A Study on the Leisure Reading Habits, Motivations, and Preferences of

Female African American Middle School Students

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Introduction

The reading achievement gap between African American and White students is well documented. In the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress report, the reading achievement gap between 8th grade White and African American students was 25 points (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2018.) While that figure represents a narrowing of the reading achievement gap over time, the fact is that African American students still trail behind all other student ethnicity groups reported in reading achievement, at all grade levels assessed (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2018.) Difficulty with reading and reading comprehension is an issue that negatively affects students in all areas of curriculum. When African American students lag behind their counterparts in this area, the playing field is never equal. Ladson-Billings (2006) reframes the achievement gap as an educational debt that the country owes to its minority students.

While there are many ideas about how to address the reading achievement gap, one that is of particular interest to as librarians and educators is the correlation between leisure reading and academic performance. Research indicates that there is a strong relationship between the amount of out of school reading a student does and their success with in school reading (Anderson, Fielding, & Wilson, 1988.) Students, however, report doing very little reading out of school. Anderson, Fielding and Wilson (1988) found that students reported spending less that 2% of their free time reading. In a study of middle school students, Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) found that only 17% read at all during the summer months. In studying the factors that motivated intermediate grade readers to engage in leisure reading, McKool (2007) found that exposure and access to literature that was deemed interesting to students was an important factor. Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) found that 71% of students in their study indicated that they obtained

reading material from the school library and 53% indicated that they obtained reading material from classrooms. Teachers and librarians can thus support and encourage leisure reading by suggesting and making available literature that is palatable for students (McKool, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

While there is research that explores the reading motivations and interests of middle school aged African American boys as readers (Tatum, 2006; Smith, 2011), the current body of literature on African American readers is limited in its exploration of African American girls of the same age group. In seeking to narrow the reading achievement gap for all African American students, there is a need to gather data from African American girls regarding their reading habits, motivations and preferences.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the leisure reading motivations and text preferences of African American female middle school students, with the hope that the data will lead to better and more informed support for these students from teachers, librarians and school administrators and add to the current body of literature surrounding African American female motivation reading.

Review of Related Literature

Reading Achievement Gap

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2013), an educational achievement gap "[...] occurs when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant." The literature shows an achievement gap in reading between African American and White students based results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, n.d.). The NAEP assessment measures several aspects of the reading task, including forming a general understanding, developing

interpretation, making reader/text connections and examining content and structure (Flowers, 2003). NAEP assessment results have shown a consistent educational achievement gap between African American students and White students (Flowers, 2003). The achievement gap has become synonymous with the idea of opportunity gap, acknowledging that the inequity in educational opportunity that exists for many minority students (Pitre, 2014).

Independent Reading and Achievement

According to Husband (2012) there is a relationship between the incidence of of students engaging in reading and their achievement in reading. The literature indicates a correlation between independent, leisure or out of school reading and academic achievement (Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989; Flowers, 2003). In a study of undergraduate students, students who were avid readers in high school showed better comprehension and nonverbal problem solving skills (Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993). In a study that compared a number of out of school activities students reported taking part in, Anderson, Wilson and Fielding (1988) found that reading had the "[...] strongest association with reading proficiency." While their study found that most children did very little outside reading, among students who did do outside reading there was a positive relationship between reading comprehension percentiles and the amount of time spent reading (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988). Reading books was also found to be a significant predictor of growth in reading proficiency (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988).

Motivations and Interest

Students are motivated to engage in leisure reading by various factors. Reluctant readers suggested that they would be more motivated to read if they had more access to and time to read self-selected reading at school (McKool, 2007). Anderson, Wilson & Fielding (1988) found that teachers were a significant influence on the amount of leisure reading that their students engage

in. In their study of middle school students, Hughes-Haskell and Rodge (2007) found that 70%

of students chose parents as a party that encouraged them to read, with 63% identifying teachers

as a party that encouraged them to read. Promoting interesting reading material by reading aloud

and discussing new titles was also referenced in the literature (McKool, 2007; Hughes-Hassell &

Rodge, 2007). Students indicated that the school library - 73% - and classroom - 53%- were

among the primary sources for their reading materials (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007). As

such, it is important to understand and provide reading material that is of interest to students

(Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; McKool, 2007; Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007).

Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) found that books accounted for 30% of student's

preferred reading material with magazines and comics being the preference. McKool (2007) also

found that reluctant readers had a preference for magazines and comics, but overall enjoyed

reading most about celebrities, sports figures and people or characters that were 'like them.'

Middle school girls were more likely than boys to read for pleasure and girls were more likely

than boys to respond that they enjoyed reading (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007.)

In a qualitative study, Smith (2011) explored the motivations and reading interest of

African American middle school boys. Among the findings was a connection between personal

interest and leisure reading and a desire for culturally relevant texts.

Research Questions

In an attempt to determine what motivates female African American middle school students to

read for leisure, how often they do so and what they prefer to read, this study will investigate the

following questions:

1. How often do female African American middle school students read out of school?

2. What kind of reading / topics do female African American middle school students read away from school?

3. What would motivate female African American middle school students to do more out of school reading?

4. Do female African American middle school students feel that their school has reading material available for your use that you find interesting and engaging?

Significance of the Study

This study will add to the body of literature regarding motivations and interests for leisure reading of middle school students by adding the voices of an underrepresented population in the current literature, African American girls. The findings will be valuable to librarians, media specialists and teachers in understanding what motivates African American middle school girls to read outside of school and how to promote that practice, as well as giving librarians specific information to make informed selection decisions that will serve this population, with an eye toward improving reading achievement.

Method

This study will attempt identify the leisure reading habits and motivations of African American middle school girls in a suburban school district.

Participants

This research will use qualitative design to investigate the reading motivations and text preferences of African American middle school girls. This will be a purposeful sampling with

the intention of giving a voice to this population. The sample size will be 15 African American middle school girl students from 5 middle school campuses in a suburban school district. The sample will include one student each in grades six, seven, and eight for a total of 3 students per campus. The names and contact information of potential participants will be obtained with the assistance of library/media specialists on each campus. Participants will be required to obtain parental permission to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

The research questions for this study will be answered by one-on-one interviews with participants. The data will be collected through in person interviews with each participant. The interview will contain multiple sections. The questions will be scripted open-ended questions. The first section will be basic demographic questions about each participant that will include gender, age, and race. The second section will be a scripted interview that will address the research questions, with appropriate selected probing questions as needed to elicit a fuller response.

Design/Procedure

Qualitative research seeks to understand social phenomena from the perspective of participants in a particular social setting (Glesne, 2006). To understand the text preferences and leisure reading preferences of African American middle school girls, a 2 part scripted interview protocol will be utilized to gather qualitative data. Interviews will take place in a private location on each participating campus. Interviews will be audio recorded. The researcher will take notes during the interviews and then follow with field notes immediately after each interview. Participants will be identified by a pseudonym to protect their identity. The research

would last approximately 2 months. The proposed steps in the procedure are outlined in Table

1.1

Table 1.1

Research Steps

Research Proposal approval

IRB process via TAMU-Commerce

Permission granted from school district and principals

Study introduced to participants and consents received

Interviews conducted

Interviews transcribed

Data coding and analysis

Conclusions draw and reported

Note. IRB = Institutional Review Board, TAMU-Commerce = Texas A&M University -
Commerce, Adapted from Smith, 2011.

Data Analysis

The proposed data analysis would be an inductive process. After transcription and

careful review of the notes and transcribed interviews, the researcher will begin the process of

categorizing themes and creating concept maps that will help narrow categories for coding. Each

transcribed interview would then be entered into a qualitative data analysis program to assist

with manipulating the data for coding. The researcher would then seek to distill the subsequent

codes into a smaller number of themes that could be used to develop the report of the findings.

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