Problem Statement Narrative

Setting:

I teach at a public magnet school in Philadelphia, PA. Part of a recent small

schools movement in the city, the school has a maximum capacity of 500 learners. As a

magnet, the school draws from approximately 70 middle schools across the city and its

surrounding suburbs. The majority of learners come to the school having attended their

district-assigned neighborhood school, but we have a broad range of learners coming

from charter, magnet, private, and home-schooling as well. As can likely be inferred

from the profile of our feeder schools, our learners' economic backgrounds vary widely.

Sixty-two percent of our learners qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

The remaining students could be considered to live at or above the middle-class

economic mark. Ethnically, the school is reflective of Philadelphia's own ethnic make-up

with approximately 45 percent African American, 35 percent white and 10 percent

Latino, 5 percent Asian and the remaining 5 percent composed of a mix of other ethnic

identities including some recent immigrants.

The school operates under an inclusionary push-in model of special education

with teachers modifying lessons and assignments as needed for those learners

identified with learning differences. Some learners also attend a Study Skills course

twice weekly for additional support around key academic concepts, organizational skills

and other learning supports. Learners with identified learning differences make up

approximately 5-7 percent of the school's population.

Though the school has a learner population of nearly 5 percent identified as

active English Language Learners (ELL), no district funding is provided for support of

those learners. Faculty-driven professional development around the challenges specific to ELL is conducted as needed.

Classes at the school are capped at 32 learners. In grades 9 through 11, learners are grouped or "streamed" for their English, history, science and elective courses. Special care is given to making certain learners' streams are heterogeneously composed across gender, ethnic, socio-economic, geographic and ability lines. Students streams are broken according to performance for their math and international languages classes based on previously completed classes.

The school is built around an inquiry-driven, project-based model with each unit of study framed by teachers using backward design. Learners work toward answering the school-based essential questions of "How do we learn?" "What can we create?" and "What does it mean to lead?" At each grade level, learners encounter and work toward answering grade-wide, cross-disciplinary essential questions on the topics of identity, systems, change and creation in grades 9 through 12 respectively. At each grade level, teacher unit plans draw their inspiration for unit-level essential questions from the grade-level questions.

Designed with an eye toward privileging teacher-learner contact time as well teacher preparation time, the school's schedule consists of 65-minute classes on a modified-block schedule. Each core academic subject meets four times weekly with electives meeting twice weekly. Teachers have two planning periods in their schedule in addition to their lunch period. The school's schedule is designed so that all teachers within a given discipline have at least one common preparation period within a week in which to meet and discuss planning, content issues or collaborate in other ways. In

addition to their traditional courses, teachers are responsible for a 20-learner advisory group that meets twice each week for 45 minutes. This advisory group remains together across all four years of a learner's time at the school and works to help acclimate learners to the school's unique design as well as acting as a safe space for discussion and assistance with personal and academic issues.

Finally, teachers come together each Wednesday for a staff / professional development meeting lasting approximately 2 hours. Learners are released at this time to attend programming at the school's partner institution, volunteer / work with a community partner or work toward their senior capstone project dependent on each learner's grade level. Within these meetings, faculty may discuss individual student issues, meet as grade-level cohorts, engage in shared study in professional learning communities or any other range of activities and topics.

Problem Statement and Objectives:

My problem is that 30% of my eleventh grade students to not complete reading from assigned texts. As much of the course's other assignments and discussion as well as the growth of students' ideas comes from interaction with read texts, a decrease in interaction with texts leads to a correlative decrease in students' abilities to perform in class. Ancillary to students' inability to perform reading-related tasks, a lack of individual performance also leads to a breakdown in class structures and systems as all participants are not able to inform the building of the community nor contribute to the augmentation of the class knowledge base. Not only does this prevent the remaining 60% of students from learning from the thinking of their non-reading peers, it requires those who have read to contribute to a greater extent making up for the gaps. This can

create additional stress within the climate and relationships of the classroom as reading

students begin to resent the inertia of their non-reading peers. Furthermore, and

perhaps most importantly, these non-reading students develop greater gaps in

understanding and ability, which will work against them as they take part in other

classes as well as state-mandated standardized tests.

Therefore, the performance objectives for this inquiry project are as follows:

1. Increase eleventh grade completion of reading assignments to 100%.

2. Determine student preferences regarding content and setting as they apply to

   reading.

3. Create classroom structures that honor student reading preferences.

References

Brozo, W., & Flynt, E. (2008). Motivating Students to Read in the Content Classroom:

Six Evidence-Based Principles. *The Reading Teacher*, *62*(2), 172-4. doi:

10.1598/RT.62.2.9

The authors again make the case for increasing choice as a means to motivating

student reading. Though the article is designed to engender motivation for

reading in disciplines outside the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, it's

information stands true. Some pieces act as gentle reminders for common best

practices within the ELA classroom, others such as finding ways to connect

traditional texts to students' existing multiliteracies shed new light on possible

approaches. The authors argue the need not only for allowing choice, but for

providing a rich variety of texts from which to choose. If this project is designed

for increasing student readership, then the authors' point of a diverse, accessible

library may prove key. Also suggested is the creation of student-to-student

partnerships within the reading process as a key to student motivation. The

social experience, the authors argue, can push students to expand their reading

horizons. These tactics for motivating readers outside the ELA classroom will

likely prove equally helpful and effective within the ELA classroom.

Duncan, S. (2010). Instilling a Lifelong Love of Reading. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, *46*(2),

90-3. Retrieved from Education Full Text database

Duncan culls several decades' worth of research to provide her readership with

the basic best practices in helping students become lifelong readers. Of

particular note are Duncan's suggestion of providing students choice of reading

materials as a way to help them invest in their own reading. She also calls on the practice of Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) within the classroom as a way of putting a premium on the act of reading. Duncan also unexpected calls on teachers to read aloud to their students beyond the primary grades as studies show this can build motivation to read within students. This source is helpful in listing research-supported approaches to motivating reluctant readers. It also serves as a nexus for follow-up reading on those approaches needing greater clarification.

Flowerday, T., Schraw, G., & Stevens, J. (2004). The Role of Choice and Interest in Reader Engagement. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *72*(2), 93-114. doi: 10.3200/JEXE.72.2.93-114

The work of Flowerday, Schraw and Stevens delves more deeply into the realm of choice than simply suggesting choice can have a positive effect on student engagement and reading. Specifically, the authors findings suggest situation choice built on the qualities of novelty, curiosity and salient informational content. The implications of this research suggest that building a classroom practice around student choice should also include some sort of attempt to excite students about the reading possibilities they encounter. In short, an element of play should be curated. For the purposes of this inquiry project this approach could well improve the excitement of reluctant readers around texts that contain familiar words, but speak to ideas and stories those readers have not yet encountered. Taken with other research, this also implies the need to make

certain classroom and school libraries are well stocked with book choices that appeal to a wide swath of interests and appear novel.

Gable, C. (2007). The Freedom to Select. *American Libraries*, *38*(3), 38. Retrieved from Education Full Text database

Gable's passionate argument for the neutrality of librarians when considering the book selections of their patrons raises important questions for a teacher considering a choice-driven approach to student classroom reading. While many researchers note the importance of students selecting texts that are not too far above or below their assessed reading levels, few speak to the implications of teacher opinion when assisting students with text selection. Mindful of Gable's argument, I must be careful not to belittle or bruise students' book choices based on content or authorship. Furthermore, Gable raises an important point when suggesting those who send library patrons the direction of bookstores to find "lesser" titles are ignoring the possible economic limitations would-be readers could face. If moving toward a choice-based system, I must be sure my classroom and the school's library shelves are stocked with texts representing as diverse a reading profile as possible or risk alienating reluctant readers with the implication the books they're looking for are not worth reading.

Lapp, D., & Fisher, D. (2009). It's All About the Book: Motivating Teens to Read. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *52*(7), 556-61. doi: 10.1598/JAAL.52.7.1

Lapp and Fisher discuss a classroom setting incredibly similar to the object of the inquiry project. Their use of framing thematic questions provided their students with anchor points to which they could return to examine how what they were

reading related to what they were attempting to learn. The authors also present

the idea of having students choose from a list of books for independent reading

and combining that with texts read in small groups. This idea of choice within a

framework points to the idea of creating greater student investment in their

reading. Also of note is the idea of teacher read-alouds and think-alouds to

model positive reading practices to underdeveloped readers. These tactics could

certainly prove useful within my own classroom to help whet the reading

appetites of those students most uncertain of how to approach new texts. Most

importantly, the authors surmise their students became more willing to read due

to peer support, and they believe that support led their students to seek even

broader reading options.

Lu Ya-Ling., & Gordon, C. (2008). The Effects of Free Choice on Student Learning: A

Study of Summer Reading. *School Libraries Worldwide*, *14*(1), 38-55. Retrieved

from Education Full Text database

Though centering on a summer reading program, this study notes the difficulties

of engaging low-achieving student in reading. A key element of note was the

summer reading program's voluntary status. Perhaps, these same tactics of

choice and project-based learning surrounding student reading would prove more

effect during the school year given the structure of a classroom environment.

Also of note were the reservations of participating teachers around the idea of

both student choice and students reading for pleasure. It points to the need

within this project to be aware of how colleagues may react negatively to more

creative and progressive strategies for improving the readership of reluctant

readers. Though this study was not keenly focused on the subject of this project, some of the findings reflect possible elements to be considered as the inquiry progresses.

Mertzman, T. (2007). Interruptions and Miscues: How Teachers Interrupt During Reading. *Journal of Reading Education*, *32*(3), 20-7. Retrieved from Education Full Text database

Mertzman's study focused on primary grade reading and writing instruction. Specifically, the study reviewed the types of interruptions made by teachers when students exhibited miscues in their reading and writing. While this is not entirely aligned with the purposes of this inquiry project, one element of Mertzman's findings is worth noting. In comparing teachers' professed reasons and beliefs for the outcomes of their lesson plans to the pedagogy underlying their interruptions, Mertzman found the two to be at odds. Frequently, teachers who professed a strong belief in pointing out students' positive work would interrupt to point out negative aspects of miscues or poorly used reading strategies. In my own practice, I must be certain that my approach aimed at increasing reader engagement do not work at cross purposes with my goals of building stronger proficiency regarding my students' reading. One possible carryover from Mertzman's work is the idea of interrupting good reading to recognize and name it. This could prove a strong factor in improving the motivation to read.

Ratcliffe, A. (2009). Reading For Pleasure? What A Concept!. *The Education Digest*, *74*(6), 23-4. Retrieved from Education Full Text database

Ratcliffe's Reading Round Table approach encourages student choice in the same manner other authors do. One difference within Ratcliffe's approach is the one-on-one connections between students and reading. While others encourage the literature circle approach with 4 or 5 students interacting, Ratcliffe provides students with the opportunity to have more intimate discussions of their reading. She also opens up the reading prospects by allowing her students to select any book within the library. While others suggest students selecting from a list, Ratcliffe's approach gives students greater and arguably more authentic choice in their reading. Her estimation of 85% reader engagement falls short of the goals of this project, but still speaks to the program's effectiveness in moving students to read. One minor point that proved interesting was Ratcliffe's acknowledgement of the dryness of some opening chapters and her setting the goal of at least 25 pages for her students before they decide whether they will continue with a book.

Tomlinson, C.A. (2005). How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Tomlinson's work on the impact and need of differentiation in the classroom relates strongly to the idea of changing strategies to excite and engage all students in reading. Her insights around planning for differentiation will likely prove key if practices are to be changed and greater student choice is to be encouraged. For student choice of texts, Tomlinson's guide to differentiated assessment will prove particularly helpful in collecting data on student learning from reading varied texts. As a teacher used to facilitating class discussion

around a shared text, I will use the author's notes on the role of the teacher in a

differentiated classroom as a guide for changing my conceptions of who I am and

what I am to do as a teacher. Additionally, Tomlinson's descriptions of the

operations of a differentiated classroom will prove helpful in visualizing the flow

and function of a reader-empowered space.

Trudel, H. (2007). Making Data-Driven Decisions: Silent Reading. *The Reading*

Teacher, *61*(4), 308-15. doi: 10.1598/RT.61.4.3

Trudel continues the theme of the importance of student choice in developing a

lifelong attachment to reading. She takes the research a step further, though and

looks at the implications of where students read. Specifically, Trudel points to the

effects of silent sustained reading on varying aspects of students' reading

profiles. She also points to the need to add structure to the freedom inherent in

silent sustained reading. Trudel's suggestions are of particular value in

consideration of the objectives of this project. Her note that students should

participate in reflection on their selections is a natural fit with the core values of

my school and provides and element of accountability that will help to determine

effectiveness of the time spent reading. Trudel's suggestion of a structured

independent reading model seems more in keeping with the needs of my

students and accounts for a greater range of collaboration around the texts being

encountered.

Worthy, J., Patterson, E., & Salas, R. (2002). "More than just reading": the human factor

in reaching resistant readers. *Reading Research and Instruction*, *41*(2), 177-201.

Retrieved from Education Full Text database

Patterson and Salas present an interesting, though not surprising, argument for the importance of personal interaction in the development of reluctant readers. In their research, the authors found the tailoring of reading instruction to the unique needs and interests of each student helped to pull that student into greater connection to reading. When taken with an understanding of the importance of student choice and the research behind silent sustained reading or independent reading, the authors' work points to the importance of helping students select texts in which they can see themselves and find specific relevance to their own lives. Additionally, any writing or discussion of the texts outside of that reading should include a driven attempt or opportunity for students to make specific detailed connections to their own interests and lives. This research proves extremely relevant to the topic of inquiry being considered.

Wutz, J., & Wedwick, L. (2005). BOOKMATCH: Scaffolding book selection for independent reading. *The Reading Teacher*, *59*(1), 16-32. doi: 10.1598/RT.59.1.3

Focusing their study on primary classrooms, the authors still encounter and elaborate on ideas of relevance to those teaching reading at the secondary level. While other researchers are looking to the role and importance of student choice in reading engagement, Wutz and Wedwick discuss a systematic framework to matching their students with appropriate and engaging texts. The BOOKMATCH system uses a series of threshold questions to help students select texts that will be positive fits for their abilities and interests. What's more, the author's illuminate the idea of posting guidelines for selecting texts in the classroom. This

not only frees up teacher time, but it allows students to gain access to assistance

without requiring them to open themselves up to feelings of inadequacy when

asking for assistance. Furthermore, this approach could be helpful within a

secondary classroom by helping students to build their vocabulary around

aspects of text they encounter or seek out when selecting new reading materials.

Advocated Solutions

Solution/Intervention 1: Allow student choice in text selection

This strategy will take heed of the bulk of the research around motivating students reading while working against the traditional concepts of the schedule and structure of an English Language Arts classroom. Rather than teacher assigned texts or choosing from a list of texts drafted by the teacher, students will be allowed to select the texts they find most interesting. This will allow students to have intrinsic motivation to read the selected texts and more fully invest them in the reading process. Their individual preferences will guide their decisions rather than teacher prescription.

Key anticipated barriers to this approach include providing a suitable range of texts for meeting the tastes of the more than 60 students in the grade 11 classes, formalizing accountability measures around student reading and engaging students in situational choice.

In anticipation of these barriers, several steps will be taken. The school librarian and the school's parent group will be contacted. With the librarian, I will coordinate trips to the library for students to explore its offerings and select texts that pique their interests. Working with the parent group, I'll organize a plan for procuring additional texts for the classroom. These will include a book drive as well as the procurement of funds to purchase additional texts. To keep students accountable for their reading, they will meet in small groups and one-on-one with other students to discuss their texts. The small groups will be organized around genres while the one-on-one interactions will be randomly matched. Following their group and peer meetings as well as reading time, students will draft reflective journal entries to record what they've read and/or talked

about. These journals will be collected and reviewed for tracking of reader development.

Finally, to generate interest, increase awareness and inspire situational choice, I will

create brief book commercials advertising non-traditional or lesser-known texts to

students. These commercials will be featured in class as well as on the class online

learning management (OLM) platform. As the term progresses, students will be

encouraged to create their own book commercials as well.

Solution/Intervention 2: Student Surveys

This strategy will begin to collect data on the choices students make in selecting

the texts they read and use that data to shape the structure and schedule of the

classroom environment. Students will participate in formal and informal surveys to

inform the creation of a reading atmosphere that appeals to the reading appetites of all

learners and draws out the most reluctant readers.

Research has shown improved understanding of student reading preferences

allows for more informed pedagogical decisions, builds a sense of reading ownership

for students and proves to students their reading preferences are valued. Inherently

problematic in this strategy are the barriers of building structures to facilitate informal

surveying of student reading interests, compiling the results of those surveys and

communicating those results to students.

To neutralize these obstacles, several approaches will be utilized. First a

program similar to Wutz and Wedwick's BOOKMATCH (2005) will be designed to aid

students asking themselves what factors they should take into consideration when

selecting a new text. This will also begin to transfer the onus of text selection to the

readers from the teacher in a manageable and systematized manner. Upon selecting or

finishing their time with a text, students will complete a Google Form online. Questions on the form will focus on concrete information such as book title, genre, etc. as well as shifting information such as students' reasons for selecting the texts and what they look for in a new book. These survey results will be compiled and examined for trends. Periodically, I will examine the results and create infographics around trends in book selection and post them to the class' OLM for student consideration. Students will be encouraged to reflect on where they would place themselves in relation to the posted information.

Solution/Intervention 3: Feeback Loop

This strategy's implementation will begin the collection of data to insure the creation of classroom structures that honor student reading preferences. Most specifically, it will create individual one-on-one mentoring relationships with student readers. Specifically, this strategy will collect personal information about students as readers and create feelings of safety and comfort when reading in the classroom.

Possible problems with the implementation of this strategy include the increase in necessary human resources as well as the difficulty in building a uniform approach to collecting information garnered from these relationships. Fortunately, several possibilities exist for combating these problems.

First, the school's Student Assistant Teacher program will be engaged. A senior student assigned to each section of the grade 11 classes will be assigned a small group of grade 11 students with whom to meet individually. The school's parent volunteer group will also be contacted in hopes of garnering parents willing to volunteer one hour per week to meeting with a similar small group of grade 11 students. Finally, interns

completing course requirements within the classroom will be organized to meet with individuals from a small group of grade 11 students. Guides will be developed outlining best practices for engaging students as readers as well as suggestions of possible discussion topics. Online files will be created for each grade 11 student. These files will hold the information from each meeting with students' reading mentors. Following meetings, mentors will complete a Google Form outlining the progress of the meeting. I will then move the results to the appropriate student folder. When issues of room organization and lesson design are considered, these folders and their contents will be consulted in order to make decisions to best meet the needs of all student readers.

The implementation of these research-supported strategies will lead to the increase eleventh grade completion of reading assignments to 100%. The collection of data these strategies require will help determine student preferences regarding content and setting as they apply to reading and create classroom structures that honor student reading preferences. Taken together, these outcomes will lead to improved abilities as readers, writers and thinkers for grade 11 students.