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Brandi Gribble Mathers
Geneva College

Amanda J. Stern
Geneva College

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Café Culture: Promoting Empowerment and Pleasure in Adolescent Literacy Learning

Brandi Gribble Mathers, Ph.D.

Geneva College

Amanda J. Stern

Geneva College

Abstract

The 160 third, seventh, and eleventh-graders involved in this study agreed, almost unanimously, that reading was “important.” Participants cited the empowering benefits of reading as they justified this opinion. However, with regards to the enjoyment of reading, fewer middle and high school participants reported “liking” reading than their elementary counterparts and fewer reported reading in their free time.

One solution to this dilemma involves providing adolescent students with a context devoted solely to pleasure reading. In doing so, educators can look to an institution that boasts both an historical link to literate culture and current-day pop culture appeal: the coffeehouse. When combined with more traditional forms of literacy instruction, the coffeehouse provides a viable model for promoting both empowerment and pleasure in adolescent literacy learning.

Introduction

Most educators would agree that the ability to read is empowering. After all, success in everyday life—whether it be work, school, or community involvement—demands individuals who are “highly skilled in reading for understanding” (Learning Point Associates, 2005, NCLB Act, ¶ 2). The long-term empowering benefits of reading are numerous, and yet, as Newkirk (2003) points out, “We all regularly avoid tasks that do not give us some form of pleasure, no matter how beneficial they

might be for the future” (p. 33). Furthermore, not only do people regularly avoid unpleasant tasks, but they seek out other, more pleasurable activities with which to fill their time (Nell, 1988).

Indeed, this phenomenon plays itself out when it comes to adolescents and reading. Although most adolescents *can* read, many do not find it pleasurable, and, therefore, avoid it when they can (Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; Strommen & Mates, 2004), choosing to fill their time with other activities. This disturbing trend makes the issue of reading for pleasure and its link to motivation and engagement an important one, despite the argument that “reading for pleasure is a ‘cuddly’ activity that some people like to indulge in but that is essentially without further merit” (Clark & Rumbold, 2006, p. 5) and/or the misconception that issues related to motivation represent “the opposite of having high standards” (Goodson, as cited in Cassidy, Garrett, & Barrera, 2006, p. 35). Such claims hold no merit; after all, much research exists linking motivation and engagement to increased learning (eg: Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Teale & Gambrell, 2007) thus making pleasure reading an important issue in adolescent literacy.

Our research was initially guided by two general research questions. First, we wanted to know how middle and high school students’ beliefs about reading differed from their elementary counterparts’. Second, we were interested in the reasons elementary, middle, and high school students gave for their beliefs about reading. However, as we began to examine students’ justifications for their beliefs, we became interested in the idea that motivation for reading could spring from a variety of sources, including the desire for “empowerment” and “pleasure.” The emergence of these two categories caused us to consider the importance of promoting both sources of motivation within adolescents’ school-based reading experiences. Finally, further reading and contemplation led us to consider the role an institution that boasts both an historical link to literate culture and current-day pop culture appeal, the coffeehouse, might play in achieving such a goal.

Conceptual Frame

A joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the National Middle School Association reports that, while elementary students fare quite well in international comparisons of reading performance, “the data indicate that the level of student performance drops off in the middle and high school years” (International Reading Association, 2002, ¶ 4). Not only do scores drop as students reach adolescence, but attitudes worsen (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). McKenna,

Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) report that, on average, students' attitudes towards reading "begin at a relatively positive point in Grade 1 and end in relative indifference by Grade 6" (p. 952). The fact that scores drop and attitudes worsen leads educators to ask the question, "Why?" Ivey and Broaddus (2001) believe the answer lies in a "mismatch between what students need and the instruction they likely receive" (p. 353). A review of the literature exposes various aspects of this mismatch, all of which point to the same end result: draining the pleasure out of reading.

Mismatch #1: Adolescents are Social, But School is Not

Santa (2006) contends that adolescents have a natural talent for things social. Consequently, school reading practices which honor the social nature of learning are likely to engage students (Casey, 2008/2009; Wigfield, 2000). However, practices which devalue the importance of things social often lead to resistance towards reading (Lenters, 2006). Adolescent resistance abounds, not surprisingly, since teacher-centered language arts classrooms are plentiful. Indeed, Ivey (1999) reports that, in her survey of sixth-grade readers, peers and social learning did not emerge as pivotal components of reading classrooms. These findings lead Ivey and Broaddus (2000) to surmise that "effective strategies for social literacy learning may be rarely used in middle school classrooms" (p. 71). Failure to recognize this social "mismatch" contributes to adolescents' resistance towards in-school reading (Lenters, 2006).

Mismatch #2: Students Like to Choose, But Teachers Like to Dictate

With adolescence comes the desire for increased autonomy. Ironically, however, the instructional environment found in many middle and high school classrooms provides little choice in students' school-based reading (Lenters, 2006). Such an environment is an anomaly since, as Reeves (2004) notes, "Younger people and older people get to choose what to read, only in middle school and high school are people's reading choices so controlled" (p. 242). Indeed, 80% of the elementary students in Gambrell's (1996) motivation studies revealed that the books they enjoyed most were ones they had picked themselves. Similarly, Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) report that their elementary participants cited "choice" and "personal interest" as factors that got them excited about reading. The importance of choice and personal interest does not diminish as students enter adolescence; Lapp and Fisher (2009) found that high-school participants were motivated to read when "their voices and interests were driving the text selections and conversations" (p. 560). Likewise, the middle-schoolers in Pflaum and Bishop's (2004) work identified "choice" and "pursuing personal preferences" as conditions that led to engagement

in silent reading. And yet, Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) reveal that the materials preferred by their sixth-grade participants have “traditionally been scorned by literary critics and many educators” (p. 23). The discrepancy between students’ desire to choose and the lack of choice actually afforded them in school represents a second “mismatch” in the teaching of adolescent literacy.

Mismatch #3: Students Need Time for Reading, But the Schedule Does Not Permit It

“Choice” serves as a powerful motivator for reading engagement. Ironically, however, at a time in students’ lives when choice in reading, and the autonomy it represents, takes on a new level of importance, free-reading is often dropped from the curriculum (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Scheduling becomes an issue (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001) and other classroom tasks take precedence. Compounding the problem is the fact that most of the time adolescents *do* have for reading involves being graded. Heins (1980) contends that it is the job of educators to “generate a positive pleasure in reading,” but that the process of “extracting” (p. 262) answers from readers ruins the whole process. Atwell (2007) concurs, “Every day, smart, well-meaning teachers erect instructional roadblocks between their students and the pure pleasure of the personal art of reading” (§ 4). The lack of time and space for free-choice pleasure reading represents yet another “mismatch” between the needs of adolescent readers and the schooling they receive.

“At-Risk Situational Contexts”

Guthrie (1996) contends that students want to be successful, stating, “We know that students bring the desire for involvement, curiosity, social interaction, challenge, and enhancement of self-efficacy into school activities.” He asserts, however, “If the context supports these motivational goals, students become intensively engaged. If the context suppresses them, children become disaffected” (p. 418). Unfortunately, the “mismatches” described previously do little to create contexts which support student engagement. Rather, they can lead to the creation of what Moore (1996) refers to as “at-risk situational contexts” (p. 26). Such contexts cause students to think of reading as a pragmatic school-based activity (Pitcher, et al., 2007) rather than a pleasurable personal pursuit. In some instances, the prospect of the empowerment that comes from pragmatic school-based activities—for example good grades, admission to college, and the eventual promise of gainful employment—may motivate students to read. Equally important, yet under-utilized, however, is the

motivating force of pleasure. We believe educators would be wise to consider aspects of empowerment *and* pleasure as they create the educational contexts which facilitate the development of adolescents' reading identities. We also believe that the coffeehouse, with its historical link to literate culture and its current-day pop culture appeal, provides a viable model for promoting both empowerment and pleasure in adolescent literacy learning. This article will share our vision for that model.

Purpose of the Study

We were initially guided by two general research questions. First, we wanted to know how middle and high school students' beliefs about reading differed from their elementary counterparts'. Second, we were interested in the reasons elementary, middle, and high school students gave for their beliefs about reading. However, as we began to examine students' justifications for their beliefs, we became interested in the idea that motivation for reading could originate from a variety of sources, including the desire for "empowerment" and "pleasure." The emergence of these two categories led us to consider the importance of promoting both sources of motivation within adolescents' school-based literacy learning and to consider the role of the coffeehouse in accomplishing such an objective.

Participants and Research Setting

Our research took place in a small urban district located in the north-eastern United States. The district had an enrollment of approximately 1,100 students, kindergarten through twelfth grade. Seventeen percent of the students were African American while 83% were Caucasian. Thirty-three percent of the students were on free or reduced-cost lunch status.

A total of 160 students participated in the project. Fifty-three of the participants were members of three different self-contained third-grade classrooms. Fifty-nine were students of three seventh-grade language arts classes. The remaining 48 participants represented three eleventh-grade English classes.

Procedures and Data Analysis

Table 1. *Original Reading Questionnaire Items*

Question 1	Are you a good reader?
Question 2	Do you like to read?
Question 3	Do you read at school?
Question 4	Do you read at home?
Question 5	Is reading important?
Question 6	Is reading hard?

This research involved an in-class administration of a brief literacy questionnaire (see Table 1) at each of the three grade levels. The questionnaire, which was administered in each classroom room during a Language Arts or English period, included six items related to reading. Each item consisted of two parts. In the first part, students were simply asked to circle “yes” or “no” in response to questions such as, “Do you like to read?” and “Is reading important?” In the second part of each item, students were asked to explain, in writing, the reasons for their yes/no answers. Students completed the questionnaires anonymously.

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, percentages were calculated for the yes/no component of each item. Next, a content analysis of the open-ended written component was conducted. As students’ written responses were read and reread, patterns related to the research questions emerged, thus forming categories for coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A database was organized for all coded responses. As responses to individual items were examined in relationship to the other items on the questionnaire, two distinct themes emerged: the role of power and the role of pleasure in literacy learning.

With the emergence of these two themes, the content analysis became more focused. Consequently, two of the original six questionnaire items were eliminated because they did not provide insight into the role of power or pleasure in literacy learning. The remaining four items included: “Do you like to read?” “Is reading important?” “Do you read at home?” and “Do you read at school?”

Results

The content analysis of student's written responses yielded two distinct themes: the role of power and the role of pleasure in literacy learning. Results are reported according to these two themes.

Reading is Empowering

Table 2. Percentage of affirmative answers at each grade level ($N = 160$)

Question	Grade 3 n=53	Grade 7 n=59	Grade 11 n=48
Is reading important?	98.11	91.53	97.92
Do you read at school?	96.23	94.92	91.67
Do you like to read?	75.47	57.63	58.33
Do you read at home?	92.45	62.71	54.17

Table 2 summarizes participants' responses to two questionnaire items: (1) Is reading important? and (2) Do you read at school? In both cases, the percentage of affirmative answers remained consistently high across grade levels.

Is Reading Important?

When asked if reading was important, approximately 98% of the third, 92% of the seventh, and 98% of the eleventh graders answered "yes." An analysis of students' written responses revealed two major justifications for this belief: reading is important because (1) it makes you smart, and (2) it helps you succeed in life.

Reading makes you smart. Students justified the belief that reading was important by claiming that reading and intelligence were linked. Approximately 52% of the third, 52% of the seventh, and 60% of the eleventh graders referenced this connection. For example, a seventh grader commented, "It helps you get smarter." Likewise, an eleventh-grade student replied, "Reading keeps your mind strong and sharp and may give you more information than if you did not read."

Not only did students claim that reading makes a person smarter, generally speaking, but they also claimed that reading improves a person's literacy skills, specifically. For instance, a third-grade participant responded, "Reading is important because you can't write if you can't read because how the heck are you going to know how to spell it." Similarly, a seventh-grade student replied, "I think reading

is important because you learn new words, know new stories, and can read more fluently.”

Reading helps you succeed in life. Students also justified the belief that reading was important by pointing to ways reading can help a person achieve success in life. Approximately 33% of the third, 41% of the seventh, and 32% of the eleventh graders cited examples of the connection between reading and success in life, including success in school and beyond. For instance, in reference to success in school, a seventh grader commented, “You need a good reading grade to pass high school or go to college.” Likewise, an eleventh-grade participant replied, “It is very important for your future maybe in college.”

In addition to linking reading with success in school, students also linked reading with success in life beyond school. For example, one third-grade participant explained, “You need to read so you can be a nurse or something else.” Similarly, a seventh-grader responded, “If you can’t read, you can’t get a job. You can’t read the menu at a restaurant, can’t drive!”

Do You Read at School?

Just as the percentage of affirmative answers remained consistently high across grade levels with regard to the question, “Is reading important?”, so too did the percentage of affirmative answers remain consistently high with regard to the question, “Do you read at school?” Approximately 96% of the third, 95% of the seventh, and 92% of the eleventh graders reported that they read at school. Students’ explanations ranged from positive, to neutral, to negative. For instance, a seventh-grade student commented, “I like to read at school when I am in like a little group of five or four.” An eleventh grader reacted, “I’m at school, what choice do I have?”

Summary: The Empowering Benefits of Reading

Across grade levels, students’ responses consistently highlighted the empowering benefits of reading. For instance, students articulated a belief in the connection between reading and intelligence. They also claimed that reading helps a person achieve success—both in school and in life beyond the classroom. Whether or not they *liked* to read aside, students reported believing that reading was important and were able to give concrete examples of its connection to personal empowerment.

Reading is Pleasurable...Sometimes

Table 2 also summarizes participants’ responses to two additional items: (1) Do you like to read? and (2) Do you read at home? In both cases, the percentage of affirmative answers declined across grade levels.

Do You Like to Read?

When asked if they liked to read, approximately 75% of the third graders answered “yes,” while only 58% of the seventh and 58% of the eleventh graders did. An analysis of students’ written responses revealed three major justifications for their reactions. These justifications revolved around three sets of considerations: (1) affective factors—those related to feeling and emotion, (2) educational factors—those related to learning and intelligence, and (3) time factors—those related to the amount of time it takes to read and to other options for filling one’s time.

Affective factors. Across all grade levels, students who reported liking to read, as well as students who did not, underscored the role of affective factors in determining their responses. For example, of the students who reported liking to read, approximately 61% of the third, 75% of the seventh, and 90% of the eleventh graders explained that factors such as “personal interest” and “choice” impacted their beliefs about reading. One third-grade participant highlighted the importance of personal interest, explaining, “I like to read because sometimes the book can be about history or it can be a fantasy or a legend or a fable. They are all very interesting.” An eleventh grader commented on the impact of choice, saying, “I really only like to read books that I pick out. A lot of the books we read for school aren’t really like my kind of books. I really enjoy science fiction.”

Of the students who reported not liking to read, 77% of the third, 68% of the seventh, and 37% of the eleventh graders referenced affective factors, including “personal interest” and “choice,” as they discussed their opinions. For instance, a seventh-grader wrote, “I don’t really like to read. I will usually start a book but never finish it because I sometimes don’t find the book interesting.” Finally, an eleventh-grade participant explained, “I’ll read magazines and stuff but not books.”

Educational factors. Across all grade levels, students who reported liking to read pointed to educational factors as they justified their feelings; approximately 31% of the third, 13% of the seventh, and 7% of the eleventh-grade participants explained that they liked to read because reading was linked to increased intelligence. For instance, one third grader explained, “I like to read because it is fun, you get to learn things and get facts.” Similarly, an eleventh-grade student commented, “Reading provides me with information that I do not know as well as expanding my vocabulary.” Educational considerations were not mentioned by students who reported not liking to read.

Time factors. The issue of “time” came up most frequently in the responses of students who reported not liking to read; approximately 31% of the third, 16% of the seventh, and 16% of the eleventh graders who did not like to read referenced

time. For example, a seventh grader explained, “I usually do not have time and don’t like to just read.” Likewise, an eleventh-grade participant revealed, “I do not like to read. It is just time consuming and I would rather do something more interactive.”

Do You Read at Home?

Just as the percentage of affirmative answers declined across grade levels with regard to the question, “Do you like to read?”, so too did the percentage of affirmative answers decline with regard to the question, “Do you read at home?” While approximately 93% of the third graders reported reading at home, only 63% of the seventh and 54% of the eleventh graders reported doing so.

An examination of students’ written explanations revealed that the participating third-grade teachers regularly required students to read for pleasure at home. One third-grader explained, “I read at home...for 40 minutes because half of the reading is my homework and the other half is just to read.” The written explanations of the seventh and eleventh-grade participants revealed no such requirement. Nonetheless, some students revealed that they did take pleasure in reading at home. An eleventh-grader commented, “When I’m at home I can read things that interest me. I am not limited to what I can read at home like we are in school.” Other students reported, however, that they did not read at home. For instance, a seventh-grader explained, “I like being on the computer or X-box or playing outside with my friends rather than reading.”

Summary: Reading for Pleasure

Although more elementary-level participants reported liking to read and reading at home than did their middle and high school counterparts, students across grade levels indicated that, under certain conditions, reading can be pleasurable. Students overwhelmingly pointed to “choice” and “personal interest” as determining factors. Students explained that, when given the chance to exercise choice or to read interesting material, they view reading as a pleasurable option for occupying their time.

Limitations

Our study relied solely on data that were self-reported by the student participants. This fact proves limiting because, in a school setting, students may be inclined to report what it is they believe adults want to hear rather than being

completely honest about their feelings. The questionnaires, therefore, were filled out anonymously so as to provide as much room for honesty as possible.

Discussion

The third, seventh, and eleventh-graders involved in our study agreed, almost unanimously, that reading was “important.” Participants pointed to the empowering benefits of reading—including, earning good grades, gaining admittance to college, and securing a job—as they justified this opinion. Because of this belief, most participants reported being willing to read at school. Whereas agreement existed across grade levels as to the importance of reading, such uniformity did not exist with regards to the enjoyment of reading; fewer middle and high school students reported “liking” reading than their elementary counterparts. Likewise, fewer middle and high school students reported reading in their free time.

Such results indicate that educators have done a good job convincing students of all ages that reading is important. It appears, however, that educators have not been as successful in convincing adolescent students that reading is pleasurable. This fact begs the question, “How can we convince middle and high school students that reading is not only important, but also pleasurable?” We believe the answer to this question involves providing students a context—a specific place and time within the framework of the school day—devoted solely to experiencing the pleasure of reading. We believe that within such a context, a culture can grow—a culture of literacy.

In laying plans for such a context, we suggest looking to an institution that has long been associated with literate culture: the coffeehouse. The coffeehouse dates back to the 1400’s when the first shop, Kiva Han, began serving coffee to the inhabitants of Constantinople (Paajanen, 2007). Eventually the concept of the coffeehouse spread to western Europe and, by the time of the Enlightenment, coffee had become the preferred drink of scientists, businessmen, writers, and politicians and coffeehouses had become “centers of self-education, literary and philosophical speculation, commercial innovation, and, in some cases, political fermentation” (Standage, 2005, p. 157). Men flocked to the coffeehouses in huge numbers to read the latest newsletters, chat with other patrons, and take part in literary or political discussions (Standage, 2005). How appropriate, then, that “coffeehouses were sometimes called ‘penny universities,’ since anyone could enter and join the discussion for a penny or two, the price of a dish of coffee” (Standage, 2005, p. 158). Ellis (2004) cites from Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* that suggests that,

although the coffeehouse existed to sell coffee, it “cannot simply be reduced to this retail function;” rather, it was also “an idea, a way of life, a mode of socialising, a philosophy” (p. xi).

Flash forward 400 years to the modern-day coffee shop: Starbucks. According to Sweet’s (2007) analysis, some things have not changed; he suggests that, much like the coffeehouses of old, “Starbucks has become an arbiter of pop culture, shaping popular tastes far beyond the flavor of a brewed drink” (p. 12). He explains that the money customers pay for a latte “is a kind of entrance fee exacted for participation in the Starbucks experience” (p. 69). This experience—set in an informal atmosphere complete with “festive decorations, aromatic surroundings, artsy lights, and comfy furniture” (p. 105)—recognizes that people crave engagement and connection.

Sweet (2007) explains, “Starbucks is fundamentally in the relationship business. Starbucks sells not coffee but connection” (p. 138). Santa (2006) makes a similar observation about teaching. She contends that successful teaching “has far more to do with human relationships and classroom community than with the content of our classes. In some ways, relationships are teaching” (p. 467). The results of our study lead us to believe that adolescents’ literacy engagement could be heightened if educators took better advantage of the motivating power of community. We also believe that the coffeehouse provides a fitting model for what that literary community might look like.

Using Café Culture to Address the Current “Mismatch”

“Starbucks didn’t set out to reinvent coffee. They aimed to reinvent the coffee experience” (Sweet, 2007, p. 32). Likewise, we are not setting out to reinvent reading. Rather, we aim to reinvent the adolescent reading experience. As things currently stand, a “mismatch” exists between the educational needs of adolescent students and the instruction they receive (Ivey and Broadus, 2001). We believe the café model proposed here has the power to rectify various facets of this mismatch, thus increasing the likelihood that adolescents will associate reading not just with its empowering benefits, but also its pleasurable ones.

Setting the Scene

So what would this reinvented experience look like? To give you an idea, we invite you to visit one high school’s literary café. . . Looking around, you notice that the interior of the room is drastically different from other spaces in the school building. The traditional stark white walls and florescent lighting have been replaced by a warm palette of colors and softer lights. The standard-issue furniture has been

replaced by comfortable couches and chairs, which, instead of being arranged in straight rows, have been pulled into cozy circles. Eye-catching book displays offer a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction, including the most recent and popular books in addition to the timeless classics. Current magazines and newspapers are also plentiful. Over the soft jazz playing in the background, you hear the hushed but unmistakably animated voices of students: a pair discussing an article they have just read in the latest edition of *Time*, a small group making book recommendations, and another discussing plans for an upcoming author's visit. Other students and teachers sit alone, engrossed in a variety of newspapers, books, and magazines. One student is writing in a journal while another writes on the computer. Everyone is sipping something: hot chocolate, herbal tea, and fruit smoothies. The environment is comfortable and yet energized.

Powell-Brown (2006) calls reading a "tough sell" (p. 85). We believe, however, that the café model proposed here will make educators' job of "selling" reading to adolescents an easier one. After all, Starbucks does not have any trouble attracting customers, nor did the Enlightenment-age coffeehouse. Why? Because these establishments provide a context rich with "passion and relationship and meaningful experience" (Sweet, 2007, p. 9). We believe that such a context offers a much-needed venue for addressing aspects of the "mismatch between what students need and the instruction they likely receive" (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001, p. 353), thus helping to convince adolescents that reading is not just important, but also pleasurable.

Mismatch #1: Students Need Time for Reading, But the Schedule Does Not Permit It

In elementary classrooms, "time" and "space" are often routinely devoted to free reading. Although this "time" goes by a variety of names—Sustained Silent Reading, Drop Everything and Read, and Read Any Place—it looks essentially the same: students enjoying books of their choosing in a relaxed environment. The "space" itself is also important. To that end, many elementary classrooms have designated "reading corners," complete with comfortable seating and attractive book displays, which provide children daily opportunities to experience the pleasure of reading. As students move into their middle and high school years, however, "time" and "space" come at a premium and, consequently, free-reading is often dropped from the curriculum (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

This is not as it should be, however, according to a joint position statement written by the International Reading Association and the National Middle School Association (2002). Both associations contend that adolescents should be given

free-reading opportunities on a daily basis. The café model provides just such free-reading opportunities; in essence, the café is simply a more grown-up version of the elementary-school reading corner. Its atmosphere combines the sensory appeal of the modern-day Starbucks with the intellectual flavor of the Enlightenment-age coffeehouse, thus “creating a space where reading practices go beyond the mundane and resemble the out-of-school literacies that a good many adults enjoy” (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006, p. 34). The impact of providing an “out-of-school” environment has been documented. Providing students with a comfortable and relaxed setting for free-reading promotes reading motivation (Clark & Rumbold, 2006), thus underscoring its importance in the development of adolescent literacy.

Mismatch #2: Adolescents are Social, But School is Not

Although providing “time” and “space” addresses one facet of the “mismatch,” the café model goes beyond simply creating an appealing physical space and then giving students time to spend there. To be successful, educationally speaking, the café must come to represent “an idea, a way of life, a mode of socialising, a philosophy” (Ellis, 2004, p. xi) which celebrates things literate. Furthermore, the café must come to represent a culture which “taps into the potential energy of social relations” (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006, p. 81) and acknowledges that reading is a social endeavor (Casey 2008/2009). Through opportunities for student-facilitated book discussions, poetry readings, authors’ visits, and Readers’ Theater performances, the café provides a context for students to interact with their peers around books on their own terms, thus promoting a degree of authenticity which can help make “the literacy learning in school resemble the passionate engagements students seek outside the classroom” (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006, p. 3).

Mismatch #3: Students Like to Choose, But Teachers Like to Dictate

Not only does social interaction increase motivation (Wigfield, 2000) and engagement (Dreher, 2002/2003), but so too do choice and personal preference (Lapp & Fisher, 2009; Pflaum & Bishop, 2004). The Position Statement for the Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association underscores the importance of choice and preference. Its authors, Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik (1999), contend, “Choosing their own reading materials is important to adolescents who are seeking independence” (p. 5). They go on to argue that adolescent students should be given opportunities to read a wide variety of materials including those “tied to popular television and movie productions; magazines about specific interests such as sports, music or cultural backgrounds;

and books by favorite authors” (p. 5). Similarly, Krashen (2004) espouses the power of “light reading”—a kind of reading, he claims, “schools pretend does not exist” (p. 92)—including comic books, teen romances, and magazines. Such materials are typically not included on schools’ required reading lists (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999) and yet, Krashen argues, these texts can serve as a “conduit to heavier reading” (p. 116) by providing the motivation and linguistic competence needed for handling more demanding texts. After all, “when the definition of legitimate text becomes limited, educators also limit what students might be able to access that could spark their interests and become the impetus for lifelong learning” (Botzakis, 2009, p. 58). The café model proposed here provides a context which revolves around free-choice reading, thus encouraging autonomy in adolescent readers.

Feasibility

Perhaps you are now interested in the idea of opening a café in your middle or high school, but are not sure about the feasibility of such an endeavor. Thankfully, other schools have already paved the way, proving that such an undertaking can be extremely successful. For instance, Hastings High School, located in Houston, Texas offers its students a before-school café (Loller, 2007). The café is located in the library and run by librarian John Witmer. Witmer reports that, before the opening of the cafe, they were “running about 6,000 visits per year to the library and checking out about 3,000 books.” Now, however, they are “running about 65,000 visits and checking out about 45,000 books” (Loller, 2007, ¶ 16). While cafés can be run by school staff, other schools are getting students involved, too. For example, the Cougar Café, located in Centennial High School in Franklin, Tennessee, is run by its marketing students (Loller, 2007). Likewise, the Kokopelli Kafes, located in Waunakee Middle and High Schools, in the Madison, Wisconsin area, are run by students in the special education program (Kittner, 2006).

Memorial High School, also located in the Madison area, was recently awarded a \$3,000 grant from the Foundation for Madison’s Public Schools to work with Ancora Coffee to open a school coffee shop (Kittner, 2006). While such monies would certainly facilitate the opening of a café, more modest funds also suffice; the Kokopelli Kafe started with a budget of only \$300.

Final Thoughts

Some may argue that reading instruction needs to emphasize the kinds of “skills” traditionally believed to empower students. While we acknowledge that these kinds of skills do have a place in reading instruction, we also resonate with the following:

Educators who teach reading and writing skills without addressing student engagement are unlikely to yield substantial improvements. As anyone who has spent time with middle and high school students can attest, attempting to build the skills of disengaged adolescents is a futile enterprise. Whether expressed as defiant noncompliance or passive “checking out,” the student who refuses to learn will succeed in that effort. (Learning Point Associates, 2005, *Why Focus*, ¶ 1)

Some might react to the café model proposed here by claiming that it puts too much emphasis on “pleasure” by extending reading instruction into the realm of comfortable furniture, appetizing drinks, popular books and magazines, and conversations with friends. For those who do not believe such things do much to contribute to an adolescent culture of literacy, we share the following reflection, written by Danny Brassell (2006), a professor of teacher education at California State University:

Growing up, I was never much of a reader. I earned good grades, but I absolutely detested reading. . . . Anytime I thought about libraries I conjured up images of musty encyclopedias, uncomfortable furniture, and old ladies constantly insisting that I lower my voice. To me, a trip to the library was about as desirable as a visit to the dentist. (p. 92)

The results of the current research indicate that Brassell’s sentiment is not uncommon amongst today’s adolescent students. Consequently, we believe that, when combined with more traditional forms of literacy instruction, the café model holds great potential for the reinvention of the adolescent reading experience because it isolates a time and space for students to enjoy the things adult readers do. By providing a context, within the typical school day, for students to experience the pleasure of reading, they will develop the reading habit and, consequently, will begin to think of themselves as readers. When this happens—when reading becomes an integral part of students’ identities—they are empowered. Thus, the café model

nurtures not just the pleasurable benefits of reading, but, ultimately, the empowering ones as well.



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About the Authors

Formerly a classroom teacher, Brandi Gribble Mathers now serves as an Associate Professor of Education at Geneva College where she has taught both graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy and assessment. Brandi would like to acknowledge Dr. Evangeline Newton for graciously lending her expertise to this project.

Amanda J. Stern graduated from Geneva College. She currently teaches 7th Grade English Language Arts at Springfield Middle School in Williamsport, Maryland. Her professional interests include curriculum and instruction, literacy, and linguistics.

