal, teachers had to fight or be sneaky to allocate any meaningful time to actual reading. The district told us to stick with the textbook and, even then, we were supposed to devote 85% of our time to pre- and post-reading activities. We were sending the students a clear message that reading independently was not important enough to devote class time to, and, thus, we don't really value reading. Unfortunately, many of them (the students) received that message loud and clear.

While most teachers were aware that California content standards set a goal that eighth grade students would read 1,000,000 words per year, they did not feel that they were encouraged or supported in allocating class time to silent reading for all students. One teacher summarized a common sentiment:

> No one was pushing independent reading from the top. If an administrator or district person came through while your kids were doing Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), you always felt as if you had to defend yourself by showing how much time you were also devoting to the textbook.

As sociocultural theory reminds us, our environment influences the meaning we create from any situation. When the English teachers at Parkdale Middle were allowed (or, in some cases, required) to make reading an inviolable part of the school day, the students' environment changed.

Teachers compared the current environment to the one created by the previous principal. Because reading was not a priority, the students did not value it. When teachers did make SSR a part of class time, many were frustrated with the results. As one participant stated: "I felt like the SSR police. Students would routinely 'forget' to bring their book or would blindly flip pages, pretending to read, while I walked around the classroom as the enforcer. There was no buy-in to the idea that independent reading was valuable."

When the teachers at Parkdale Middle School approached reading as a "must-do" activity, one that was not even encouraged by the administration, Parkdale's environment (or sociocultural context) led students to believe that reading was not a valued, or valuable, part of the school day.

Mr. Gaffney's goal was to shift the school culture toward one in which time for reading was expected. He expected all English classes to devote at least 15 minutes each day to SSR, and he routinely visited classrooms to observe the practice in action. He also expected other content area teachers to have trade books in their rooms and to talk with students about their reading. The students noticed the change in administrative expectations. One eighth grader

commented, "My teacher didn't seem to like SSR at first. She would sometimes tell us we weren't doing SSR that day … but by the end, it was better. We did SSR all the time, and I remember one day, I looked, and she was reading the same book I was. … that made me smile."

As we know from the motivation research, teachers' expectations influence student motivation to work diligently in school. When this student found his teacher reading the same book, he realized that his teacher expected *all* members of the community to read. These small moments worked together to convey the expectation that everyone would read because reading was a priority.

By the second year of Mr. Gaffney's tenure, SSR was firmly in place. The students knew they needed an SSR book with them at all times. Administrators would ask students what they were reading; teachers would expect them to pull out books during down time. A math teacher noted:

> I can still remember the day I was giving a quiz and asked the students to place their SSR books on their desks. I looked up, and there was a book on every desk. It was amazing. Of course, now the problem is that I have students who want to read when they are supposed to be doing math!

The students felt the impact of the consistent and substantive time devoted to reading. One said, "I bring my SSR book to school every day because I know I will use it. At my old school, I didn't bring it because, half the time, we wouldn't read, and I don't like to carry anything extra." As middle school teachers know, students need to know that they will use what we ask them to bring. When students know they will use their books, they are much more likely to carry those books around. Parkdale's environment had been changed to the point that reading was an unquestioned part of the context.

Time Allocation

The majority of the teachers and students were enthusiastic about the increased time allocation to actually read. An eighth grade teacher commented:

> The amount they are reading is amazing. Our eighth graders have been doing this for three years now, and they are ready to read. The second day of school my kids read for 35 minutes straight, and it was so quiet you could hear the pages turning. Even more amazing is the volume of their reading. I went through their reading logs on the 68th day of school, and my 90 students had read 1,245 books.

The students' comments offered a few explanations for the increase in volume. One student said, "This is the first time I ever felt like I could read in school. It's quiet, and no one is bugging us every five minutes to answer questions about what we are reading." Others stated that they could finally read entire books in a reasonable amount of time; and one reluctant reader said, "I still don't like to read, but it's funner (sic) when we are doing it all together." It appeared that when the adults explicitly prioritized reading, the students responded by valuing it as well. Although this study focused on a qualitative analysis of reading, Stairs and Stairs-Burgos (2010) asserted "the amount of time children spend leisure reading is correlated with reading achievement" (p. 42). The purpose of this study was to identify what existed in Parkdale's context that led to increased student engagement, therefore, we did not analyze the students' test scores or reading achievement. Stairs and Stairs-Burgos's study, when coupled with ours, offers a suggestion for future exploration.

As Gee (2007) reminded us, any academic discipline is a set of "distinctive social practices" (p. 27). Parkdale students knew their teachers expected them to read, and they developed the social practices connected to reading together, which made them feel more motivated to continue reading. The sheer volume of time devoted to reading appeared to contribute substantially to the creation of a school-wide reading culture. Making reading explicitly a priority positively influenced student engagement.

Modeling and Support

Students' engagement was significantly influenced by the fact that reading was so clearly recognized as a school-wide priority. Nonetheless, creating the time and space to read was meaningless for many of the students, who did not have access to books at home. Because the nearest public library was too far to access by foot or bicycle, and the school library had an outdated collection of books, it fell to teachers and administrators to provide books for their students. With support from the principal, teachers used a one-time district grant to purchase books. They scoured garage sales and their friends' shelves and created classroom libraries with 500–1,000 books each. When one teacher amassed more than 4,500 books, he made his collection an integral part of the school reading network.

As the teachers made their class libraries available to their students, many were able to read books that their friends were reading. Because there were multiple copies of the same book on campus, and because the administration mandated time to read in class every day, students began to view reading as a social activity. One student noted, "I formed a book club with three of my friends. We take turns picking books, and we read the same books together. It's fun to talk about books." These students, plus many others, decided what books to read because they noticed what their peers were reading or because their teachers consistently exposed them to new titles. They learned the social practices connected with reading. They were given the autonomy to choose what they read, and they knew the adults expected success.

One teacher noted, "A weak link when we started this process" was adult knowledge of books to recommend. She said, "Not enough of us were really experts on young adult literature, and we were not practiced at book hooks." Mr. Gaffney devoted faculty meetings to teaching teachers how to give quick talks on the salient points of a book. He used the expertise of faculty members who were practiced with "hooking" students on books and building interest in a wide variety of texts. As a result, the teachers became "experts" in young adult literature, and the students felt more connected to their teachers through a shared love of reading.

Ongoing formal and informal discussions about books increased the teachers' knowledge of engaging books for middle school students. The school literacy council and a pair of lead teachers provided professional development to the rest of the faculty and staff on what books were available and how to talk about them with students. Mr. Gaffney actively supported the practice by giving his own book hooks in English classrooms. One student illustrated the impact when she said, "I always have a next book to read, because my teacher shares two new books with us every day. She makes it so I can't wait to read them." This student illustrated the importance of autonomy in terms of fostering engagement. Because the teacher shared interesting books every day, his students had the equivalent of a nightstand reading. They had substantial choices and significant time to take control over their own reading lives.

Creating Motivating Learning Environments

Although Parkdale's faculty was not explicitly knowledgeable about the motivation research, they unwittingly incorporated many of its elements, which allowed them to create motivating learning environments. One teacher knew that a school-wide reading culture "would be more successful if the students felt they had the power to choose." In the past, many teachers had strict requirements as to what books were allowed, but they came to recognize that many worthwhile options were not included in their lists. Through the extended time spent on reading and the learning occurring in faculty meetings, the adults on campus realized, in the words of one teacher, "While it's hard for me to admit that the books I had selected (and loved) might not be the best for all my students, there is no question that for a number of students, freedom to choose has removed a barrier to reading success." An eighth grader elaborated, saying, "This is the first year when I really felt that I was in charge. My teacher even told me I could drop a book I didn't like." After a pause, he added, "I did it (dropped a book), and he didn't get mad!" His comment about being "in charge" echoed what we know from the motivation research—feeling autonomous often leads to feeling motivated to engage or participate (Deci et al., 2001).

As time to read, book hooks, and conversations about books became an expected and reliable part of the school day, teachers and students felt the reading culture develop across the school. On a typical day, we found students reading on bean-bag chairs inside classrooms or outside the rooms perched on stairs and retaining walls. The students responded to the culture shift by focusing on their reading for extended periods of time. One student exclaimed, "I'm finally comfortable! I never could concentrate on reading when I had to sit up at a desk."

Students also believed their teachers valued reading in and of itself, as opposed to being a means to an assessment end. As the students concentrated more on reading and demonstrated visible engagement in the process, teachers separated formal assessments from reading time. A veteran teacher noted:

I didn't realize it but every time students finished a book, I punished them by making them do a book report or pass a test. Of course they didn't want to read a lot. Now I have learned to separate teaching literary response from independent reading. I still formally

assess literary response, but not as a way to confirm they are reading. A simple book chat does that.

Because the teachers expected the students to read, they did. Because the students expected the teachers to support reading habits, they did. Expectations for success (Anderman & Anderman, 2010) contributed to the students' desire to read.

A result of creating the culture of reading was that, as one student said, "For the first time I feel that reading is valued for itself, not as a way to write a report or earn some points." The participants' reactions echoed the findings of a recent study (Casey, 2009) where adolescents were "engaged because (the teacher) privileged the learning processes over the products" (p. 288). Because Mr. Gaffney's actions clearly illustrated his intent to create a school-wide reading culture, other content area teachers began to understand their role in supporting and maintaining reading development. A math teacher said that he "started making a point of noticing and commenting on what the kids were reading, letting them know that I was interested too." The reading culture expanded beyond the English classroom, because students viewed all members of the school community as fellow readers. One of the most popular sources of non-fiction texts was the principal's office because of his frequent book hooks in English classrooms, and the school's administrators initiated conversations about reading during encounters at lunch or after school.

The students knew that reading was a valued and valuable part of the school culture, and conversations about books became a regular part of their school life. They recommended books to each other as is illustrated by one student's comment, "I really liked it when another student put my name up next to Heat (Lupica, 2006) because he knew I was a pitcher on a traveling team."

Teachers noticed that books were passing from student to student without adult intervention. One said:

I noticed that popular titles like Speak (Anderson, 1999) would often take a long time to make it back after they were borrowed. When I asked the students, I found the books had migrated from student to student before making it back to my classroom. Loaning a book to a friend, even a book that wasn't exactly yours, had become standard operating procedure. In fact, I found that siblings, cousins, parents, and grandparents had become part of our school's literature community by reading books from my classroom library.

Instead of being limited to 15 minutes during English class, reading had become an integrated part of the school culture. Parkdale's faculty and staff created a motivating learning environment by emphasizing choice (autonomy), believing all students could and would read if given enough support (expectations for success), and understanding the context of middle school influences engagement (sociocultural theory).

Discussion

Parkdale Middle School created a culture in which students were engaged in and enthusiastic about reading, because it incorporated lessons from the motivation research. There are no easy answers or quick fixes to the challenges of fostering student engagement in middle school, but this study suggests three actions middle schools might take as they work toward that goal.

Action 1: Prioritize reading as a school-wide goal and as a subject of ongoing discussions.

Prior to Mr. Gaffney's arrival, the faculty and staff at the middle school did not view reading as their priority or, in some cases, even their responsibility. Reading experiences such as time to read were haphazard and subject to the interest and commitment of individual teachers. When Mr. Gaffney became principal and mandated time in every school day for every student to read, he made his priority clear and followed his words with his actions. When he committed himself to talking about his own reading in English classes, and the other administrators engaged in conversations about books with the students, they showed that they viewed themselves as active participants in the school's reading culture. The students saw that reading was a priority, and they were given the time and the resources to engage in the practice; thus, they too began to view reading as important.

If middle schools want students to care enough to exert the effort necessary to become better readers, they must make reading a school-wide priority. Sociocultural theory reminds educators that the middle school environment significantly influences student engagement (AMLE, 2003).

Action 2: Provide ongoing professional development that allows faculty and staff to become knowledgeable about young adult literature.

The teachers repeatedly stated it was difficult to maximize the increased time for school-wide reading because of their lack of knowledge about young adult literature. They wanted to promote reading and to read with their students, but they did not feel comfortable recommending books; nor did they have a clear understanding of how to teach students to choose and interact with books.

Parkdale Middle School devoted time during their work days before students arrived and also during in-school faculty meetings to expanding teachers' knowledge of young adult literature. Other middle schools might find that teachers are better able to recommend books based on students' interests when professional development is focused on this task. The students in this study felt more engaged with books and reading because their teachers constantly talked about books and modeled active reading. Students believed that reading mattered when they saw teachers reading books and talking about that reading with each other and with students. As faculty members showed they were interested in what students were reading, everyone became more engaged in the process.

Action 3: Commit resources—time and money—to ensuring that all faculty have comprehensive classroom libraries and an understanding of how to manage them effectively.

Students know what their teachers and schools value based on how time and resources are allocated. Parkdale devoted significant time to the actual act of reading and considerable money to ensuring there were books to read. Middle schools can demonstrate their commitment to reading through expanding classroom libraries and providing time every day for students to read.

In any budget year, schools and districts struggle with money allocation decisions. We understand the challenge administrators face when it comes to deciding how to spend money and deciding professional development priorities. Parkdale's experience suggests that dedicating money to basic resources, such as books and professional development, has a positive impact on student engagement.

Final Thoughts

This case study suggests that student engagement can be increased if middle school administrators actively create and foster a school-wide reading culture. As with any study, limitations do exist. This study examined Parkdale's approach to changing their culture. Because we only looked at one middle school, the results cannot automatically be generalized to a larger population. However, Stake's (1995) work suggests that case study research is a rigorous, accurate means for exploring qualitative questions. Interviews were conducted three years into the new principal's tenure, so there is some question as to whether the gains made by the middle school will be sustainable and permanent. Future research should follow this middle school to determine whether the increased engagement is ongoing.

Schools should implement strong reading programs because decades of research cite significant positive outcomes when students read every day. This study adds another layer to the existing research and reminds educators that devoting time to reading increases student engagement. When students are engaged, they learn more. The lessons learned from this case study are powerful. If building a school-wide culture of reading can positively influence more students' engagement, middle grades teachers will have yet another means of reaching their students.

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Appendix A
Student Interview Questions

1. What is your grade level, and how long have you been at this middle school?
2. Do you think of yourself as a reader? What does that mean to you?
3. If yes, when did you first start thinking of yourself as someone who reads regularly?
4. Does your current English teacher do SSR/SIR? What does that look like?
5. Do you enjoy SSR/SIR in your current English class? Why or why not?
6. How do you decide what to read?
7. How do you decide what you want to read? (If needed, prompt with "Does anyone make suggestions?)
8. Are you able to get a copy of books you want to read?
9. How does your teacher know what you have read?
10. Do you ever read in school besides in English class? If so, where and when?
11. Do your teachers other than your English teacher encourage/discourage you from reading? What does that look like?
12. Do you think that the principal or other administrators want you to read? Do they do anything that makes you think the way you do?
13. Did your other English teachers in middle school (or elementary for 6th graders) do SSR? If so, was it the same as you are doing now, or was it different?
14. If you were to list three things that affected how you read in school, what would they be?
15. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your reading in middle school?

Appendix B
English Teacher Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been teaching English at this middle school?
3. Has your teaching of reading changed over the last four years? If so, how?
4. If your teaching has changed, what were the main factors causing you to change?
5. Do you think that the current principal has impacted your teaching of reading? If so, how?
6. How would you describe the "reading culture" of this school?
7. Do you do SSR/SIR in your classroom? If so, what does it look like?
8. How much freedom do you give your students in their choice of books? In their physical arrangement during reading?
9. Do you do anything to assist your students in choosing books? If so, what?
10. What are the other source(s) of books for your students?
11. Are there enough books available to your students at school?
12. What "in-services" or other types of reading training have you had over the last three years? Has it been useful? If so, how?
13. What is your feeling about your students' attitude toward reading?
14. Do you have any further comments about the teaching of reading at this school?