Adapting Independent Reading for the Virtual Classroom

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ADAPTING INDEPENDENT READING FOR THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

by

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ADAPTING INDEPENDENT READING FOR THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Ellen J. Foley, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2021

There is no doubt that the 2020-2021 school year was an unprecedented one. Around the world, COVID-19 school closures forced teachers to change their instructional practices with very little time, preparation, or guidance. While frustrating and challenging, experiences from this particular school year provide unique insight into pedagogical adaptations from in-person contexts to virtual ones.

This qualitative, grounded theory study examines the experiences of six secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers and their adaptations of independent reading pedagogies for their virtual classrooms during the 2020-2021 COVID-19-impacted school year. Independent reading is a practice that depends on proximal classroom factors including encouragement and advice from the teacher, time to read, access to a variety of book options, and a conducive reading environment (Atwell, 2007; Miller & Sharp, 2018; Gallagher, 2009; Hiebert, 2009; Gambrell, 2007). Because of these conditions, it is a particularly difficult pedagogy to adapt to a virtual learning context, and research about virtual independent reading is lacking.

Research participants were recruited using purposeful and snowball sampling from six U.S. midwestern junior high and high schools. In-depth, semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted during which participants were questioned about three topics: (1) the origins of the teacher’s decision to implement independent reading, (2) a depiction of what independent reading looked like in their in-person classrooms, and (3) a depiction of what independent
reading looks like in their virtual classrooms. Transcripts were coded and analyzed using NVivo coding software, and a coding paradigm was developed. This paradigm includes causal conditions that underlie the teacher’s ability to implement independent reading in a virtual context, the context and intervening conditions that influenced teachers’ strategy development, strategies for adapting independent reading to online contexts, and consequences of those strategies. Finally, these codes were synthesized to create a framework of the barriers, teacher factors, strategies, and outcomes of adapting independent reading for virtual learning. Explanations of the five key themes and takeaways from the theoretical model are identified and described in narrative data. These themes are: (1) the barrier of book deserts amid e-book floods, (2) the intuitive appeal of independent reading, (3) adopting e-resources, (4) creating opportunities for book access, and (5) the free fall of independent reading.

The purpose of this project is to increase understandings about the ways independent reading practices—typically dependent on in-person classroom contexts—can be adapted to virtual spaces. What resources did teachers need to be able to do this successfully? What remained the same from in-person independent reading and what changed? How did teachers perceive the efficacy of the practice when done virtually? What challenges and successes did teachers have and what strategies did teachers implement? By examining the ways teachers have adapted their independent reading practices to virtual contexts, this study will inform and guide ELA teachers’ understandings and utilizations of independent reading as a pedagogical practice, both in-person and virtually, and contribute to the body of knowledge on reading instruction for teacher educators, teacher preparation programs, school administrations, and policy makers.
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To my kids—Love you. Thanks for letting mama work. Keep reading.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the most severe global educational disruption in history (“From COVID-19 Learning Disruption to Recovery,” 2020). According to UNESCO’s report on the pandemic’s impact on schools, school closures have affected over 1.6 billion students and 100 million teachers and school personnel worldwide, forcing teachers to rapidly adapt to new virtual learning tools, platforms, and methodologies (2020). After the one-year anniversary of many school closings in March 2020 in the U.S., emerging studies are beginning to analyze the ways teachers have adapted to this new teaching milieu. The purpose of this study is to research one specific COVID-impacted teaching methodology—独立阅读—and the ways secondary teachers adapted their implementation of independent reading practices for their virtual classrooms during school closures.

Overview and Key Concepts of Independent Reading

In this dissertation, the term “independent reading” is used to encapsulate the instructional practice being studied; however, this practice is known by different names including: Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR), Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), leisure reading, recreational reading, self-selected reading, Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Sustained Quiet Reading Time (SQUIRT), and Positive Outcomes While Enjoying Reading (POWER) (Pilgreen, 2000; Gambrell et al., 2011). Central to these various labels is the idea that “students are provided with both time and opportunity to engage in the independent silent reading of self-selected texts” (Gambrell et al., 2011, p. 143).

Time allotted for independent reading has a significant impact on student success. Many literacy experts have noted the commonsense reality that one of the best ways for students to
become better readers is by spending time reading (McCracken, 1971; Pilgreen, 2000; Krashen, 2004; Allington, 2009; Hiebert, 2009; Gambrell et al., 2011). Research supports that independent reading has various positive outcomes, including strengthening reading comprehension (Krashen, 1993; Cuevas et al., 2014; Jouhar & Rupley, 2021), improving grammatical accuracy (Jouhar & Rupley, 2021), improving vocabulary (Krashen, 2004), increasing student reading stamina and ability to read increasingly complex texts (Allington, 2009; Hiebert, 2014), building student fluency and automaticity (Allington, 2009; Hiebert, 2014), and building students’ background knowledge and writing skills (Gabriel et al., 2012). In addition to the academic benefits, there are also affective advantages of independent reading such as fostering reading enjoyment (Cohen, 1999; Krashen, 2004; Hiebert, 2009; Gambrell et al., 2011), which have the potential to impact the trajectory of students’ reading lives. In her study of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Pilgreen (2000) found that students who were exposed to independent reading as a routine instructional practice showed increased enjoyment for reading, increased engagement with reading outside of school, increased self-perceptions as readers, and increased utilization of multiple sources for independent reading—all of which are useful traits in building strong reading identities and becoming engaged and critical readers of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The National Endowment for the Arts’ 2007 report, To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence, further elaborates the broader implications of these readerly traits, noting that strong readers typically “accrue personal, professional, and social advantages, while less proficient readers run higher risks of failure in all three of these areas” (Gambrell et al., 2011, p. 148).

Despite these advantages, independent reading has faced obstacles as a pedagogical practice since its inception in the 1950s. Adherence to curriculum, funding constraints, and required standardized assessment data have negatively impacted time allotment and resources.
available for independent reading in the classroom. Some have called into question the validity of the research on the practice, noting that it is difficult to pinpoint independent reading’s causation on improved reading ability (Shanahan, 2006; Trudel, 2011). These tensions and perceptions of the efficacy of the practice by researchers, administrators, and policy makers have inhibited its use in classrooms (Gambrell et al., 2007).

A new and unique obstacle for independent reading has taken shape in 2020. When the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the United States in March 2020, teachers across the country were required to shift their teaching to virtual platforms. Many districts continue to utilize virtual instruction for the 2020-2021 school year and, as a result, many instructional routines are undergoing revisions for ongoing virtual learning. Implementing independent reading poses significant challenges in this virtual implementation because the practice relies on many in-person facets, for example, providing students with physical access to books via classroom libraries or the school library, providing a conducive, quiet environment in class to read, and conferring with the teacher.

**Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

While there have been numerous studies on teacher adaptability and effectiveness (Pearson, 2007; Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011; Hattie, 2009; Fisher et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2018) as well as studies on teacher adaptations to virtual spaces (König et al., 2020; Huber & Helm, 2020), there are no studies to date that focus on how teachers adapt independent reading practices for online learning. Given the importance of independent reading for academic and personal success and the continuation of virtual teaching contexts, additional research on how teachers adapt their independent reading practices to the virtual classroom is very much needed.
This qualitative research explores the experiences of secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the question, “how do teachers adapt independent reading practices for virtual classroom settings?” Six secondary ELA teachers from various midwestern middle and high schools explained their implementation of independent reading routines and practices, the value they place on the practice, the adaptations they have made in their virtual classrooms, and the challenges and benefits they have experienced. This study is significant because it provides information on independent reading processes and also provides a framework for adapting independent reading which includes the five major themes that emerged from this research: (a) the barrier of book deserts amid e-book floods, (b) the intuitive appeal of independent reading, (c) adapting e-resources, (d) creating opportunities for book access, and (e) the free fall of independent reading.

The purpose of this project is to increase understandings about the ways independent reading practices—typically dependent on in-person classroom contexts—can be adapted to virtual spaces. By examining the ways teachers have adapted their independent reading practices to virtual contexts, this study has the potential to inform and guide ELA teachers’ understandings and utilizations of independent reading as a pedagogical practice, both in-person and virtually, and contribute to the body of knowledge on reading instruction for teacher educators, teacher preparation programs, school administrations, and policy makers.

**Reflection on My Identity**

Despite my current interest in reading, growing up, I was not a reader. With the exception of the *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Foxtrot* collection of comics and a sprinkling of Shel Silverstein poetry, I never turned to books for entertainment or enjoyment. This wasn’t for lack of effort on behalf of the adults in my life. My mom took me to our local library, and I recall having a boxset
of *American Girl Dolls* books on my bedroom bookshelf as a tween, but they couldn’t compete with Nintendo. Both of my parents are avid readers, and the bookshelves of my home were filled with books. Still, I didn’t like to read.

But I wanted to be a reader, or at the very least, I wanted to be perceived as readerly. In seventh grade, my English teacher, Mr. Z, clearly aware of the value of student choice, let my class choose their own books. I don’t recall if it was daily or weekly reading time, but I vividly remember the book I chose sitting on my desk: John Grisham’s *The Firm* (1991). The first paragraphs of the book read:

THE SENIOR PARTNER studied the résumé for the hundredth time and again found nothing he disliked about Mitchell Y. McDeere, at least not on paper. He had the brains, the ambition, the good looks. And he was hungry; with his background, he had to be. He was married, and that was mandatory. The firm had never hired an unmarried lawyer, and it frowned heavily on divorce, as well as womanizing and drinking. Drug testing was in the contract. He had a degree in accounting, passed the CPA exam the first time he took it and wanted to be a tax lawyer, which of course was a requirement with a tax firm. He was white, and the firm had never hired a black. They managed this by being secretive and clubbish and never soliciting job applications. Other firms solicited, and hired blacks. This firm recruited, and remained lily white. Plus, the firm was in Memphis, of all places, and the top blacks wanted New York or Washington or Chicago. McDeere was a male, and there were no women in the firm. That mistake had been made in the mid-seventies when they recruited the number one grad from Harvard, who happened to be a she and a wizard at taxation. She lasted four turbulent years and was killed in a car wreck.

He looked good, on paper. He was their top choice. In fact, for this year there were no other prospects. The list was very short. It was McDeere or no one. (p. 1)

According to The Lexile Framework for Reading, *The Firm*’s Lexile is 680L (“Lexile and Quantile Tools,” n.d.).¹ Also according to the Lexile website, a college and career ready seventh

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¹ Lexiles are numbers that are assigned to books. To determine a book’s Lexile, the book’s text is assessed based on its word frequency and sentence strength (“Lexile Levels: What Parents Need to Know,” n.d.), but not based on its content or maturity level. This is the book’s Lexile measure and is indicated by an L after a number (e.g. 500L, 1000L, etc.). Students also receive a Lexile Readability Level based on their Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) test or through another standardized reading test which converts the score to a Lexile. Lexile contends that when students read books that align with their readability level, they should understand most of the text.
grade student should be within the 970L-1120L reading range (“Prepare for College and Careers,” n.d.). Of course, I didn’t know any of this at the time, and I had chosen the book because, as an only child, I looked to my parents’ bookshelves for reading options. A certain film adaptation starring Tom Cruise may have also factored into this decision. Certainly, I could decode all of the words in the first paragraph, but with my limited knowledge of law firm culture in the 90s, not to mention a total unawareness of the racist and sexist undertones Grisham describes in law firm culture in the 90s, this paragraph made no sense to me. I spent our independent reading time staring at the book and pretending to read.

As a high school student, I was not encouraged to read self-selected books. Like many secondary students, the reading that comprised my high school experience was based on the canonical works that we read together as a class: Of Mice and Men, Romeo and Juliet, To Kill a Mockingbird, Fahrenheit 451. During the summer leading up to my junior year, I recall trying to get a head start on my AP Literature reading list by diving into D.H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers and Henry James’ Turn of the Screw. More pretend reading ensued, aided and abetted by my newfound awareness of Cliff’s Notes. By this point, I figured I just wasn’t a good reader.

When I started college, I was reintroduced to the concept of “choice” while reading. In a course about environmentalism and literature, the professor gave us the opportunity to craft our own reading lists, with guidance and support. I read William Ashworth’s The Left Hand of Eden (1999) Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962), and Bill Bryson’s A Walk in the Woods (1997). I remember sitting under a huge pine tree outside of the English department building choosing to read. Slowly, I started to realize what others saw in books. I began to read books at night, on vacation, and in my free time. This awakening, combined with my prior experiences with reading,
made me realize that I could help students like me which ultimately led to my decision to major in English education.

Once I started teaching high school English, the benefits of choice reading became increasingly clearer to me. While reading Of Mice and Men and To Kill a Mockingbird (those same canonical works I read in high school), many of my students zoned out. When they were allowed to read anything they wanted during independent reading time, I had significantly more class participation, engagement, and joy. One of my favorite students, Sumer, refused to read in my freshman English class. It wasn’t until she picked up Lauren Weisberger’s The Devil Wears Prada (2003) that she started seeing herself as a reader. She is now an English teacher. Realizing the value of the practice, I chose to pursue my Master’s in Education with a focus on reading instruction and subsequently became the school literacy coach. My work with other teachers reinforced my understanding that many students weren’t reading for extended amounts of time in their English classes and were only being exposed to canonical texts. A few years later, I became the school reading specialist, working with many students who, like me in high school, hated reading. In this role, I found that many of my students had the requisite decoding skills but lacked the stamina, engagement, and confidence with reading. Another favorite student, Leslie, read every Simone Elkeles book she could find and was so inspired, she arranged an author visit to the school. As I continued to read more about independent reading and began to seek out conference presentations and professional resources to build my understandings, independent reading became a consistent element in the broader comprehensive reading interventions I was providing to students—striving to infuse reading pleasure into strengthening reading skills.

Now, as a parent of a nine, seven, and three-year-old, I am further convinced of the power of choice reading. My third grader reads himself to sleep each night with book series like Amulet,
Who Would Win, and Wings of Fire. My first grader will read any Mo Willems or Dav Pilkey book with award-winning inflection and animation. My preschooler babbles her way through her own set of favorites, too.

These experiences and history have made me a strong advocate of independent reading in all classrooms. This has the potential to shape my findings, conclusions, and interpretations drawn in this study. While interviewing participants, it was important for me to remember to remain objective so that they would not adjust their responses to my questions based on my own reactions to their ideas, adaptations, and perceptions on independent reading. Additionally, it was important to keep these biases in mind during the data analysis phase in order to remain objective on what the data presented. I believe using a grounded theory approach helped this objective process because it provided a framework for data analysis, as outlined in the Chapter Three: Research Methods.

**Chapter Overviews**

In this introduction, a brief overview of independent reading pedagogy, benefits, obstacles, and a reflection on my identity as a reader and reading specialist have been presented. This summary provides readers with an overview of independent reading and how I, as a researcher, arrived at this particular topic to study. In Chapter Two: Literature Review, an overview of the definitions, historical context of independent reading’s trajectory, and effective independent reading practices are outlined. A discussion of the way independent reading can be an empowering practice, especially for students of color and other marginalized populations is presented along with recent research about reading during COVID-19 lockdowns. Additionally, an overview the adaptive teaching literature that underpins my research is summarized. Chapter Three: Research Methods details the research process including the theoretical framework, rationale, participant
selection, data collection methods, research questions, data analysis, and Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) procedure. Chapter Four: Participant Profiles describes each of the six teachers’ backgrounds, beliefs about independent reading, prior implementations of independent reading before the pandemic, and professional resources used to inform their decisions about independent reading. Chapter Five: Discussions of Important Themes includes a discussion of the four major themes which emerged from this research on COVID-impacted teaching methodologies: (1) Book deserts amid e-book floods; (2) The intuitive appeal of independent reading; (3) The adoption of e-resources; (4) Creating book access; and (5) The free fall of independent reading. Chapter Six: Virtual Independent Reading: Implications and Future Directions details the takeaways for teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers as well as the limitations of the project and ideas for future research.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of the literature on focal areas of independent reading—the adapted practice studied in this research. The chapter also provides a brief overview of the basic tenets of adaptive virtual teaching that inform this research. The first section of the chapter gives an introduction to independent reading including its various definitions. The second section outlines the history of independent reading as an educational practice. The third section presents an overview of the recommendations from the literature on effective implementation of independent reading in the classroom, structured by what teachers can do before, during, and after reading. Fourth, a discussion of the benefits of independent reading as a means for including more culturally representative and responsive literature in classrooms is presented. Next, I include a review of the studies that have been published in the last year in response to independent reading and COVID-19 school closures. Finally, the focus of this literature review shifts to an examination of adaptive teaching and how teachers demonstrate their abilities to move from in-person teaching to digital learning (Huber & Helm, 2020). The chapter concludes with a summary of the key takeaway from this review.

Introduction

In November 2019, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) revised its “Statement on Independent Reading.” The definition reads as follows:

Independent reading is a routine, protected instructional practice that occurs across all grade levels. Effective independent reading practices include time for students to read, access to books that represent a wide range of characters and experiences, and support within a reading community that includes teachers and students. Student choice in text is essential because it motivates, engages, and reaches a wide variety of readers. The goal of independent reading as an instructional practice is to build habitual readers with conscious reading identities. (para. 2)
Even though the practice’s emphasis is on student independence, as one can see from the NCTE’s definition, independent reading is a complex reading pedagogy and successful implementation requires balancing numerous elements, including engaged teacher involvement and support before, during, and after reading. Effective implementation of independent reading greatly benefits students as one part of a balanced reading curriculum (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Guthrie et al., 2012). This implementation comes in many forms including providing access and choice (Allington et al., 2010; Miller & Sharp, 2013; Broz, 2011), encouragement (Sanden, 2012), time (Cox & Guthrie, 2001; Sanden, 2012) scaffolding and assistance (Ivey & Johnston, 2018), and conducive reading environments (Kasten & Wilfong, 2005; Lee, 2011).

Table 1, provided below, shows the evolution of definitions about the practice. As one can see, the definition of independent reading in the 1970s and 1980s focused on building reading stamina and carving out time in the schedule for everyone to read with the explicit goal of making this experience pleasurable. As the practice has evolved in the 21st century, the emphasis has shifted from the application of reading skills toward building the foundation for lifelong reading habits, including the ability to analyze author’s craft and to develop a readerly identity whereby students can choose books based on their preferred genre or determine which book they want to read based on the type of book they want for a particular reading experience (e.g. “beach read” or “page-turner”). Allington points to the tension in the practice that, despite best intentions to provide students with choice, complete autonomy can be inhibited by teachers’ constraints which are often based on book leveling or content appropriateness.
Table 1. Definitions of Independent Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hunt, 1970</td>
<td>“The essence of reading power; the ability to keep going with ideas in print.” (p. 150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambrell, 1978</td>
<td>“The component of the reading program which gives students the opportunity to transfer and apply isolated skills in a pleasurable, independent reading experience.” (p. 328)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCracken &amp; McCracken, 1978</td>
<td>“A set time each day when every pupil and the teacher read silently for a substantial period of time without interruption.” (p. 406)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berglund &amp; Johns, 1983</td>
<td>“Students choose something to read; the teacher chooses something to read; then, everyone reads silently without interruption for a specified period of time.” (p. 534)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krashen, 2000</td>
<td>“Free voluntary reading means reading what you want to read, with no book reports, no questions at the end of the chapter, and not having to finish the book if you don’t want to.” (p. vii in Pilgreen’s <em>The SSR Handbook</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atwell, 2007</td>
<td>“Teachers in a reading workshop are creating readers for a lifetime. We introduce new books and old favorites, tell about authors and genres, read aloud authors and genres, and talk with kids about their reading rituals and plans. We teach the elements of fiction; how poems work; what efficient readers do - and don’t do - when they come across an unfamiliar word; how punctuation gives voice to reading; when to speed up or slow down; who won this year’s Newbery Award; how to keep useful reading records; what a sequel is; what readers can glean from a copyright page; how to identify the narrative voice or tone of a novel and why it matters; that there are different purposes for reading that affect a reader’s style and pace; how to identify a beach book or a page-turner; how to tell if a book is too hard, to easy, or just right; and why the only way to become a strong, fluent reader is to read often and a lot.” (p. 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allington, 2009</td>
<td>“Assigned independent reading is the traditional drop-everything-and-read activity, for instance, or the daily 15-minute read-at-home assignment. In most cases students have the opportunity to select the text to be read, but often within teacher-monitored constraints (such as texts deemed ‘appropriate in content and difficulty’ by the teacher), and the reading activity is required.” (p. 42 in Hiebert’s <em>Reading More, Reading Better</em>)</td>
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With the addition of NCTE’s “Statement on Independent Reading” (2019) presented at the beginning of this chapter, one sees that the original individual “silent reading” idea has changed and added the component of establishing and building a reading community with teachers and students as well as the rationale of motivating, engaging, and reaching a wide variety of readers.
History of Independent Reading

While the concept of independent reading has existed for as long as people have been able to read, the 1950s marked a pivotal point for individualized reading instruction in schools. A review of the publications on teaching reading reveals that the terms “self-selection” and “individualized reading” gained momentum during this decade. Much of the focus on providing students with opportunities for choice in text selections was in response to traditionalist basal-based reading methodologies (for example, the Dick and Jane books). Multiple publications in the 1950s encouraged teachers to rethink this approach. For example, Willard Olsen’s Child Development (1952) included a chapter on “Seeking, Self-Selection, and Pacing.” This milestone specified the processes by which children could select and read books at their own pace as well as the childhood development theory to support individualized reading (Ferree, 1998). Alvina Burrows published Teaching Children in the Middle Grades (1950) which also provided detailed information on how to individualize reading experiences for students. Additionally, Jeannette Veatch published “Individualized Reading for Success in the Classroom” (1954) as a reference pamphlet for teachers interested in individualizing reading instruction, describing it as a “method devised to meet individual differences, wherein children select their own books and read at their own pace” (Ferree, 1998, p. 5).

These publications and the idea of individualized reading were not met with complete support from the reading community. At the 1960 International Reading Association annual convention, Veatch recalls giving a speech in which she accused the organization of censoring educational ideas like individualized reading, noting that individualized reading had been “assigned to Outer Purgatory” (Veatch, 1986, p. 587). As a result, Veatch notes, the term “individualized reading” was not back on the convention program until six years later (Veatch,
1986). However, works continued to be published in order to guide teachers’ implementations of individualized reading into their classrooms including May Lazar’s *A Practical Guide to Individualized Reading* (1960), Veatch’s *How to Teach Reading with Children’s Books* (1968), and Walter B. Barbe’s *Educator’s Guide to Personalized Reading Instruction* (1970). By 1965, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) provided federal dollars for purchasing books to stock school libraries, thus increasing access to books for children during the school day (Beers & Probst, 2017).

In 1971, Lyman C. Hunt Jr. proposed six identifiable steps to the Individualized Reading Program (IRP) which remain core components of the practice today, including (1) the classroom environment, (2) silent or quiet reading time, (3) instructional guidance, (4) book talks and conferences, (5) records and evaluation, and (6) skill development using what he termed as “Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading,” or USSR (Hunt, 1971). Hunt stated that “every teacher of reading should think of USSR as the pinnacle of achievement with regard to teaching skillful reading” (Hunt, 1971, p. 29). Emphasizing silent reading’s significance and the importance of reading stamina, Hunt outlined the specific requirements and benefits of USSR. These requirements included “a very definite and particular set of attitudes on the parts of both the teacher and the reader” (Hunt, 1971, p. 30), and a means to track progress as students’ sustained reading enabled them to read for longer stretches of time. Hunt also emphasized the benefits this practice had for “low group” readers, noting that “helping a young reader develop power of silent reading is the first priority” (Hunt, 1971, p. 31) rather than fixating on oral reading skills. Benefits listed in the article include developing extensive, exploratory reading as well as the skills of sustained silent reading, independence, and self-direction, and, according to Hunt Jr., “the grandest result” of fostering a “L.O.B.” or love of books (Hunt, 1971, p. 32). McCracken (1971) shortened Hunt’s
acronym to SSR and defined the process as “a set time each day when every pupil and the teacher read silently for a substantial period of time without interruption” (McCracken, 1978, p. 406).

In the late 1970s and early 80s, SSR became “an accepted component of many school reading programs” (Berglund & Johns, 1983, p. 534), reflecting constructivist pedagogies which encouraged the accommodation of individual student differences of the time. Sustained silent reading solved some of the issues that teachers and researchers noticed about traditional reading instruction, including reading instruction that was “overtaught and under practiced” (Noland, 1976, p. 158 in Berglund and Johns, 1983, p. 534) via inauthentic mediums such as worksheets instead of books (Berglund & Johns, 1983). As SSR gained momentum in classrooms, more research was published on the practice. Berglund & Johns provide a list of the research including studies which showed positive changes in student behavior and increases in time spent reading and discussing books (Petre, 1977), feelings of happiness about going to the library and participating in assigned reading (Cline & Kretke, 1980), and studies showing that, while there was no significant difference in the achievement of students using SSR compared with those who had not, SSR was preferred by students over other reading instruction methodologies (Towner & Evans, 1975). Interestingly, Petre (1977) also focused on the impact on the teacher, noting that when participating in SSR, some faculty members extended their established reading habits whereas others began a reading habit in which they had not originally participated.

In 1997, Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to create a panel to “assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read” (Teaching Children to Read, 2000, p. 1-1). The US National Reading Panel (NRP) published Teaching Children to Read in 2000, outlining findings on phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, fluency, comprehension
strategies, and vocabulary instruction. One section of the report focused on the efficacy of SSR and independent reading programs, finding only fourteen studies that fit their selection criteria on fluency and independent reading. The report concluded that there were not enough scientifically based research studies conducted on independent reading that met the study’s methodological guidelines. Thus, it could not recommend independent reading as a research-based practice for improving reading achievement. The NRP also included three recommendations for future evaluations of wide reading via programs such as SSR, Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), and Accelerated Reading (AR) including: (1) monitoring the amount of reading in and out of school by experimental and control groups, (2) comparing routines against procedures where students read less, and (3) measuring an adequate baseline of current or previous reading engagement (Teaching Children to Read, 2000). The report’s findings, combined with an educational context focused on increasing standards-based reforms such as Clinton’s Improving Schools Act (1994) and Bush’ No Child Left Behind (2002), resulted in independent reading falling out of favor as an instructional practice in classrooms. The results of the NRP report were used to shape the Reading First legislation which required states and districts to show how federal dollars would support each of the five areas covered in the report (Kim, 2008).

The 2000 NRP report was viewed as controversial and problematic from many in the reading community, particularly for its research design as well as its placement of independent silent reading under the fluency subgroup (Cunningham, 2002; Gambrell et al., 2011). Leading reading researchers in the field were quick to point out that the NRP study did not meet the standards for sound meta-analysis (Krashen, 2004; Hiebert & Fisher, 2005; Allington, 2005; Garan, 2002). Two important books written in response to the panel’s report include Richard Allington’s Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum (2002) which devotes six chapters
to explain why the NRP’s report was based on unreliable evidence, and Stephen Krashen’s *The Power of Reading* (2004) which provides a comprehensive literature review of all of the research that supports what he labels “Free Voluntary Reading” (FVR).

Gambrell et al. (2009) have suggested that many of the misconceptions about independent reading stemmed from the NRP report and that these have had a long-lasting impact on reading research, policy, and practices today. In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) published *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (Bradshaw, 2004) concluding that Americans were spending less time reading and that their reading comprehension skills were in decline. The report found that the steepest decline in literary reading was in the youngest age groups (18–24-year-olds). In 2007, the NEA published another report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, which found that nearly half of all Americans ages 18-24 read no books for pleasure (*To Read or Not to Read*, 2007). The report also stated that reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement and that “voluntary readers are better readers and writers than non-readers, children and teenagers who read for pleasure on a daily or weekly basis score better on reading tests than infrequent readers, and frequent readers also score better on writing tests than non-readers or infrequent readers” (*To Read or Not To Read*, 2007, p. 14). The report concluded that strong readers “accrue personal, professional, and social advantages, while less proficient readers run higher risks of failure in all three of these areas” (Gambrell et al., 2011, p. 148). In 2009, the NEA published *Reading on the Rise: A New Chapter in American Literacy* which found that literary reading had increased the most rapidly among 18-24-year-olds, the same group that had shown the steepest decline in 2007.

In the last decade, independent reading has seen a resurgence in popularity in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms and professional organizations for teachers, as indicated by the
proliferation of books published on the topic. NCTE’s newly revised “Statement on Independent Reading” (Schaffer et al., 2019) and the International Literacy Association’s “Creating Passionate Readers through Independent Reading” (McVeigh, 2019) position statements also suggest a renewed emphasis on the importance of this practice. Some of the books and position statements published in the 21st century supporting its implementation and geared toward teacher audiences are listed in Figure 1.

- The SSR Handbook (Pilgreen, 2000)
- The Reading Zone (Atwell, 2007)
- Reading More, Reading Better (Hiebert, 2009)
- Readicide: How Schools are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It (Gallagher, 2009)
- “The Importance of Independent Reading” (Gambrell et al., 2011)
- Reading in the Wild: The Book Whisperer’s Keys to Cultivating Lifelong Reading Habits (Miller, 2013)
- Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers (Kittle, 2013)
- Read Write Teach: Choice and Challenge in the Reading-Writing Workshop (Rief, 2014)
- Disrupting Thinking: Why How We Read Matters (Beers & Probst, 2017)
- No More Fake Reading: Merging the Classics with Independent Reading to Create Joyful, Lifelong Readers (Gordon, 2017)
- Game Changer: Book Access for All Kids (Miller & Sharp, 2018)
- 180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018)
- NCTE’s Statement on Independent Reading (Schaffer et al., 2019)
- ILA’s Literacy Leaders Brief: Creating Passionate Readers Through Independent Reading (McVeigh, 2019)

Figure 1. 21st Century Literature about Independent Reading

Much of the current independent reading research centers on teenagers’ unique stage of life and the impact of reading not only on their academic achievement, but also on their psychological and moral development. In their study of eighth graders’ experiences in engaged reading, Ivey & Johnston (2018) observed that, “the books to which adolescents are drawn no doubt contain sensational situations and details that make them curious, including encounters with drugs, sex-related crimes, and psychological hardships” (p. 144). Their study found that, while parents expressed concerns about “disturbing content” in books, these same books enabled readers
to see the consequences of bad choices through a relatable character and that this allowed readers to wrestle with “moral dilemmas and their implications hopefully before facing them in reality” (p. 149). In a study of 282 German adolescents focusing on the impact of “transportability”—the tendency to immerse into narrative worlds—and building empathy, Lenhart et al. (2020) found that “different dimensions of self-reported empathy (empathic concern, perspective taking, and fantasy) were positively related to the reading of narrative literature” (p. 25) among teenage readers. Engaged reading offers the possibility of “imaginative rehearsals” (Gallagher, 2009) which build the capacity for social imagination and may lead to changes in social behavior (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Indeed, the research on this ethical development supports S.I. Hayakawa’s observation that “it is not true that ‘we have only one life to life’; if we can read, we can live as many more lives and as many kinds of lives as we wish” (1990, p. 144).

**Implementing Independent Reading**

With an understanding of the historical context of the practice, the focus turns now to how independent reading can be implemented in classrooms. Hunt’s (1971) “Six Steps to the Individualized Reading Program” was one of the first to outline the steps necessary to successfully implement an individualized reading program, and includes: (1) reading atmosphere, (2) quiet or silent reading time, (3) instructional guidance, (4) book talks and conferences, (5) uninterrupted sustained silent reading, and (6) record keeping and evaluation. Here, the definitions for each of these steps is provided as they serve as a useful foundation for the literature that followed Hunt’s initial outline.

Hunt described the reading atmosphere as a climate that takes careful nurturing on the teacher’s behalf. The goal, according to Hunt, is to develop a productive reading experience for
each individual student. This requires endurance and endeavor from the teacher, rather than leaving the atmosphere to chance.

To ensure this atmosphere is achieved, Hunt argues that silent reading time is vital. To achieve this, he encouraged teachers to include a visual with student expectations for the duration of the reading period. An overview of the list he provides includes the following recommendations:

1. Select a book or other printed material.
2. Read quietly.
3. Have a book talk or conference.
4. Record your results.
5. Study vocabulary.
6. Work with a partner.

Here, Hunt also outlines four indicators of success in IRP: (1) Making wise and intelligent selections of reading material, (2) spending large blocks of time in independent silent reading, (3) preparing for and being ready to make one’s best contribution during the conference time, and (4) preparing reports, keeping records, and being ready to share learning from books with others. Hunt cautions teachers that they are sometimes too eager to get to the products—the conferences and the discussions—of reading, and that they need to make reading time the priority.

Hunt’s third element of IRP is “instructional guidance,” though contemporary readers may better understand the idea as classroom management. He begins this section by identifying students who prefer to spend IRP “in more noisy endeavors” (p. 28). These students, whom he categorizes as the gossips, the wanderers, and the squirrels—those who get a new book each day but are too busy gathering rather than actually reading—impede productive reading time. Hunt encourages teachers to attend to these problems by telling students to “sit down, keep quiet, and start reading” (p. 28) and to abide by the guiding principle that “during the reading period no one may act so as to interfere with the productive reading of another” (p. 28).
Book talks and conferences are, according to Hunt, at the heart of IRPs. Contrary to current understandings book talks—where teachers advertise the book to the class—Hunt defines this as the practice of having students talk about their books to the teacher during a conference. The purpose of this conference, Hunt asserts, is to enable the reader to “reveal the significance of his reading experiences” (p. 29) and it is the teacher’s responsibility to ask questions that can give insight into the depth of the student’s reading.

Hunt’s fifth step is Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR), a skill that students can learn wherein they sustain themselves with print for longer and longer stretches of time. Whereas many teachers may think of Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading as an activity, Hunt poses it as a skill—a capability that successful readers are have. Here, he emphasizes the importance of the reader having “the facility to keep his mind on and flowing with ideas” (p. 30) while reading, a skill Allington later defines as “reading stamina” (2009). Hunt defines USSR as a “skill which signals that the student is able to read by himself and for himself over long spans of print” (p. 30). Success in this area means that the reader is (1) accomplishing as much silent reading as possible during the reading time, (2) keeping one’s mind on the ideas while reading, (3) acknowledging and responding to “high potency words and sentences,” and (4) responding with less attention to less important ideas in the reading material. Hunt lists ways to show this progress to students including the use of charts, graphs, time-keeping records, and teacher-monitored support and questioning. Hunt encourages teachers to ask the question, “Could you keep your mind on the ideas all the time you were reading?” to gauge student success with USSR.

Finally, Hunt details record keeping and evaluation methods for teachers and students. He writes, “teachers who are developing the individualized approach to reading instruction have found it necessary to devise ways for keeping records of the children’s development in reading” (p. 31).
He suggested that students keep notes on the books they read which can help them remember details and important ideas during conferences. He also suggests teacher checklists on student reading performance and ability; however, he cautions that “compulsive record keeping can be fatal for IRP. If keeping records, keeping track of books, answering questions or writing resumes on books read takes more time than is spent by readers reading then the teacher has become lost – lost in the non-essentials” (p. 31). He also acknowledges that evaluation is complicated, as the hallmark of IRP is making “independent, self-sufficient, and self-sustaining readers” (p. 31), and not to assess oral reading fluency, whether or not the student understands each word, or the memorization of details through reading quizzes. Hunt suggests more holistic evaluations, asking teachers to assess whether or not the reader is able to find meaningful reading material, extract significant ideas from it, and exhibit the staying power to follow through with longer passages. This ability, he states, “is the mark of a true reader” (p. 32).

Hunt concludes his article by listing the four values and benefits of IRP: (1) the development of exploratory reading, (2) the development of the skill of sustained silent reading, (3) the development of independence of self-direction for students, and (4) a “L.O.B” or love of books.

Building on Hunt’s foundation, McCracken & McCracken (1978) added more key features of a successful Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) program, dropping the “U” for “Uninterrupted” and emphasizing that all adults in the classroom must read while students are reading. They also note that SSR doesn’t work without access to many reading materials. They emphasize that upon completion of a book, “teachers require nothing of children after sustained silent reading that they do not themselves do willingly and naturally” (1978, p. 407). Rather than book reports, tests, and worksheets, they list realistic follow-up activities including reading logs, talking with others, and
writing down important ideas. They conclude their article with a list of the messages of trust and respect that children learn from SSR: (1) Reading books is important. (2) Reading is something anyone can do. (3) Reading is communicating with an author. (4) Children are capable of sustained thought. (5) Books are meant to be read in large sections. (6) The teacher believes that pupils are comprehending (because he or she doesn’t bother to check). (7) The teacher trusts the children to decide when something is well written and when something important has been read (because the teacher expects pupils to share after SSR).

Berglund and Johns (1983) also provide an outline on how to implement silent sustained reading, what to expect, and what to do if something goes wrong. Here, they position the importance of sustained silent reading as something that is necessary because when students are being taught to read, they need enough time to practice the skill. They cite Mork’s (1972) suggestion that the ratio of reading practice to reading instruction should be “as high as 80 percent practice and 20 percent instruction” (Mork, 1972, p. 440 in Berglund and Johns, 1983, p. 534). They construct their argument for SSR in classrooms around four assumptions: (1) reading is overtought and under-practiced and many students don’t read outside of the school setting, (2) reading requires the reconstruction of meaning from the printed page (a step beyond simply decoding words), (3) silent reading is more important than oral reading, and (4) student independence and choice in selecting materials is important in developing lifelong readers.

Berglund and Johns outline a series of suggestions for successful implementation. These include publicizing books to build interest in reading materials, having a collection of reading materials, and integrating daily reading time that gradually lengthens in duration. They cite McCracken’s (1971) list of rules to begin SSR: (1) each student reads silently, (2) the teacher reads and permits no interruptions, (3) each student selects a single book, magazine, or newspaper, (4) a timer is
used, (5) there are no reports or records of any kind, and (6) begin with whole classes or heterogeneous groups. Interestingly, Berglund and Johns identify one of the key signals of a successful SSR program is when students ask to keep reading beyond the time allotted. They also identify the potential pitfalls of SSR. Such pitfalls include the teacher’s lack of participation in reading, troublesome students who get away with not reading, other adults (aides or visitors) who don’t read during reading time, and too few books from which students can choose (1983, p. 537).

They cite Hunt’s (1979) strategies for overcoming reluctant behavior:

1. Be patient and persistent.
2. Allow some students to pretend read until they build their ability to silently read.
3. Allow browsing, flipping, and picture looking.
4. If a serious disruption occurs, stop the silent reading time and transition to the lesson of the day.
5. Provide students who struggle to find books two or three books from which to choose.
6. Start with short reading time periods and gradually lengthen the time as students build capacity for reading.
7. Tell students that it’s ok if they don’t know every word while reading.

(Berglund and Johns, 1983, p. 537)

Building on the foundational structures of independent reading, the following sections detail current literature on its implementation, as organized by what teachers and students can do before, during, and after independent reading time.

Before Reading: Access, Choice, and Encouragement

One of the most important aspects of a successful independent reading program is access to and choice of books (Miller & Sharp, 2018; Sanden, 2012; Krashen, 2013). When students have access to current, engaging books, they will read more which will help them read better. Miller and Sharp point out that many students live in “book deserts” without consistent access to quality books and that this disproportionally affects students that come from lower-income communities or those who are living in poverty. These marginalized groups often face barriers to book access including fear of fines from libraries, financial restrictions that impede the ability to purchase
books of their own, and the inability to produce a proof of residency document in order to get a library card. Miller and Sharp recommend building a robust classroom library, but they acknowledge that this requires a lot of effort from the teacher, especially for new teachers who may not have libraries of their own. Miller and Sharp suggest that teachers conduct a yearly audit of their classroom libraries, focusing on four categories: currency, diversity, quantity, and organization. Teachers need to keep up with current reading lists put out by The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) among other recognized reading lists (NCTE, ILA, etc.) to maintain the classroom library’s currency. Teachers also need to be willing to self-fund or seek opportunities to group-fund books in order to provide a wide diversity of books, and many have found creative ways to do so. Teachers must also survey and discuss with their students to find out what their individual needs and desires are when it comes to books. Miller and Sharp note that it may not be possible that all teachers have classroom libraries of their own, though they note that the closer students’ proximity to books, the more they will read. Other options they proffer are to utilize the school library or to work closely with the public library.

In addition to providing access and choice, students also need guidance in selecting appropriate-level texts. Both Atwell (2007) and McRae & Guthrie (2009) note that students should not be limited by the level of texts; however, they should be provided guidance in their choices. If books are too difficult, the student will not be able to read the book without instruction. Allington (2009) gives a helpful assessment by having students read one page of a book and keeping track of the number of words that they don’t know. If the number exceeds five on one page, the book may be too difficult for the reader. However, he notes that this can be remedied with ample background knowledge. That is, if the student has ample background knowledge on the topic, he
or she may be able to read more difficult text. Allington also notes that struggling readers, especially, need a steady diet of “high-success” books in which they can read with at least 99% accuracy.

Even with access and the ability to choose appropriately-leveled texts, students also need encouragement in order for them to want to pick up a book and read. Atwell (2007) and Kittle (2013) extol the value of the book talk—an opportunity for the teacher to “sell” the students on the book that they’re reading and that can also come from the students themselves. Another option to get students motivated to read is to show them book trailers or authors’ discussions of their books which typically preview the content of the book and pique the readers’ interest. Gallagher (2009) creates a culture of literacy by sharing his own reading experiences with students, posting the book that he last read, the book he’s currently reading, and the book he plans to read next on his whiteboard. Many teachers include “What I’m Reading” as part of the signature on their emails to show students that they, too, are readers. Another way Gallagher and Kittle (2018) get students interested in books is by using excerpts for studying the author’s craft. In this practice, the teacher chooses interesting sentences from the text to highlight the writerly moves that the author is making while simultaneously advertising the book to students. Kittle maintains a multi-year list created by her students of books that address different themes, thus involving students in the effort to increase interest in other students’ book choices.

During Reading: Time and Teacher Scaffolding

As early proponents of individualized reading emphasized, teachers must provide time in class for students to read. Gambrell et al. (2011) note that there is no clear insight into how much time needs to be provided, and the ranges vary drastically. Allington (2009) suggests 90 minutes a day at the elementary level. Atwell suggests 20 minutes a day with an additional 20 minutes at
home each night. Gallagher and Kittle, noting that they are limited because they only have only a period with their students each day ranging from 50 to 120 minutes, aim for 10 to 15 minutes per day for independent reading. In her study of sustained silent reading, Pilgreen (2000) found that most the secondary classrooms she studied averaged twelve minutes per day and that this practice was most effective when it was provided as part of a daily or semi-daily routine rather than a massed time (for example, one day a week, month, etc.). It is also important to determine how independent reading can fit within the many demands made on ELA teachers. Kittle and Gallagher suggest a 50/25/25 balance in which 50% of the reading time is spent on independent reading, 25% on book clubs where groups of students read the same story, and 25% for works from the curriculum. It is, however, a delicate balance and one that each individual teacher must determine for themselves based on how it works best in their particular classroom contexts. It is also worth mentioning that independent reading is not a replacement for the study of literature and that research emphasizes that it should be part of a balanced literacy curriculum.

Teacher scaffolding is also essential in order to increase students’ perseverance while reading (Gambrell et al., 2011). Scaffolds include teaching students how to select appropriate-level texts, holding individual conferences with students to help them use strategies to comprehend the text, constructing opportunities for students to discuss the books with other students, and helping students set reasonable goals for completing the book. These strategies are especially helpful for struggling readers and can occur during short conferences with students during reading time (Gambrell et al. 2011).

After Reading: Follow-Up Activities

Atwell (2007) is firm in her opinion that teachers should not “clutter the landscape” with reading activities once students are finished reading a book. This, she notes, means that teachers
shouldn’t require students to complete double-entry journals or book reports after they finish reading. Pilgreen (2000) admits that this contradicts what many teachers feel needs to happen when students finish a book, especially in our increasingly overly-standardized curricula and assessment environments. She encourages teachers to remember that we should place emphasis not on evaluating students’ reading but rather help them to respond to the books they’ve read. Kittle (2013) elaborates on this idea by emphasizing that when students finish reading a book, they should be metacognitive about their reading process and the reactions they’ve had and that this can be used to further build a community of readers in the classroom. For Kittle, this means having students write student-friendly—and un-assessed—book recommendations which she keeps under the front cover the book for future students who want to read the book. Others have advocated for an in-between approach, noting that they could not implement this practice in their classrooms without some means of accountability. One adaptation, called Scaffolded Silent Reading (ScSR) (Walker, 2013), involves using independent reading books to analyze literary genres, theme, and author’s craft. Technology can also play a role in connecting readers with other readers around the country and the world. For example, there are many opportunities for students to use social media to publicize their excitement for books, such Twitter hashtags like #nerdybookclub and #projectlit. There are also opportunities for students to get in touch with their favorite authors through collaborative platforms like StorySeed in which creative youth are selected to collaborate with authors of young adult literature to work their ideas into collaborative stories with the help of the author. Other options include publishing fan fiction or creating podcasts where multiple people talk about a book or about similar themes across multiple texts. An interesting new phenomenon of advertising books on TicTok is the “BookTok” (Harris, 2021) where young readers record themselves responding—typically sobbing—to their favorite, sad books.
Independent Reading and Representation

An emerging and important area of interest about independent reading is its ability to serve as an empowering practice because it enables teachers to include more diverse, representative, and culturally responsive literature in their classrooms. These diversities include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, language proficiency, immigration status, domicile, religious preference, and family makeup (Naidoo & Dahlen, 2013). Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) is an oft-cited voice in the need for diversity and representation in students’ reading experiences. She explains the various effects of reading through her metaphor that books can be mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p. ix)

However, not all students are being provided with “mirror book” experiences because of the predominance of white-authored and white-charactered books in ELA curricula (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) posits that, when there is a lack of diversity, students of color often become illiterate by the middle grades because they do not see their hopes, dreams, and aspirations reflected in the literature they read and, thus, choose not to engage in leisure reading. Indeed, it is also important, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides contend, for white students to have access to diverse books—those window and sliding glass door books—to build their cultural competencies and to dispel the self-importance that an all-white curriculum suggests. Attending to all students’ hopes, dreams, and aspirations in each individual classroom is
not possible with a set list of books that does not reflect the diversity of the classroom. Independent reading offers one solution to this curricular homogeneity.

In the preface to her influential *Literature as Exploration* (1938), Louise Rosenblatt honors the importance of reading in a democracy and extolls that participation in a democratic society means that people are able to recognize, understand, and value—no matter how much they disagree with—others’ beliefs. With democracy under attack when she first wrote the book in 1938, Rosenblatt’s ideas remain relevant in the political and ideological context of 2021. Independent reading taps into the developmental needs of adolescents enabling them the capability for social imagination in the reader’s own life, which has the potential to change readers’ social behavior (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). It enables them to make sense of their world while also developing empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2012) and balancing information and enjoyment in learning (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). It enables students to make choices about what they read while simultaneously building critical reading skills which will empower them for the rest of their lives. Finally, independent reading fills in—though is only one small solution to a larger problem—the diversity gap which currently exists in classrooms and impacts students’ abilities to see their lives, values, and beliefs reflected as well as learning about how others make sense of the world.

**COVID-19 Reading Research**

Emerging studies are just beginning to explore the impact on reading during COVID-19 school closures. In a study by the National Literacy Trust of young people’s reading experiences and opinions before and after the lockdown in the UK, Clark and Picton (2020) determined seven key findings based on an initial, pre-lockdown survey of 58,000 students and a follow-up, post-lockdown survey of 4,141 pupils. First, they found that children were reading and enjoying reading more during lockdown; however, they identify a widening gender gap in daily reading, with boys
lagging behind girls. Additionally, the report found that audiobooks were a potential solution to re-engage boys. The report also found that children were turning to genres of adventure, comedy, fantasy, and realistic fiction, with nearly half of children reporting that they had read a new book during the lockdown. Additionally, the report addresses the affective component of reading, finding that many children turned to reading because it provided refuge, supported their mental wellbeing, and enabled them to dream about the future. The study concludes by noting that barriers including lack of access to books, lack of quiet spaces to read at home, and lack of school/peer support negatively affected some children’s ability to read and their motivation to read for enjoyment.

In a study out of Singapore which is part of a larger project investigating Singaporean students’ leisure reading outside of school, Sun et al. (2020) used a mixed methods design to survey 2,012 fourth and fifth graders. They found that, while students’ most preferred leisure activity both before and during school closures was playing games using a device, reading—ranked third on the list of most preferred leisure activities after “hobbies”—was considered more preferable during the closure than prior to it, with about 4% more students choosing reading as their preferred leisure activity when they were not in school (Sun et al., 2020). Within this area of study, researchers also found several recurring themes about at-home leisure reading, including students’ acknowledgement of the distraction of digital devices, the ease of reading in print versus the difficulty of reading on digital devices, the lack of digital book knowledge, and the lack of support for using technology for reading, which the researchers point out may explain why students lack digital book knowledge.
Adaptive Virtual Teaching

In addition to the literature about independent reading, it is also pertinent to explore the research on teacher processes of adaptation for the purposes of this research project. Studies have shown that teachers who are adaptable are often the most effective (Fisher et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009; Parsons et al., 2018, Pearson, 2007; Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011). According to Soslau and colleagues, adaptive teaching expertise “enables a teacher to modify their planned instruction based on pupil cues in real time, adjust scripted curriculum guides to serve contextual demands, and balance experimental teaching approaches with risks to pupil learning and well-being” (2018, p. 100). Indeed, the increasingly diverse learning needs of students conflict with efforts to formalize curricula and prepare for standardized tests, and so teacher adaptability is especially important in today’s educational context. In their comprehensive literature review and research synthesis of empirical studies about teacher adaptability spanning from 1975 to 2014, Parsons et. al (2017) created a model—presented in Figure 2 in the next chapter—to illustrate how adaptive teaching takes place in a complex social setting of a socially constructed classroom, which is influenced by students’ and teachers’ sociohistorical experiences. Factors influencing the teachers’ responses include “teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, experience, and thinking, which are influenced by student assessment, their instructional context, and professional development. Instructional contexts can either promote (if autonomy supporting) or inhibit (if focused on standards or testing) teachers’ adaptive instruction” (p. 230-231). They point to the need for future research to understand the relationships among different aspects of adaptive teaching. My study addresses that dearth of published literature by exploring a specific instructional practice—独立阅读—in a specific educational context—虚拟学习. Underpinning this study of independent reading are those core tenets listed above: teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, experience,
Research about teacher adaptation during the pandemic is limited. In the recent available research focused on how teachers have adapted to online learning during COVID-19 school closures, König et al. (2020) studied the ways early career teachers—presumably part of the digitally savvy generation—adapted to this situation and which factors accounted for their success. At the conclusion of their study, they found that teacher technological pedagogical knowledge (TPK) and self-efficacy were significant in predicting maintained social contact with students and providing task differentiation. Additionally, they found that the availability of computer technology and familiarity with online software put teachers at an advantage when schools closed. The study also found that teacher education opportunities to learn digital competence were instrumental in adapting to online teaching. These three findings—TPK, technological availability, and professional development—are important factors to consider in adapting to online learning contexts. Undoubtedly, these findings of how early career teachers adapted their instruction has insight into how mid-career teachers have adjusted.

Understanding independent reading definitions, history, implementation processes, and benefits provides a useful foundation for realizing why this practice is important to educators and students and why, despite the COVID-19 school closures, teachers sought to adapt this process for digital learning. Ultimately, this literature review shows there is a gap that exists in the research available on how teachers adapt independent reading in virtual spaces. This is, in part, because of the particular and rapid transition in the COVID-19 zeitgeist. This dissertation addresses this dearth of literature about independent reading practices in virtual contexts and explains the barriers, teacher factors, strategies that influenced teachers’ adaptations of independent reading
pedagogy to virtual classrooms as well as its outcomes. The implications from this research can be used by teachers to make decisions about independent reading in future virtual learning scenarios as well as inform and expand on independent reading practices in in-person classroom contexts. Additionally, understanding the barriers, teacher factors, and strategies that enabled teachers to adapt this practice will prove useful to teacher educators tasked with preparing future teachers for various teaching settings. The findings also point out implications for school administrations and policy makers who are in the position to make decisions about structures to support successful independent reading such as book access and time spent in virtual classrooms. In the next chapter, the methodology used to examine this particular adaptation and generate these findings is presented.
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter explains the theoretical framework for this study; research design, including rationale; participant selection and informed consent; and an overview of data collection and analysis. Also explained are an overview of the potential limitations of the study and the Human Subjects Internal Review Board procedures.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study is based on theoretical foundations of teacher adaptability. As mentioned in chapter 2, in their literature review of teachers’ instructional adaptations mentioned, Parsons et al. (2017) analyzed 64 empirical studies published between 1975 and 2014 about teacher adaptability. Using theories of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and teacher metacognition (Duffy, Miller, Parsons, & Meloth, 2009), their study revealed that research on teacher adaptability falls into five categories: (1) Affordances for Adaptive Teaching, (2) Teacher Factors Associated with Adaptive Teaching, (3) Nature of Adaptive Teaching, (4) Barriers to Adaptive Teaching, and (5) Effects of Adaptive Teaching. Parsons and colleagues point out that in order for teachers to effectively navigate the daily, fluid, unpredictable nature of the classroom, “teachers must be flexible and creative in their approach as they adapt their instruction to support the various learners under their care” (p. 206).

From these categories, the researchers created a “Model of Adaptive Teaching” (See Figure 1) illustrating how “adaptive teaching takes place in the complex social setting of a socially constructed classroom which is influenced by students’ and teachers’ sociohistorical experiences” (p. 230).
This model shows how teacher adaptations are a recursive process informed by teacher factors, such as beliefs, affordances, and barriers, and stimulated by observed student learning, behavior, and motivation. The context of the classroom also plays an important role in the teachers’ instructive adaptations and actions. This theoretical framework informed my analysis in this research inquiry, providing a framework for my interview questions which is detailed in the “Methods of Data Collection” section of this chapter. Additionally, categories including “Teacher Actions,” “Teacher Factors,” “Barriers,” and “Outcomes” were used to organize my findings in creating a framework for adapting independent reading for virtual settings, as explained in Chapter 5: Discussion of Important Themes.
Rationale

In order to capture the creative and flexible approaches teachers applied to their implementation of independent reading, qualitative research was the most fitting approach. This is because its purpose is to describe, explore, and search for meaning, and it is the generally accepted research medium in the field of education (Freebody, 2003).

Conducting grounded theory research is one of many available options for qualitative research in the educational field. Because my primary focus was to determine how teachers adapt independent reading for virtual classes, the grounded theory approach made the most sense in order to meet this specific goal. A narrative would limit the ability to determine this process since it would seek to tell stories of individual experiences of teachers which would not necessarily synthesize their experiences together, nor seek to create an explanation of a process. A traditional case study, while providing an in-depth understanding of a case, would be limited to one teacher at one time versus being able to study the diverse experiences of multiple teachers.

Grounded theory research is also fitting for this topic because my goal was to capture the experiences and processes of teachers in order to generate a theoretical model for adapting independent reading to a virtual context based on the themes which emerged from the research. Using a grounded theory design enabled the generation and explanation of a broad theory which, in this case, explains the various influential and contextual factors as well as the resulting strategies and outcomes that occur when teachers adapt independent reading to a virtual classroom. As existing theories do not address this specific issue, generating a theory grounded in the data provides an explanation that is sensitive to teachers in this specific context (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In order to obtain this in-depth understanding of teachers’ views, the data had to come through teachers’ own words and reflections derived directly from participant data.
(Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was achieved using open coding followed by axial coding procedures to connect the categories and create an emerging theory, as detailed below. The understandings from this theory have the potential to be a valuable guide for teachers, teacher practitioners, preservice teachers in training, teacher educators, and school administrators.

**Participant Selection and Informed Consent Process**

This study included six secondary English Language Arts teachers who were selected using three criteria. The teachers needed to: (1) express a passion for independent reading, (2) teach virtually for part or all of the 2020-2021 school year, and (3) plan to implement independent reading while teaching virtually. To determine teachers who were passionate about independent reading, I looked for teachers who exhibited one or more of the following: (1) published positive views on independent reading through social media, blog posts, or other public forums, (2) personal knowledge of the teachers’ implementation of independent reading, or (3) recommendations by another teacher through snowball sampling. Using purposeful sampling of individuals to interview, an overview of the study and its goals was sent via email to eight teachers in September 2020 (see Appendix A. Information Letter). Six teachers responded and expressed interest in being interviewed. Upon receiving emails in return indicating their interest, teachers were invited to sign the consent form (see Appendix B. Consent Form) and schedule an interview at their convenience. This streamlined recruitment process enabled interviews to take place with each of the teachers during the time that they were teaching virtually. All but one teacher have since returned to hybrid or in-person teaching formats as of May 2021. Interviewing participants during the time they were navigating virtual independent reading captured the authentic thoughts and experiences as teachers were confronting this challenge during the time of the interview. This
decision also reflects the urgent need for more information to help teachers shift their practices to virtual formats.

**Methods of Data Collection**

Each individual participated in two interviews of approximately forty-five minutes in length per interview. These video call interviews enabled the collection of data more than once from each source as well as the return to data sources for more information throughout the study until data saturation was achieved (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Each interview was recorded using Zoom, Webex, or Microsoft Teams video conferencing platforms, dependent on the participant’s preference, at a mutually agreed upon time. At the start of each interview, I informed the participant that I would be recording the interview and assured them of their confidentiality.

During the first interview, I asked questions about the teacher’s prior experience with independent reading, including routines, roles, perceived benefits and value, challenges, definitions of key terms, and origins of how they arrived at using the practice in their classes (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What values/beliefs do teachers have about independent reading?</strong></td>
<td>• In what ways does independent reading factor into your reading instruction pedagogy?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the challenges of this practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What value does this practice have?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How do teachers define independent reading?</strong></td>
<td>• What does independent reading mean to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How do you explain independent reading to your students?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you call independent reading and why?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What did independent reading look like in your classroom pre-pandemic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do teachers arrive at the practice of incorporating independent reading into their classrooms (ex. Influences, resources, experiences, etc.)?</strong></td>
<td>• What is your background with independent reading?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How did you decide to use independent reading in your classroom?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What training have you received on independent reading implementation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do you feel that independent reading is supported by your school/administration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you tell other stakeholders (parents, guardians, administrators, other teachers) about independent reading?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How has it changed from when you first implemented independent reading?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the second interview, I asked questions about how the teacher was adapting the practice to a virtual space, including questions about revised routines, roles, benefits, challenges and any follow-up questions I had from the initial interview (see Table 3). Once complete, recordings were transcribed.

**Table 3. Research Questions and Corresponding Second Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| How do teachers perceive the ways they stay true to their beliefs/values when teaching Independent reading in a virtual classroom? | • What changes have you made to your implementation of Independent reading to fit in virtual setting?  
• What values are you holding on to? What values have you had to let go of?  
• What do you want to accomplish with Independent reading this year?  
• What are your resources?  
• What are your challenges?  
• On a scale of 1 to 10, how are your students responding to virtual Independent reading? |
| How have teachers changed their implementation of Independent reading for a virtual class? | • What does Independent reading look like in your virtual classroom?  
• How do you provide access to books?  
• How do you build reading community during independent reading?  
• How do you motivate students to read independently?  
• How do teachers create a conducive reading environment during Independent reading in a virtual classroom?  
• What do follow-up, conferencing, and assessment activities during Independent reading look like in a virtual classroom? |

**Data Analysis**

I followed the same interview protocol with all participants, focusing on three core categories: (a) teachers’ beliefs, values, and definitions of independent reading, (b) independent reading implementation in in-person classes, and (c) independent reading implementation in virtual classrooms. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Parsons et al.’s (2017) “Model of Adaptive Teaching” framework provided the research base for these categories, as the questions enabled an understanding of the multidimensional nature of adaptive teaching including teachers’ previous experiences, teacher factors (including beliefs, affordances, and barriers), teacher actions, and instructional contexts and settings which influence adaptive teaching (Parsons et al., 2017).
Immediately following each of interviews, I took detailed notes and reflective memos to record my ideas, thoughts, and insights.

During the data collection process, I employed a systematic approach to grounded theory to examine the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I began by uploading transcripts into the NVivo qualitative data analysis computer program. Once uploaded, I used the software to assign open codes to chunks of the interview, coding the data for major categories of information (Creswell et al., 2007). Some early examples of open codes included “e-resources,” “time limitations,” “concerns,” and “positive experiences.”

After coding the first interview, I used a constant comparative approach to see which codes were the same and which emerged from the second interview, then went back to look for those new codes in the first interview. This process was repeated with each consecutive interview which ultimately resulted in 40 individual codes. Table 4 shows the list of open codes and Figure 3 shows the codes as represented by the number of coding references.

Table 4. List of Open Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adaptations</th>
<th>Modeling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Not knowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>Positive experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs about independent reading</td>
<td>Questioning choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations with students</td>
<td>Reading instruction pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Same but different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointment</td>
<td>Social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E Resources</td>
<td>Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Benefits</td>
<td>- Same organizational structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Limitations</td>
<td>- Virtual organizational structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Tensions</td>
<td>- New organizational structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Effort</td>
<td>Success in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing</td>
<td>Teacher as reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of shared reading experiences</td>
<td>Time limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td>Virtual effect on in-person ind. reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main concerns</td>
<td>Stress in teachers’ private lives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once the codes were established, I used intercoder reliability by having colleagues who were available and knowledgeable in the field review the defined codes I determined from the data set with the transcripts to check for consistency in meanings and application (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Additionally, following the use of intercoder reliability practices, I engaged in peer debriefing by having discussions with knowledgeable colleagues of my findings and analysis in order to get reactions to my codes, significant statements, themes, etc. (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This process helped me refine the codes and describe and explain my thinking.

Finally, I used confirmability in an effort to minimize my judgments as a researcher. In order to do so, I kept records of the logic I used to interpret the data, including notes, interview transcripts, and memos which could be used to confirm the validity of the research, creating an audit trail in order to be transparent on how data were collected and managed (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).
Once the initial open codes were determined, I employed axial coding in which I identified the core phenomenon—adapting independent reading to virtual classrooms—and reexamined the data to build a coding paradigm around this core phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007). This paradigm (see Figure 4) consisted of traditional axial codes including (1) casual conditions, (2) strategies, (3) contextual conditions, (4) intervening conditions, and (5) consequences, taking care to interrelate these categories (Creswell et al., 2007). This visual helped organize my findings and ultimately served as a first draft of the framework presented in chapter five, “Framework for Adapting Independent Reading for Virtual Learning”—the main takeaway of this study.

**Figure 4.** Adapting Independent Reading to Virtual Classrooms Coding Paradigm
At the center of this diagram is the core category: Teachers’ adaptations of independent reading for virtual classrooms. This was identified as the core category because all of the other coding categories related to it (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The diagram portrays “the interrelationship of causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 441). As can be seen from viewing the diagram from left to right, the causal conditions influence the teachers’ adaptations of independent reading for virtual classrooms, and this phenomenon, combined with the context and intervening conditions, influences the strategies used to adapt. This, in turn, results in the consequences/effects. An in-depth discussion of framework that emerged from this initial diagram and subsequent findings is provided in Chapter 5.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The boundaries of this study include the small population being studied and the methodological procedures being used. Because I am using a grounded theory approach with a very purposive and small sample, the results of this study may not prove to be generalizable or replicable. Additionally, because of the nature of grounded theory research and my role as the interviewer and researcher, the findings could be subject to other interpretations.

**Human Subjects Institutional Review Board**

This research project was submitted for approval by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board prior to data collection and analysis. In order to obtain approval, I included an overview of (a.) the informed consent process, (b.) the risks and costs of participation to participants, (c.) the benefits to the participants, and (d.) the assurance of confidentiality to the participants. I received a letter from the IRB stating that approval was not required because I was
not collecting personal identifiable information and the scope of my work did not meet the Federal definition of human subject (see Appendix C. HSIRB Letter).

As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, the findings based on the research methodologies explained in this chapter have the potential to inform and guide ELA teachers’ understandings and utilization of independent reading as a pedagogical practice in both in-person and virtual contexts and to contribute to the body of knowledge on independent reading implementation for teacher educators and teacher preparation programs. In the next chapter, detailed profiles of each of the participants are presented. These profiles enrich understandings of the teachers’ backgrounds including some of the causal and intervening conditions, including their rationales for using independent reading, how they arrived at the practice, and what independent reading looked like in their previous, in-person classes.
CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This chapter gives an overview of each of the teacher participants’ backgrounds, beliefs about independent reading, in-person implementation of independent reading, and trusted professional resources. As pointed out by Parsons et al. (2017) in their “Model of Adaptive Teaching”, specific instructional contexts, student demographics, as well as teacher beliefs, knowledge, experience, and thinking greatly impact the ways in which teachers adapt and thus, understanding the participants’ histories with independent reading prove relevant. All teacher names have been changed.

Teacher Participant #1. Robin

Background

Robin teaches sixth grade English Language Arts at a racially diverse public middle school of approximately nine hundred students in a large midwestern city. She has taught for eleven years in the same district, nine years at her current school, and she is also a graduate of the district in which she teaches. Her classes are large, averaging between 28 and 37 students per class, and the district receives Title I funding. Robin was recently awarded her state’s Middle School English Teacher of the Year recognition, and it is clear by looking at her robust, informative, and engaging teaching blog, which she has maintained for the last four years, exactly why.

Robin recalls being a nonreader until third grade. She recalls a librarian who found out that she loved horses and animals and found books based on this interest. Growing up, Robin says that she didn’t have any teachers who practiced independent reading, but she still found access to books she liked because she lived close to a public library.
What stands out in Robin’s mind as being a turning point for incorporating choice reading into her classes is when she started teaching. When she received the list of books from the curriculum, she remembers wanting to branch out and find other books because she “hated the books she was required to teach.” She also points out that, in her first teaching position at a different school, she didn’t have access to a school library. When she started teaching in her current school, which houses a school library of over 10,000 titles, she felt that this access—both for herself and her students—was instrumental for her development as a reader and as a teacher of reading.

Currently, Robin is taking an active role in changing the culture in her own school as a teacher-leader, providing professional development on a variety of topics, from culturally relevant teaching to independent reading. Robin describes her philosophy that having an adult that is passionate about books is “infectious.” She explains, “If I’m talking to you about books nonstop, the likelihood of you picking up a book is pretty good. If I have ten copies of the book and I’m passionate about it, I’m going to have ten people pick up that book.” And this is true—having witnessed Robin’s book talks (a topic she gives a thorough overview of on her blog), they are sharp, engaging, and make everyone in the room want the book. Robin is also well known at professional conferences for bringing and handing out free books to teachers that attend her presentations.

**Beliefs about Independent Reading**

Independent reading is used in all of Robin’s classes. She calls it one of her “non-negotiables,” and has carefully selected the term “choice reading” to describe the practice in her classes for multiple reasons. First, Robin says there is a preconception about “independent reading” that sounds lonely and isolating. Second, Robin explains that her middle schoolers often come
from elementary classrooms where they are required to fill out “independent reading logs” and thus have a mental stigma attached to those logs that she seeks to change when students get to her middle school classes. She believes that these logs come out of the teachers’ desires to hold kids accountable. “Teachers have the best intentions,” she explains, “but there is also a required level of accountability. Reading logs are the default, and the problematic tendency is that reading logs can be completed without actually reading. There is also no research showing that they encourage the reading appreciation and maturation that we want students to have.” Third, and most important to Robin, the word “choice” is powerful; she tells her students, “you have your own choice, and you can select different things—it’s up to you.”

Robin explains that incorporating choice reading into her classes requires a conscious effort each week to design her routine to include. She believes by making the conscious choice to plan independent reading time into her lessons enables it to become “habit and then it becomes practice.” She makes it a priority to incorporate it into her classes on a daily basis, but she also acknowledges that this depends on the culture and climate a teacher has established in one’s classroom.

*Independent Reading in the Classroom*

When Robin first started implementing independent reading, she explains that she defaulted to a “prescribed notion” of Silent Sustained Reading: reading anything, reading logs for accountability, and time devoted for reading. “You do it, and it’s part of a task—you just get through it.” She also notes that it was easy to slip into the basic mode of accountability for choice reading, citing reading logs and checklists. Wisely, she describes that “compliance is something that’s easy to get. Engagement is something that has to be earned.”
Robin’s transition to having access to her school library was significant, but this also hinged on showing students the element of enjoyment in reading that she felt needed to be present. She acknowledges that when she saw that her students weren’t getting any joy out of reading assigned books that this was a catalyst for developing a classroom library and making resources available to them to get them excited about reading. Robin got serious about her classroom library and expanding her own reading of young adult literature. She started to curate the books through grants, Donors Choose projects, administrative support, discounted book websites, local bookstores, and the use of her own money. According to her, “A current, updated library requires being passionate about making that a priority in your classroom. Kids want current titles, graphic novels, comics, and they need a variety of levels.” Daily book checkout is available in her classroom, and she gives book talks one or two times per week.

In her most recent in-person classes, Robin engages students with at least ten minutes of daily reading time at the beginning of class, explaining that “it’s a way to settle in. It’s a way to make time. When it’s at the end, it gets rushed, dismissed, or it’s the add-on time filler. Books aren’t time fillers. It’s what happens first; it’s the first priority.” She uses a clipboard to keep track of reading habits, including who is able to sit down and settle in, who is able to take the “reader position” which she describes as “looking at the page, tracking with their finger, looking with their eyes,” tracking student choices and interests, and taking notes on how she can diversify what they’re choosing. If, for example, a student is constantly choosing one genre, Robin will specifically suggest a different genre to broaden that students’ reading repertoire. This is a check-in with students, and Robin points out that this requires that the teacher knows what the students are reading. “The impersonality of the reading log is a lot easier,” she says, “but to actually know what a student is reading ups the level of accountability and engagement. It requires a continual
effort to have conversations, provide time, and provide access.” Robin says that figuring out what kind of books students like and getting to know the students as readers takes her from September through December in her classes. She achieves this through multiple conversations with each student about what kind of books they like and don’t like. Robin says that “the most powerful recommendation is not from me, it’s from another kid. It is priceless.” She makes time for student recommendations as often as she can, noting that it’s not a formalized process in her class, but rather something that happens organically. “The more they have their hands on books and are accessing books, the more they will have an opinion, and we want them to have an opinion.” When asked if the reading is graded, Robin points out that, “the moment we take the focus off of the joy and put it on the points, it’s no longer about the actual task, but it’s about the grade.”

*Professional Resources*

Robin cites Donalyn Miller, Colby Sharp, and Pernille Ripp as some of her favorite professional resources. She notes, though, that she didn’t get serious about her own personal reflection as a teacher until she started her blog in 2017. This, she pinpoints, is when she became receptive to hearing other voices and other teachers’ ideas in the field. That required her to look at what other people were saying and what research was saying. She acknowledges that her use of social media and sharing led to a sense of responsibility to see what other voices were saying about the topic. This “journey of reflection,” she says, has caused her to be a curious learner and find out what other teachers and researchers are saying. This awareness has also made Robin confident in her choice to incorporate independent reading into her classes. She explains that she does the research so that when she’s challenged—by administration, caregivers, other teachers—she has the rebuttal, response, or reaction. She rationalizes, “the level of risk is mitigated when you have research on your side.”
Robin also makes use of her school library. She takes her students there once a week and explains that the ultimate goal is to “find a book and read.” In addition to finding books, however, Robin also points out that it’s important for her students to see her and the librarian modeling reading habits including perusing the shelves, touching books, reading a few pages, and putting books back if they’re not right.

While Robin would say that her choice reading is a successful pedagogical practice and that, each year, she has success stories, she acknowledges the reality that, “there are going to be kids whose lives are not changed because you had a classroom library or because you gave them access to books, right?” Many of Robin’s students have been positively impacted, and, she says, many still couldn’t gain access to being a reader. Robin remains optimistic, however, and says that this is the importance of the “practice of longevity” with choice reading: hopefully, the next teacher will get them.

Teacher Participant #2. Shirley

Background

Shirley teaches in a racially and socioeconomically diverse suburban school district of approximately 2,000 students. She teaches a co-taught, combined freshman ELA course with another class period for reading support. Usually, teachers of the course get a description of what the students’ needs are, for example, if they struggle with comprehension, making connections, or vocabulary from the students’ middle school teachers. Shirley explains that her students all have struggles in reading, and their struggles can vary quite a bit. Some students come in testing at a second or third grade reading level, whereas other students’ reading levels are at the sixth or seventh grade level. The average reading level is at between fifth and seventh grade, and within a
year’s time in this reading support course, the teachers can usually get students at least two grade levels up.

Shirley has taught for twenty-two years. She started teaching in a public high school in a major metropolitan, Midwestern city where she taught for six years. She was hired there as a reading teacher, even though she didn’t have a reading background. Like most new teachers, she quips, “I took the job because I needed a job.” At the time, the district offered “emergency credentialing courses,” and Shirley took advantage of this opportunity, taking several reading classes and reading workshops. “That’s where I really learned everything I use now. I feel like I really learned the difference between teaching reading and teaching English, and I had no idea how different the two were.” She relates that this is where she learned how to teach reading skills to secondary students, noting that it was a steep learning curve, but also realizing that these reading skills would ultimately help her be a better English teacher.

Because of her husband’s career, Shirley moved to a suburban high school in a college town. There was no reading program in place, so the principal was very interested in Shirley’s experience in her former district, and Shirley was instrumental in creating a supplemental freshman reading support class there.

In her current district, Shirley was hired as an English teacher and has taught several senior electives. She has continued to work on her Masters in reading instruction and started teaching reading courses in the district ten years ago.

Shirley also reflects that in her own elementary and middle school education, she had forty-five minutes of SSR independent reading time on Fridays. She remembers enjoying that time, which was bolstered by her elementary teachers’ book talks. This, she explains, is what got her hooked on books like Tales of Fourth Grade Nothing, Fudge, and Superfudge. She also attributes
her love of reading to the fact that both of her parents were educators, so not only were there always
books in her house, but it was a value that she grew up with and that her parents modeled for her.

*Beliefs about Independent Reading*

Shirley calls the practice “independent reading” because she wants students to be independent in making their own choices. The whole idea, she explains, is that students are exercising choice. She has been using independent reading for her entire teaching career, noting that during her emergency credentialing, much emphasis was placed on the value of self-selected reading in order to enable students to be able to identify with the characters. In each of the three high schools where she has taught, Shirley’s students have always been racially diverse; however, most of the curriculum she has been required to teach was about characters that looked and sounded nothing like the students in front of her. This, combined with the success she felt from the practice, galvanized independent reading’s importance in her mind. She calls it a staple of her teaching for twenty-two years now.

*Independent Reading in the Classroom*

When defining the practice for students, Shirley explains that when she introduces independent reading, she emphasizes that students can choose whatever book they want. Each year, she tries to get to know her students as quickly as possible by asking them a lot of questions. Often times, she has self-declared haters of reading, and she has a go-to list of books for kids who hate reading based on students’ recommendations from the past. There’s a lot of trial and error, but Shirley is usually successful in matching a student with a book.

Students receive a grade for independent reading. She used to require a reading response each day for what students would read. Now, she creates space for students to talk about reading instead of writing about it. She attributes this to Kelly Gallagher, and now has students share out
what they’re reading, what the book is about, what they like about it, and then who they would recommend the book to. Following this, students are allowed to talk about the books they’re reading. Shirley also conferences with students at least once a month, noting that it’s very easy to tell if students are reading or not based on these one-on-one conversations.

Independent reading in Shirley’s classroom lasts about fifteen to twenty minutes during the reading intervention class time. She says that she always has students read at the beginning of the class period because it’s “a nice way to get students in and settled” and provides a transition for students who are often coming from the chaos of the lunch hour. Her classroom has a mini classroom library, but she relies on the school’s library and librarians for book access and awareness. Shirley expresses gratitude for being able to work with the librarians in her school who are passionate about YA literature and keep up with the new titles each year. She schedules time early on in the year to get students comfortable going to the library and commends the librarians’ engaging book talks and ability to pinpoint an intended audience. For example, they will recommend books for “readers who love messy romances and high drama,” or books for “students who love being on the edge of their seats.” Once students find books, Shirley tells them to give the book at least 15-20 pages before giving up on it. If, however, after those first few chapters, the student doesn’t love the book, she sends them back to look for a new one. During the reading time, Shirley acknowledges that it is “very tempting to do other things while my students are reading” but that she knows that it’s important to model reading behavior. “It’s nice to be able to read,” she explains, and she always picks up a young adult book that someone is reading in her class or something that she knows her students will want to read.
Professional Resources

In addition to Kelly Gallagher, Shirley cites literacy researcher Richard Allington as informing her practice, noting that he “really changed her approach to independent reading” because he offered permission and ideas to let independent reading be just that: much more independent, without having writing assignments attached to them. She also believes in the value of access to books and that schools should supply books to students. “It’s not just teaching students how to fish, but it’s putting the fishing pole in their hand and telling him ‘you don’t have to return this.’” She notes that many of her students fear borrowing books from her library because they don’t want to lose them and risk having to pay a fee. She assures them that that unreturned books are the best problem she could possibly have. She attended workshops with Cris Tovani which helped Shirley refine students interactions a variety of texts and her reading strategy instruction. Shirley now seeks out conference presentations that address how reading can impact students’ social-emotional needs. She explains, “before it was about practicing reading skills though independent reading. Now, I want students to read what they want to read with characters they can identify with. I want the experience to be based much more on the social emotional instead of on reading skills.”

Ultimately, Shirley wants her students to read more, enjoy reading, and develop through reading. She notes that for many of her struggling students that reading is probably something they’ve never enjoyed. She seeks to get them to “fall in love with books that they enjoy reading.” Also, she wants students to make personal and emotional connections to those books.

Shirley characterizes explains that independent reading works for her and her students year after year. She acknowledges that there are, of course, anomalies; however, she attributes her success with the practice to her diligence in setting clear expectations and maintaining those
expectations throughout the year. “Our students are reading books they want to read. It’s also a success because of the volume of young adult literature out there. The YA novels have gotten so good.”

**Teacher Profile #3. Steven**

*Background*

Steven has been working in the same public high school for his twenty-year teaching career. The school is in a diverse suburb of a major midwestern city and has approximately 2,500 students. For the last decade, Steven has taught a combined English with reading support course with a co-teacher and aide. The course spans two class periods, totaling approximately eighty minutes of instruction each day. Students are placed in the class based on their standardized test scores from middle school and teacher recommendations.

*Beliefs about Independent Reading*

Steven is very pragmatic in his definition of independent reading. He explains that “it’s just giving time to read and assistance to students to help them find books.” He has been using independent reading in his classes for at least the last thirteen years. When asked about his rationale, he tells a story of a student he has this year to explicate the value. During virtual learning, Steven’s student refused to show up for the online meetings. She had professed her hatred for online learning early on in the semester. Shortly after the beginning of the year, she was hospitalized. With the help of his co-teacher and school librarians, books were delivered to the student while in the hospital, and the student started reading *The Sun is Also a Star* (2016) by Nicola Yoon. Steven can’t help but chuckle in the interview because suddenly the student started showing up to virtual classes—even though she was on medical leave—to talk about how much she loved the book. This, he explains, is the power of independent reading.
Like this story, each year Steven finds that this sort of reading reinvigoration happens for a handful, maybe a dozen or more of his students. “We find kids that start the year thinking they don’t like reading and it is really just because they haven’t found a book or an author that they enjoy.” He believes that most students probably loved reading or being read to at one time or another when they were young but attributes the loss of reading love on middle school variables, including puberty, tween drama, peer pressure, and the rigid reading requirements of the curriculum. He explains that, by combining independent reading as a course requirement and giving students the time to read, flexibility on what they can read, and good book recommendations, that “we have stories like that each year.”

Steven also knows his student demographic in his reading support class. He explains that many of his students come to his class with negative self-perceptions of reading. “To repair their reading, I need to repair their relationship with reading. No matter how good any one book is, it’s just there’s no one-size-fits-all book.” This, he notes, is why choice is so important. To find the right book, Steven and his co-teacher have ongoing conversations with students, asking them what they have liked to read in the past, what their favorite films and TV shows are, and what hobbies and interests they have in order to find something in a similar vein. Steven leans heavily on his library staff for recommendations and allows students to make the trek to the library during class to meet one-on-one with the librarians—an autonomous moment that he believes also empowers students.

*Independent Reading in the Classroom*

At the beginning of the school year, Steven conducts an experiment in his classes. He gives students forty minutes of time to read, and says that, each year, students lack the stamina to make it the full forty minutes, typically only being able to read for half of that time. By six weeks, he
explains, they have built up the reading stamina and are far enough in their books that when the bell rings after forty minutes, they want to keep reading because they want to finish the chapter.

Steven’s guiding philosophy of independent reading, and the way that he explains it to others, is through metaphor:

If I was a gym teacher, it wouldn’t matter if I can get students in shape for this year. If they stop exercising once they leave me at the end of the year, they’ll be out of shape in a couple of months. They wouldn’t be considered fit or athletic, right? I feel like with reading, if I can help them see that there are books that they like to read and that reading can be a part of what they do, it starts to repair their perceptions of reading and their relationship with it. I tell them from day one that reading is not more fun than video games, but just because you like video games doesn’t mean you cannot also like reading, right? Just different things for different times of the day.

He explains that students often think that it’s one or the other—either they are a reader or a gamer, but his goal is to show that they can be both.

**Professional Resources**

When asked about professional resources Steven uses to inform his independent reading practices, he points to his school reading specialist, his co-teacher, and his school librarians as being instrumental in his understanding of the practice. He cites the reading specialist’s role in creating the “Book Notes” assessment that he has used with his students which asks students to write about the beginning, middle, and end of a book. He relies on school librarians to do book talks and provide recommendations to students when they visit the library.

**Teacher Profile #4. Lynne**

**Background**

Lynne teaches at a large, affluent, suburban public high school of approximately 1,700 students. It is a high-achieving district, touting its 96% graduation rate, 95% post-secondary school attendance, and 25 AP courses on the district website. Lynne has taught for seven years total, and
this is her third year in her current district. She currently teaches a poetry course for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders. In addition to this course in the brick-and-mortar school building, the district has also opened a new virtual school where Lynne teaches eighth grade ELA and twelfth grade AP psychology.

Lynne describes the culture of the English department in her school as one that subscribes to the “old school” language arts model, defining it as “the four by four”—one book and one essay are assigned per marking period. She sees that some teachers are trying to break out of this routine to involve more choice reading and authentic writing assessments, and Lynne considers herself one of these teachers, but she characterizes the shift as a slow, uphill battle.

When asked about her journey toward implementing independent reading, Lynne remembers being interested in the practice as an undergrad studying to become an English teacher. “I knew it was something I wanted to include because I had one high school English teacher who always allowed us to read, and I was just a voracious reader. That’s the only thing I remember from that class.” She recalls that, while in her undergrad program, instructors talked about the value of students choosing their own books, but that her professors—many of whom were former secondary teachers—were typically straightforward about the practice, explaining that it was also something that was often the first thing cut from a class because of other course demands and scheduling.

During her first year teaching, Lynne wanted to try it out and had the support of her district, but she explains that as a new teacher, she lacked confidence at the time. Often wavering in her decision to include independent reading in her freshman ELA course, Lynne attributes this to the fact that she hadn’t yet acquired the resources and tools for working with students who wouldn’t participate or students who would get off task.
Six years later, Lynne is now providing professional development to her district on implementing independent reading. At a district-wide “un-conference,” where teachers signed up to present sessions on their teaching practices, Lynne and another colleague presented on the intersections between reading and social justice, providing an overview of the ways they use independent reading to enable and affirm student identities, especially for students of color through focusing on stories of joy and not just of trauma and police brutality. To round out the presentation, Lynne and her colleague provided a list of suggested texts as well as frameworks for how teachers can get students to discuss books and how to bring independent reading into the curriculum for more sustained, formal study.

**Beliefs about Independent Reading**

When asked to define independent reading, Lynne says her definition mirrors the language of the NCTE Position Statement on Independent Reading which, she notes, she was reading in order to prepare for her conference presentation. She thinks of it as a “protected practice,” one that is a systematic routine that students engage in regularly and that the teacher scaffolds as well. “It’s students reading literally anything that they want,” she explains, while also acknowledging that the inherent value when students read a novel or a set of stories that connect thematically. But, she quips, she has become “aggressive” about finding materials for students, and especially in her quest to find shorter works for those students who don’t have the stamina to read longer texts. She eagerly takes on the challenge of finding the perfect article, comic, or poem that they will enjoy reading.

What Lynne values most about independent reading is that it enables her to empower her students with choice and autonomy over how they spend their time. Lynne has many conversations with her students about choosing what they want to read and shows students that their interests
matter. She also explains that she tells students that she values reading as a cultural, personal, and academic practice. “It’s about learning, getting to know about other cultures, getting to know about your culture, and growing academically and building academic skills.”

*Independent Reading in the Classroom*

Lynne implements independent reading daily for at least ten to twenty minutes in all of her classes, including her poetry and AP psychology classes. Lynne sees this as a valuable routine in her classes, enabling students to have a “soft start.” She creates a cozy classroom environment. With a virtual fire projected on the board, she encourages flexible seating—bean bags, a futon, sitting on the floor—and students can claim their spot at the beginning of class. She explains that this time gives students “a way to work through things they are going through emotionally” and that sometimes the students read, and sometimes they don’t, and that she no longer takes this personally. When reflecting on how her implementation of this practice has changed over time, Lynne explains, “I have become more patient and more tenacious. I’m kinder to students who don’t like to read. When I first started, I took it personally when students didn’t want to read.” She says that now she realized that it isn’t about her and that she can’t control everything. Instead of getting angry about students who choose not to read, she channels that energy into finding “that right book.”

*Professional Resources*

Lynne also notes the huge academic benefits that independent reading affords her students, citing Donalyn Miller, Kelly Gallagher, Penny Kittle, and Nancie Atwell. When she started teaching juniors in her district, Lynne recalls a parent teacher conference where she was giving an overview of the course structure. When she got to the part explaining that students would be reading independently for twenty minutes a day, she started getting a lot of questions from parents,
attributing this to their concerns about SAT scores. She said her response was simple, and that if students were going to do well on the SAT, they needed to read a lot. “The more you read, the better you get, and it fosters a lifelong love of learning.”

Lynne estimates that she has about 1,500 books in her classroom library, almost all of which she has read. To acquire books, she goes to library sales and explains that books are all she asks for birthday and Christmas presents. She also checks books out from the school library or public library for students.

Lynne’s love of independent reading has been bolstered by her interest and involvement with Project Lit, a nonprofit organization which seeks to “eliminate book deserts and promote a love of reading” (Project LIT, n.d.). Having found the program through Twitter, Lynne thought it sounded interesting and when she moved to her new district, she started a local chapter there which is an afterschool book club for students.

Currently, her Project Lit chapter has five students. Lynne would provide a few starter discussion questions, but they would try to ground their reading in “how does this book change who I am as a person or my understanding of the world?” Most of the students in her chapter were from historically lower represented groups or were students of color, and Lynne notes that this speaks to the power and importance of reading affirming books.

**Teacher Profile #5. Franklin**

*Background*

Franklin teaches at a public high school of approximately 1,400 students in a metropolitan suburb of a major midwestern city. The student body is predominantly white, and their socioeconomic status spans the spectrum, from “students in severe poverty to students whose families are multimillionaires.” Franklin has been teaching for 14 years. He has a strong
educational social media presence, and is a strong advocate for, among many things, choice and culturally responsive and reflective texts in secondary schools. Every conversation with Franklin brims with references to current scholarship, conference presentations, and it is clear he keeps his finger on the pulse of educational equity work.

In his current district, Franklin wears a number of hats. Ten years ago, he started at his current school with a full load of traditional English classes, but he has since transitioned into the roles of founder and director for his school’s award-winning writing center, faculty advisor for the school’s literary magazine, instructional coach, department chair, and co-district department chair.

While having always valued student choice in reading, writing, and assessment, Franklin’s career began in a different district which did not embrace a culture of student choice. When he started his first job in his former district, it was very clear that the expectations were to carry out rigid and scripted curriculum which left Franklin feeling like his relationships with students were lacking. During the limited opportunities for student choice, which in his former district were contained to a single unit per year, Franklin notes that he tried to bring autonomy to student reading options, defining his perspective “looking at independent reading broadly,” noting that if a student wanted to read the magazine *Car and Driver*, that he supported that choice. The support he gave students was not reciprocated by his administration in his former school. During one evaluation, he recalls getting “an earful” from his department chair about having students reading graphic novels in his class. Understandably, this frustrated Franklin and the amalgamation of restrictions ultimately pushed him to leave the district.

Now, in his multiple roles in his current district, Franklin is an advocate not only for independent reading, but also for rectifying the curriculum in his district to be more “identity affirming, justice seeking, and equity driven,” and he sees independent reading as one viable outlet
for this work. In his role as co-district department chair, he has written proposals to get more culturally relevant and responsive books and has received upwards of $60,000 in grant money for e-books. Franklin has a high-level view of and influence on the inner workings of the curricular choices being made in his school as well as influence on the professional development of the English faculty at his school. When asked about how his current district compares to his previous one, Franklin says, “in a lot of ways, things are better, and in a lot of ways, things aren’t better.”

In his role as department chair, he has been able to achieve a commitment to a one term unit where all teachers implement literature circles or book clubs in their classrooms. When he first proposed this idea, he tells the story that some teachers looked at him as though this was the most radical idea that they’d ever heard. He went back and reread Nancie Atwell’s work and accurately summarizes that this work is nearly fifty years old, and with a sigh, “this is nothing radical.”

Franklin’s most current experience with independent reading comes from his work in the school writing center. As the coordinator, he has a cohort of students from various grade levels who take a writing center credit course with him as their guide. Throughout the semester, the students work on their “Passion Project” where they are required to design—with consultation and scaffolding from Franklin—a project that is important to them. More specifically, the project needs to address something that they want to advocate for, and Franklin points out that many of his students want to talk about choices or lack thereof in what they’re reading. Starting with an autoethnography, students are asked to unpack their experiences with reading, writing, and assessment as they start to analyze systems within the school and beyond that need change.
Beliefs about Independent Reading

While Franklin’s students are not necessarily participating in the “traditional” concept of independent reading (for example, choosing an independent reading novel to read each day for a set amount of time), Franklin sees this as a very authentic form of independent reading. He observes, “so all these kids are just reading voraciously and independently—whatever they can get their hands on to put things into these projects.” For students who aren’t focusing on reading-related topics for their passion projects, he explains, they are still doing a lot of independent research and, thus, have multiple layers of choice in determining which genres, purposes, and topics best fit their self-selected project. “It may not be typical independent reading in the way we think about it, but they’re also probing different [texts], and it’s exciting to watch that happen.”

Independent Reading in the Classroom

This year, Franklin had a student who started crying as she reread her autoethnography, having come to the realization that, as a result of the reading that was put in front of her all of her school life, that she had internalized white standards of beauty and white standards of knowledge. Franklin explains that this student is Black and wears a hijab. He recounts the moment, saying that the student explained, “I never saw anybody that looked like me or sounded like me or believed like me in anything that I’ve read and I have been fed such a steady diet of classic Canonical texts. I have so internalized everything that was brought to me that I see myself as stupid and ugly.” The student is now taking her experience and using it as an impetus for her Passion Project. She is researching and working to create representative and diverse “build your stack” blog posts for teachers. Not only does this project have the potential to change the reading material that is offered to students, both in her district and beyond, but it also requires a large amount of independent reading via the research that the student is required to complete in order to complete the project.
Another student in the writing center was upset by the lack of #OwnVoices options for teens that are Jewish. #OwnVoices started as a hashtag movement on Twitter calling for more books written by authors who from the same group as the main characters to provide a more authentic perspective and has since gained both momentum and criticism in the publishing industry. Franklin’s student was upset that everything they read that dealt with Jewish characters was about the Holocaust and trauma. He is now working on applying literary criticism to assigned books through an antisemitic lens, focusing specifically on the *Great Gatsby* and exploring issues of caricatures, eugenics, and stereotypes while also compiling lists of books written by Jewish authors that are not about the Holocaust.

*Professional Resources*

Franklin is heavily influenced by and aware of recent inclusive pedagogies. During our conversation, he cited Gholdy Muhammad’s *Cultivating Genius* (2020) and Be Oakley’s GenderFail Press, which is a “publishing and programming initiative that seeks to encourage projects that fosters an intersectional queer subjectivity” (GenderFail, n.d.). Not only do these inform his own approaches, but he brings materials from these readings into his classes, sharing works like Oakley’s *Stonewall was a Riot* and *Radical Softness is a Boundless Form of Resistance* which, he explains, “talks about the ways in which writing and words and signs can be resistance, particularly for marginalized folks who aren’t safe in public spaces.” When discussing his ungrading approach, he references Alfie Kohn, Jesse Stommel, and Jeffrey Moro, all of whom he credits for his shift toward labor-based grading and away from traditional grading. And while these may not be the traditional and oft-cited independent reading luminaries, the philosophies of student autonomy, choice, agency, inclusivity, and engagement inherent in each of these authors’ ideologies align with Franklin’s choice to incorporate this practice into his classroom.
Teacher Profile #6. Amelia

Background

Amelia has taught for twenty years in her district. The junior high where she works now has approximately 1,000 students in grades seven through nine. It is situated in a large district of approximately 4,500 students in total and is located in a large suburb of a major midwestern city. It is a Title I school and has 100% free and reduced lunch.

Amelia started her teaching career as an eleventh and twelfth grade high school English teacher. When the district merged two high schools due to budget cuts, Amelia was involuntarily transferred to her current position teaching eighth grade at the junior high school. Having taught eleventh and twelfth grade literature courses throughout her career, Amelia said she felt like she was having an identity crisis when the switch was made, having always thought of herself as a high school English teacher. She explains, “I taught Macbeth. What was I going to do with eighth graders?” Despite this initial hesitation, the transition to the middle grades has been successful, and now Amelia can’t imagine being anywhere else. This is Amelia’s seventh year teaching in the eighth grade. In addition to teaching, Amelia also maintains a teaching blog and writes for multiple educational websites, sharing her knowledge and teaching ideas with others.

When reflecting on how she began implementing independent reading in her classes, Amelia pinpoints, “I can tell you exactly when it happened.” While still teaching at the high school, she recalls encouraging students to read independently, but she struggled to know how to assess the reading. She also remembers looking at the list of books she had to teach which included Frankenstein and 1984 compared with the list of student Lexile scores for her twelfth graders, realizing “it’s not even just that they don’t want to read this. They can’t.” As she was sharing her concerns with a colleague, the colleague invited her to come with her to see Penny Kittle at a
professional conference. Amelia says it was at this point that she realized, “That’s it. This is what my students need to do. They need to read these kinds of books.” Amelia reached out to her school media center specialist, telling her that she wanted her students to read “teenager books.” The specialist suggested creating book clubs, and asked the principal for Title I money, securing enough books for Amelia’s students to have six new titles, including Stephen Chbosky’s *Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), John Green’s *Fault in Our Stars* (2012), and Ned Vizzini’s *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* (2006). During this process, Amelia was also very transparent with her students, telling them that she was trying something new and valued the input they could give her. Students were encouraged to look at all of the titles and pick one that interested them. When asked how it went, Amelia tells the story of a student who “never read anything—not even directions!” who wouldn’t put *Perks of Being a Wallflower* down.

After this first successful brush with independent reading, Amelia realized she wanted her own classroom library and decided to create a wishlist on Amazon in order to get more books. Here, she was able to add numerous titles, with input from her students. After sharing her list on her blog and social media, Amelia estimates that three hundred books were sent to her doorstep. Since then, Amelia has also applied for and been awarded the runner up for the Penny Kittle Book Love Grant, receiving $500 for books. Just as Amelia was feeling she had a robust library for her high school students, she was transferred to the junior high, teaching eighth graders and realized she would continue reading workshop there. To this day, she has a placard on her classroom library that reads, “This library is dedicated to the class of 2014 because they knew that this could become a thing before I did.”
Beliefs about Independent Reading

With her students, Amelia calls the independent reading time “Choice Book Time.” On the second day of school each year, she introduces her expectations and the overall concept of Choice Book Time by displaying a slide with the covers of all of the books she has read over the summer, hyperlinked to Goodreads. She asks students, “What do you notice? What do you wonder?” and, invariably, her students arrive at the conclusions that (1) their teacher is a reader, and that (2) they will be reading a lot in her class. After this initial discussion, Amelia posts another slide with the covers of the four books they will read together as a class and four book outlines with question marks. Here, she tells students they get to pick anything they want to read.

Amelia sees independent reading as a way to settle in as they get ready for class—both for her students and herself. She says that many students who become readers over the course of their time with her learn that reading for twenty minutes quiets everything, and that they’re more ready to use their brain for English class once they’ve had that transition time. Amelia also points out that students have more to talk about when asked to make connections across other books and texts that they’ve read, which, she notes, is part of the goal. She sees this as a background building booster. “By reading, they expand what they know a little bit about.” As an example, Amelia points to the connections her students made between *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* and *Of Blood and Bone*. Amelia believes independent reading also gives them practice with ELA skills, from summarizing to finding themes.

Philosophically, Amelia believes that being a reader will help students find success in anything that requires thinking more easily and more aptly than people who don’t read. She tells her students that daily reading builds and establishes habits and stamina for reading. “The more words they have, the more successful and academically, and otherwise, they’re going to be.”
shares with her students that, “Someday you’re going to be sitting there at 65 years old, and you look at where your life path is taking you, you’re going to recognize that the reading you did is why who you are.”

Amelia shares love of books with her students. “Reading is my love language. Sharing books and reading with people is how I tell them I love them.” She takes pictures of her own children’s libraries and points out that her library for her students is much larger. She asks them, what does this tell you about how much I love you and value your success in life someday. I don’t care about test scores and assessments, reading is the thing that will sustain you when life is hard, help you academically, and it’s just always there – it’s a comfort. I’m so blessed and privileged to have been given that. A senior reached out to Amelia for a letter of recommendation, telling her, “you and your classroom library are what I think of when I think of why I love school.” Amelia smiles, “That’s why I do what I do.”

*Independent Reading in the Classroom*

Throughout the year, every Tuesday is “Book Talk Tuesday” where Amelia summarizes and advertises one to three titles. She also takes her students to the media center once every 9 weeks, where the media specialist book talks three to four titles. Students, as well, are responsible for their own book talks as the semester progresses. Amelia devotes twenty minutes 2-3 times per week for Choice Book reading, making sure to model her own reading while her students are reading. She also conferences with students and suggests new books as needed during this time.

She also builds excitement around books by having students go “book speed-dating.” In this activity, students make rounds to different sets of books for two minutes per book and fill out a form that asks them to rate the book based on first impressions (from the cover art), flirting (based on the summary and author’s biography), and Getting to Know You (from reading an
excerpt from the book). Students then select “yes,” “maybe,” or “no” on whether they’d like to take the book out. All of the books that the student rates as a “yes” are written down in their Reader Notebooks as future options. She replicates this experience in a “Book Tasting” activity during the year which is similar, “but with treats.”

Amelia continues to add to her library, estimating that she now has over 2,000 titles. She maintains her Amazon wishlist, gets new books through donations, and attends the annual NCTE conference and ALAN workshop which provides the first 500 registrants with a free box of books. The entire back wall of her classroom is shelved and filled with books, and Amelia organizes her library by different colored stickers for different genres: Purple for realistic fiction, the bulk of her library, orange for fantasy, green for mystery, and so on. Amelia also has a few special genres that she separates out, including sports fiction, outdoors/adventure, horror, and graphic novels, as she knows that these are usually student favorites, and she wants to highlight them for easy access. The classroom also has an audiobook section with audio players and headphones, awarded by grant money from the school board.

Professional Resources

In addition to Penny Kittle and Donalyn Miller, Amelia turns to professional conferences for inspiration, including attending the NCTE and ALAN annual conferences each year to build up her professional knowledge on reading pedagogies and to stay current with young adult literature. She is also currently pursuing her Ph.D. and has considered exploring independent reading in middle schools as her dissertation research topic.

Amelia’s love of books is palpable. She loves to talk about books, regularly mentioning authors or titles that she’s read. When she asks her students to predict what they’ll do in her class during the year and students, glancing back at the “wall ‘o books,” inevitably come to the
conclusion that they think they’ll read a lot of books, to which Amelia bursts out enthusiastically, “YES WE ARE!”

Conclusion

An awareness of the teacher participants’ experiences, beliefs and values, implementations of, and professional resources about independent reading illuminate their value for this practice and, thus, their rationales for attempting to adapt independent reading to virtual classrooms as discussed in the next chapter. The following chapter will also address the remaining research questions and present the key findings about the ways teachers’ adaptations of the practice were informed by barriers, teacher factors, and strategies, as well as the consequences of those adaptations in the process of adapting independent reading.
DISCUSSIONS OF IMPORTANT THEMES

This chapter will discuss five key themes based on the final two questions of this research: (1) how teachers perceive the ways they stay true to their beliefs and values when teaching independent reading in a virtual classroom, and (2) how teachers changed their implementation of independent reading for their virtual classes. Merging the grounded theory coding paradigm and Parsons et al.’s (2017) “Model of Adaptive Teaching,” both presented in chapter three, these findings are explained within the categories of “barriers,” “teacher factors,” “teacher actions and strategies,” and “outcomes and consequences.” The themes which emerged are: (1) The barrier of book deserts amid e-book floods; (2) The intuitive appeal of independent reading; (3) The adoption of e-resources; (4) Creating book access; and (5) The free fall of independent reading (See asterisked themes in Figure 5: Adapting Independent Reading for Virtual Learning Framework and Table 5 for Definitions of Themes).

Figure 5. Framework for Adapting Independent Reading for Virtual Learning
Table 5. Definitions of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>The intuitive appeal of independent reading</td>
<td>Teachers’ innate sense and convictions about the value of independent reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>The adoption of e-resources</td>
<td>Teachers’ choices to utilize e-resources to support their independent reading practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating book access</td>
<td>Teachers’ strategies for getting physical books to students</td>
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<tr>
<td>The “free fall” of independent reading</td>
<td>The perceived feeling of lack of control and lack of knowing how successful independent reading was in virtual classrooms</td>
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Barriers

In their survey of literature on teacher adaptability, Parsons et al. (2017) found that one of the categories that influences teacher ability to adapt is the barriers they face—the experiences and situations that impede teacher adaptability. One of the key findings in this study is the contextual challenge which obscured teachers’ abilities to stay true to and adapt their independent reading implementation. While teachers expressed a wide range of barriers including balancing their home lives with teaching schedules, technology issues, and the tremendous amount of effort to plan and execute online lessons, the main challenge for each teacher with regard to independent reading was access to print books.

Theme #1: The Barrier of Book Deserts Amid E-Book Floods

Classroom and school libraries enable immediate access to print books and are a key component of a successful independent reading routine. The major barrier teacher participants expressed in this study was a lack of access to print books despite having a plethora of e-book and e-reader resources available. Though it may seem counterintuitive since Generation Z students are
considered to have strong digital literacy skills, this idea is supported by the findings out of the Singaporean study of pre- and post-leisure reading habits. They discovered that, “despite the ubiquity of devices, devices were underutilised for reading purposes. Students demonstrated a clear preference for print reading over reading digitally both before and during the school closure and relied more on home than online resources for reading materials” (Sun et al., 2020, p. 1). Teacher participants in my study confirmed the value of access to physical books, noting that e-books were less appealing to students because of screen fatigue and the potential for distractions, and they found this lack of access problematic, especially for low-income students and struggling readers. This barrier to physical book access resulted in frustration, and it was also an impediment to the teachers’ ability to continue implementing independent reading in virtual classes. However, as explained later on in this chapter, teachers were also able to find ways to navigate around this issue.

The Matthew Effect of Inequitable Book Access

The Matthew Effect has been described as the notion that there are “cumulative advantages leading to still further advantage, or, conversely, initial disadvantage being accentuated over time” (Shaywitz et al., 1995, p. 894). In my interview with Robin, she observed that many of her students live in book deserts where access to print resources is hard to obtain (Neuman & Moland, 2019). Robin explained that, prior to COVID-19 school closures, “if a child is living within a book desert already, their one access to an oasis is school.” Having that access taken away, she noted, is not only problematic, but also inequitable. Robin explained that her students from low-income households traditionally have less access to books, and her observation is backed by the research. In their studies of summer reading loss, Allington et al. (2010) found that low-income students don’t read during the summer because they don’t own books and they live in areas where there are
limited options to purchase books. Robin reflected, “without physical access to books, I’m going
to say that no, they’re not reading as well. We can’t figure out a way how to bring that same level
of joy [that physical books bring] to it.”

In addition to a lack of physical books at home, Robin also pointed out an additional
obstacle: “We no longer have access to the library. We no longer have access to our classroom
libraries.” Because of the strict lockdown procedures her school district put in place, Robin was
unable to enter her classroom, and so she was unable to access her own store of resources to get to
students. She explained her feeling that “physical books are a thing of the past unless a family is
affluent or has the means to go buy books” and noted that, in her district, “the way that we give
access to books post COVID-19 is through e-books and e-resources.” This, however, came with
its own set of limitations as online resources often come with time stipulations. The virtual reading
platform her district provided only allowed students to read during school hours which, in Robin’s
mind created a barrier for students because “reading happens 24/7.” She explained that when
students were able to get into an e-book during their independent reading time, they couldn’t
continue reading it outside of school hours because the platform restricted student access after 4
PM each day. On top of the time limitations, Robin points out, these platforms also have a limited
number of titles from which to choose.

Additionally, reflections of teachers in this study indicate that book access serves different
purposes for different types of readers, and that a lack of access impacts struggling readers more
than confident ones. In Amelia’s middle-school classes, she explained that “the biggest thing
emerging readers need is to always have that next book available.” While strong readers are able
to finish one successful reading experience and follow it up with the next well-chosen book, for
struggling readers, this isn’t the case. Strong readers—those who know their favorite genre, series,
or author, and have experienced reading success—are more likely to make the effort to find their next book. Struggling and emergent readers, on the other hand, need more handholding in this process. In our interview, Amelia pointed out that her struggling readers needed to be able to stop reading a book that wasn’t working for them and be able to go to the bookshelf and start a new one. Without immediate access to a classroom library and real time guidance and recommendations from a teacher, that momentum for independent reading was lost because of this lack of access. Amelia pointed out that even though her students had a variety of e-book resources at their fingertips which she had explicitly modeled how to access, many of her struggling readers would shrug and say, “Well, I just can’t get a book!”

Struggling readers not only had difficulty finding access to books, Amelia noted, but the distractibility of being online also played a role in students choosing not to read. If students were in in-person class, they would be more closely monitored by the teacher and they would also be surrounded by other student readers, which Amelia notes, is a positive peer pressure. With student cameras off, Amelia explained that she had no way of telling what her students were doing. She asked her district for GoGuardian software which helped her to gain some insight on what her students were doing on their computers and found that many of her students were playing video games during class time. She reflected, “It’s maddening because some kids are having internet connectivity issues and they can’t stay connected. And then I have kids who have no connectivity problems and all the access, and they’re sitting there playing Call of Duty. It’s irritating and their parents can only do so much.” When given the option to read or to play video games, many middle schoolers lack impulse-control, especially students who don’t have a foundation of self-esteem and success with reading.
As expressed by both Robin and Amelia, this lack of access to print books had the biggest impact on those who can potentially benefit the most from independent reading: students whose homes are book deserts and students who struggle with reading. This Matthew Effect where low-ability readers weren’t getting what they needed in order to strengthen their reading skills and enjoyment was perpetuated by lack of access to print books. Out of the six teachers interviewed, Amelia and Robin teach in the lowest SES schools with 100% free and reduced lunch and were the only two who acknowledged that they had to relinquish independent reading more than they would’ve liked. Amelia reflected that, “the number one thing I’ve had to let go of is doing reading during class time. The biggest thing I’ve had to give up is allowing minutes of class time to read, so it’s pretty much just on the back burner. I’m still expecting it, but it’s not taking up time in class because there’s just too much else.” Robin’s frustration was palpable during the interview. She said, “the element of the shared reading experience—which I think choice reading in school gives you—is gone. They are missing out on a person who models that. It’s important to read, and they’re missing out on recommendations. But they’re missing out on a whole host of things when they can’t put their hands on books. Are they reading? They are not. Not as well as in person.” Clearly, barriers to book access not only impact student ability to read, but also the teacher’s ability to nurture this practice in the virtual classroom. This barrier created cognitive dissonance for teachers—a feeling of having to settle for resources that weren’t meeting their needs.

**Teacher Factors**

In their survey of the literature, Parsons et al. (2017) explain that “Teacher Factors” are another important adaptability factor, defining the term as “inherent teacher characteristics that influenced, positively or negatively, a teacher’s ability to adapt” (p. 224). The subcategory they found most common was “Teacher Thinking” that influenced adaptability. In the interviews with
teacher participants, the second theme that emerged closely aligns with this “Teacher Thinking” subcategory, which I label here as the “Intuitive Appeal of Independent Reading.”

Theme #2: Intuitive Appeal of Independent Reading

Throughout the coding process, a vague code kept reappearing: “knowing.” As I revisited the interview transcripts, it became clear that the extracted interview data coded in this way pointed to what I now identify as the “intuitive appeal of independent reading.” Teachers communicated an intuitive value, and thus a rationale, for continuing independent reading despite the challenges they faced. I attribute this value to four factors: Teacher as Reader, Value of Routine, Social Emotional Appeal, and Redefining Rigor.

Teacher as Reader

As mentioned in Chapter 4: Participant Profiles, each of the teachers in the study exhibited a love and appreciation of reading. Lynne reported that she averages 115 to 120 young adult books per year, in part so she can give compelling book talks and in part because she just enjoys reading them. Amelia sets a goal each year to read 50 books and in 2020, she read 64. She posts these books and bolds her recommendations on her teaching blog, categorizing them by fiction written for adults, YA lit, middle grade books, novels written in verse, nonfiction, children’s books, and comics. Many of her selections come from her graduate work while others come from series that she reads with her own children and with her students. Robin believes that “as teachers of writing, we must show our love of reading” and believes that ELA teachers need to talk about books with an enthusiasm that invokes passion and curiosity, and this requires reading a lot of children’s and young adult books. While interviewing Steven, I noticed that his camera was facing three full bookcases and asked if his students had the same view while teaching virtually to which he responded, “Yeah, that’s a conscious choice.” Shirley attributes her love of reading to her junior
high school teachers who gave “a special schedule one day a week where classes were cut shorter and at the end of the day on Fridays, regardless of what class you were in, you finished the last 45 minutes of the day with independent reading. They called is SSR way back then… I really enjoyed that time,” citing favorite books like Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing and Superfudge. She also attributes her love of reading to her parents, both of whom were educators. “It was a value I grew up with.” Asked about her reading life now, she reflected, “there are periods in my life where I have time to read more so than others, but I definitely consider myself a reader, and more so now than ever before.” In my conversation with Franklin, it was difficult to keep up with the number of names, authors, and book titles he referenced throughout our interview.

Though seemingly part of the job description of an ELA teacher, Applegate and Applegate (2004) found in their study of preservice teachers that there can be a “Peter Effect” which is “the condition characterizing those teachers who are charged with conveying to their students an enthusiasm for reading that they [the teachers] do not have” (p. 556). They conclude that, “if teachers cannot effectively promote a love of reading, then the Peter Effect will propagate in many of their students and the cycle will remain unbroken” (p. 561). Gambrell (1996) also points out that reading motivation is fostered when the teacher is a reading model, noting that “teachers become explicit reading models when they share their own reading experiences with students and emphasize how reading enhances and enriches their lives” (p. 20). Each of the teachers in this study read for professional development, pleasure, and as part of their duty as an ELA teacher and thus not only valued independent reading for their students’ sakes, but also felt the value for themselves. This translated into an internal belief that independent reading—based partially on their own reading lives—is important.
Value of Routine

Another intuitive benefit attributed to the continued practice of virtual independent reading was its placeholder as a routine in the class. Research shows that classroom routines increase students’ feelings of confidence and well-being (Avni-Babad, 2011) and serve as an effective procedure for classroom management (Marzano et al., 2003). Lynne acknowledged that not only did independent reading offer opportunities for choice reading, it also was a routine for beginning her class. She explained, “we usually start class and I welcome everybody and give people time to log in and then we start [reading] right away, just like I would in a normal class. Sort of a soft start.” She describes that on a day in November, she put up a virtual fireplace on screen, something she does to establish a cozy mood on a cold day, and something she does as well in her in-person classes during reading time. Shirley explained that her virtual independent reading time “looks the same” as her in-person reading time. “We give them about 15 minutes during our virtual learning time to read their independent reading book. That part hasn’t changed.” She and her co-teacher put students in individual breakout rooms and “skip around from student to student to ask them to turn their cameras on, asking ‘Can you show me what you’re reading? What page are you on right now?’” Having time scheduled for independent reading enabled students to know what to expect when they came to their virtual classrooms, and teachers felt that this predictable practice helped students transition into their classes.

Social Emotional Appeal

Reading for pleasure can have a profound effect on social emotional well-being of youth (Elkin et al., 2003; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998) and teachers in this study rationalized the use of independent reading because they perceived this affective benefit. In their work, Elkin et al. found that, “the story can have the psychological value of showing children that someone else has
been there before them; they enable teenagers to move forward in experience to consider what lies ahead, to contemplate experiences as it were ‘by proxy’ before encountering them directly” (p. 14). Three of the teacher participants in my study also acknowledged this effect and that they valued independent reading because of its ability to address the social emotional needs of their students.

As mentioned in chapter four, Steven points to the value of independent reading using the story of his student who was not showing up for class and then was hospitalized. “We got the books to her mom and her mom got the books to her in the hospital. She read The Sun is Also a Star and loved it to the point where she showed up in class and I don’t even know that she was expected to be in our class. I think she just did it because she wanted to talk about how much she loved that book.” Additionally, Steven sees independent reading time as a place where he can check in with students. “So much of my time during [independent reading] is dealing with the social emotional issues with some of the kids. A lot of that time is used to discreetly have one-on-one problem-solving conversations.”

Shirley also saw this reading time as addressing needs beyond reading skill acquisition. She explains that she has “started attending some conferences that appealed more to students’ social emotional needs and having reading address that, so that has been kind of a new area of research. Students can address trauma through reading or just more of the social emotional aspect of reading whereas before it was just practicing reading skills. Now, we’re kind of sneaking those reading skills in while students are reading books that they really like.” She continues, “my own personal focus in my classroom right now is letting students read books that they want to, characters they can identify with, and having that connection be much more social emotional instead of asking about character development, main ideas, or inferences.”
As mentioned in chapter four, during his autoethnography project, Franklin had a student who, reflecting on her identity as a Black, Muslim young woman, she said, “I never saw anybody that looked like me or sounded like me or believed like me in anything that I’ve read and I have been fed such a steady diet of classical canonical texts, I have so internalized [white standards of beauty and weight] that was brought to me that I see myself as stupid and ugly.” This conversation was heart wrenching to Franklin, and it served as a springboard for the student to work on creating resources for teachers to build more responsive reading into their classrooms.

Redefining Rigor

Some teachers, administrators, and parents question the rigor of independent reading. Miller & Sharp (2018) point out that “Burdened with curriculum demands, [teachers] feel that they do not have time to foster students’ personal reading lives… However, emphasizing academic reading over personal reading is short-sighted and undermines students’ long-term literacy development” (p. 102). In his role as department chair, Franklin also sees his colleagues questioning the practice’s value. He has a unique perspective because he is both practicing independent reading and trying to get other teachers in his department to do the same. He points out that one of the major mental shifts that teachers need to make when they transition from whole-group books to independent reading is that “it doesn’t sound rigorous. People are really tied to these antiquated notions of rigor and that makes it really challenging because it actually is really rigorous in its own way. Rigor doesn’t just mean students are doing tons of work.” Franklin points to the rigorous thinking that occurs when students read books that broaden their understandings of the world. He tells the story of students who were studying grading reform and doing their independent reading with works from Alfie Kohn, Sean Michael Morris, and Jesse Stommel. He reflects how excited his students are because “they’re encountering these things for the first time.”
However, despite his own success in this approach with students, he still sees other teachers resisting the idea of independent reading. “This is one of the biggest pieces of blowback I’ve gotten this semester when we asked people not to assign novels. I got an email from a particularly disgruntled person saying that the fact that we’re not reading whole class novels is ‘pedagogically egregious.’ One of the biggest issues is control. It’s ego.” Franklin explains that teachers often express hesitation to adopt independent reading because they’re worried about assessment. “They are going, ‘I haven’t read it. I haven’t read this book, so how do I hold students accountable? And it’s like, well, you don’t. That’s not really the point here.” “The necessity of moving away from policing reading is really critical.” He also points out that reading can be much more authentic when teachers let go of some of the control and policing of reading. “People cannot imagine kids having rights as readers to skip pages, to read how they want, to move around, to drop a book.” A redefined notion of rigor—one that acknowledged the various silent processes occurring in students’ minds while they read and removed strict assessment measures of reading proficiency—helped Franklin to champion independent reading, both in his own classes and throughout his school.

**Strategies**

Parsons et al. (2017) define “Teacher Actions” as the response to a stimulus that focus on supporting student needs. This, at its core, is the nature of adaptive teaching, elucidating how teachers adapt and reflect on their adaptations. Interestingly, after going through the process of adopting their approaches for virtual learning, many teachers noted that they would likely take these new approaches and continue to use them when they returned to in-person learning.
Theme #3: Adopting E-resources

All teachers in this study transitioned to the use of e-books and online reading material for independent reading, though, as mentioned previously, many lamented the access to physical books. Specific reading platforms that were mentioned during the interviews include Epic, OverDrive, and Hoopla. These platforms make e-books available for students on their phones or tablets. Steven noted the potential benefit of these resources when they return to in-person teaching, saying, “You know where I see it working a lot is when they have the paper copy, but they forgot it at home. They could have the digital copy so they can keep moving forward.” Additionally, some teachers admitted that they felt they were guilty of copyright infringement, providing ripped audiobooks or PDFs of chapters and books on their teacher websites.

Another adaptation was the medium through which teachers engaged students with their online reading. For example, Amelia has traditionally had her students maintain a reader’s notebook with responses to their reading. Prior to the pandemic, these notebooks were physical notebooks that were kept in class. She explains, “One thing I did this year that I think I’ll keep is instead of having them write their responses in their reader’s notebook, they each have a Google slideshow, with each slide as the next response. I can respond, add comments, and pop in whenever I want. I don’t have to go over to the shelf and flip through. It’s just right there.” She added that the medium also allowed her students to be more creative in their responses by including pictures and audio to their presentations.

The use of recording software such as Flipgrid was also mentioned by multiple teachers. For Shirley, she used a recording app in the district-adopted learning platform to have students record their book talks for her class. “Students can just open it up like they’re sending us an email, record and then give us a 30 second to two-minute spiel about what they’re reading, what’s
happening in their book, and what they think of it.” She notes that normally students would be doing these in front of the whole class and that one of the downsides is that she doesn’t share these recordings with other students because “students are so self-conscious about being on camera, let alone recording themselves.” Nevertheless, she appreciates being able to listen and see her students talking about books via the recording. Lynne and Robin both used Flipgrid to have students engage with books which were shared with other students. Lynne explained that there were different prompts students could respond to, including a book talk, a book recommendation, ponderings which she defines as “something that your book made you think about”, questions students had about reading, and a celebrations thread where students could “talk about your goal—they could either admit they didn’t meet their goal and revise a goal for next time or they could humblebrag.”

She said that this worked the first time she implemented it but that “students seem to be sort of over Flipgrid, and I think it’s hard when they don’t know each other as well.” Robin also pointed out the limitations of Flipgrid because, though it simulates a conversation because students were responding to other students’ recordings, recording a response is not truly a dialogic exchange; however, she recognized its value for recording teacher book talks that her students could access whenever they finish a book and are looking for something new to read.

Teachers also used their virtual face-to-face time with students to model reading behaviors and create reading experiences for students. Lynne explained that she kept her camera on while she read with students during independent reading time. During this time, she also posted a Wakelet link in the chat of her virtual platform of “different online reading resources, how to log into our libraries, and different thematic readings depending on what’s going on in the school year.” Steven used the chat feature to engage with students, asking them to “put the title of your book in the chat. How many pages did you read?” Amelia and Lynne both created a virtual “book
tasting” on Google Slides for students to introduce them to new books. Amelia explains that she “set up eight tables which were eight separate slide shows that had six books each, so kids could go through them at each table and would make a list of ones that they liked.”

**Theme #4: Creating Book Access**

Constraints often result in creative workarounds, and teacher participants in this study truly created amazing ways of addressing their biggest barrier—book access—through teacher deliveries, modeling processes of book access, leaning on school librarians, and brainstorming big ideas for future access.

**Teacher Delivery**

One means of getting books to students was by crowdsourcing. When Amelia found out that her school would close in March of 2020, she posted on Facebook that her one wish was that she could get books into the hands of her students. Her followers asked how they could help, and so Amelia created an Amazon Wishlist with six books that were high-interest and cheap. She surveyed her students to see which of the six books they were most interested in. She recalled, still with some disbelief, “people bought them all. And then they asked if they could send more, so I put more books on the list.” Books were sent to her home and she individually gift-wrapped each one, including a note from her with the person’s name who donated the book. She had her husband take all of the books to the post office (she also received money for postage from her followers) and reported that “almost all of my students got a gift-wrapped book sent to them. I had a few students who said, ‘I have enough books’ or “I can go to the library—will you send my book to another kid?” While Amelia knows that receiving these books brought joy to her students, she admits, “you can’t do it again. You can replicate that. It’s not sustainable. And it’s one book—
that’s the sad thing. It’s awesome that each kid gets one book, but then you think, *it’s just one book*.”

Robin also found a way to get books into the hands of students. Her school hosted a virtual visit with young adult author Alicia Williams. To pique student interest, copies of her novel *Genesis Begins Again* were given to students, provided by the local library. Robin recalls, “and it was amazing—that was a beautiful, organic, amazing experience where kids got a chance to read the book and keep the book. But, at the same time, it also involved me driving around [the town] dropping off books. I could only do that for 24 kids. It took two hours to deliver 10 books.” Robin’s district has remained virtual throughout the 2020-2021 school year, and her school library now offers students “curbside pickup” where students can peruse the library catalog, email their requests to library staff, and pick up materials at the school.

Though amazing feats to get books into the hands of their students, both Robin and Amelia acknowledged that it wasn’t sustainable for them to continue to mail or hand deliver books to students because of the time, effort, and inability to replicate these exceptional circumstances on a regular basis.

**Modeling Book Access**

Explicit modeling and instruction on procedures for finding books was another way that teachers expanded opportunities for book access. Lynne explains that during the first weeks of school, she had students complete a scavenger hunt in their house, encouraging them to find out how many books they had. After the initial count, she explains, “they were supposed to ask people within their COVID bubble—ask your mom, your older sister at college, your neighbor who you still eat dinner with—and ask them, what books would you recommend, and do they have access to them?” She also promoted buying books from local bookstores, creating a list of independent
bookstores. She noted, “especially in light of the Black Lives Matter movement, I told them, ‘here are some independent bookstores that are owned by black entrepreneurs that do shipping.” Lynne also modeled her own personal struggles with reading during the pandemic, along with so many other events of 2020. She stated, “I try to model [my reading struggles] really aggressively. I normally read 115 to 120 books per year, and I think I’m on book 75, so that feels abysmal. I didn’t read at all before the election, so I told students, ‘you know what I ended up doing is rereading The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants series. It’s like I needed a gateway book to get back into it.” Amelia also took time to show students how to access books via the public library. Sharing her screen, she explained, “I was showing them how to search the library and then when you look at it, what does it mean?” She explained that she took time to explain how to know how many copies are available, what the waitlist meant, and that the headphones icon meant it was an audiobook. This type of modeling is essential because students need support and encouragement—especially during a tumultuous year—to enable successful reading choices.

School Libraries and Librarians

For those participants who still had access to their school libraries, school librarians and media specialists played a critical role in getting books into the hands of students. Steven recalled that one of the first things his school librarians did was provide students with an order form. His school librarian “took care of it, so we have one easy link which is linked on my course homepage.” This link allowed students to request a book for pickup at the school. Taking this idea one step farther, Shirley’s school librarians “put together book trailers that we were able to share with our students with all of these book titles.” At the time of the interview, her school library was offering home deliveries, something Shirley notes, was “a huge luxury.”
Ideas for Book Distribution

Given the unknown nature of the pandemic at the time of the interview, I asked teacher if they stayed in virtual classrooms what their “dream” scenario would be for getting books into the hands of students, and the answers were creative and may serve as useful ideas for the future.

- **Book Bundles** – Lynne wants her students to be able to fill out a survey with what they’re interested in and the library curates a book bundle, with reduced late fees, delivered to their homes.

- **Book Pickup** – Robin wants a month’s supply of books delivered to students’ doorsteps.

- **Bookmobile** – Amelia laughed as she described her students telling her she should get a bookmobile and drive it around distributing books (and ice cream).

- **Book Drop** – Amelia noted that if the Bookmobile didn’t work out, it would probably be more realistic to have a map of where students lived to determine a central location for a book drop, “where students can check out books and return any that they have.”

- **Little Free Libraries** – Robin mentioned a teacher in her district who is currently raising funds by selling literacy-related shirts and sweatshirts to build and stock Little Free Libraries in her students’ neighborhoods.

**Consequences and Effects**

The final category of adaptive teaching in Parsons et al.’s model (2017) is “Consequences and Effects” of the adaptation strategies implemented. Parsons and colleagues focus on the impact on students as a result of the strategies that were put in place; however, students were not the focus of this study, and so for the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on the consequences of the adaptive strategies on the teachers. The scope of this research was not to study the impact of these adaptations on student readers; rather, it was to focus on the process and effects on teachers.
Theme #5: Feeling the Free Fall

Elaine Garan explains that when teachers practice independent reading, they often feel turmoil over giving up control to students. She writes:

It feels like a free fall. Nevertheless, at some point, if the purpose of schooling is to prepare students for life in society, we must allow them to assume responsibility for their own learning. At some point, we need to take that leap of faith, free fall, and allow students to assume control of their own learning. If we believe what we say about the intrinsic value of reading, then don’t we need to show instead of tell—and let students read? (p. 55)

This free fall was certainly felt by teachers in this study in terms of engaging with virtual independent reading. Indeed, perhaps the unexpected benefit is that virtual learning has provided students more autonomy—more independence in the true sense of the word—in not only what they’re reading but also in their choice to read or not to read. Timothy Shanahan points out this difference, noting that he defines “independent reading” as when “readers choose to read, choose what they want to read, and are accountable to no one for what they read” whereas “required self-selected reading” is when “teachers insist that kids read but allow them to choose the texts” (Shanahan, 2018, para. 3-4). This free fall feeling resulted in both tensions and rationalizations as a result of choosing to implement this practice virtually.

Tensions

Clearly, the year has been full of teaching tensions, and this is no less true for the practice of independent reading. The biggest tension expressed in the interviews was the feeling that independent reading was not going as well virtually as it was in person. When asked to rate their feelings of success with the virtual practice, Shirley gave her class a 5; Lynne, a 5 or 6; Amelia, a 2 or 3, and Robin responded, “are they reading? They are not. Not as well as in person” and “we don’t know if they’re reading with us.” Steven explained that about two-thirds of his students were reading. These, in contrast with all teachers’ ratings in the 8s, 9s, or 10s when asked about their
success with the practice in in-person classrooms suggests that teachers felt like the practice wasn’t going as well it was in-person. Nevertheless, the majority of teachers in this study chose to continue with it.

In response to the free fall feeling, teachers were faced with the tension of changing their fundamental beliefs about the practice because of the virtual format, namely in terms of accountability. For example, Robin noted that her school was using an online reading program that enabled her to be a “super accountability tracker.” That is, she could see what her students were reading, when they were reading, how long they were reading, and their estimated reading rate. But, she notes, she decided not to pursue that level of accountability because she felt that it was not true to her values for independent reading. However, by not holding students accountable, Robin also acknowledged that students weren’t reading. Additionally, Robin talked about the intrinsic pressure to put an independent reading grade in the gradebook. She explained that she chose not to do this because she didn’t want to resort to reading logs, explaining that “The easiest thing would be doing a Google form reading log each week, but that can’t be it if my fundamental application of choice reading is for joy. That can’t be my method of joy.” Robin felt the tension between what she values about the practice and what would be easiest in the virtual format, ultimately opting for the former.

Steven also noted this tension when we discussed virtual accountability of independent reading—something he assesses in in-person classes using “book notes” which has students respond at the beginning, middle, and end of the book. When asked if there is some added level of accountability now that he’s virtual, he responded, “I just can’t come up with a reliable enough measure on a daily basis to make it worth the massive effort it would be.” Lynne, too, points out
that, “it’s hard to know what is happening because cameras are off for the most part, and we’re just not having as many awesome conversations.”

Rationalizations – Better Some than None

Despite the issues of perceived efficacy and accountability, teachers also expressed the idea of accepting the relinquishment of some control during independent reading time. This was apparent when teachers acknowledged that they didn’t expect each student to read all the time, but they chose to continue the practice anyway because they felt that if some students were reading, it was better than having no students reading. This acceptance of the free fall feeling enabled teachers to rationalize the continuation of the practice, acknowledging the unique and difficult impacts that the pandemic and online learning were having on their students. Three teachers expressed the feeling that even if not all of their students were reading, they still considered this to be a valuable practice. Shirley explained that she knew that many of her students weren’t doing the independent reading. “It’s really hard right now, but half of them are doing their independent reading, and with the struggles that my students in this class have, I’m happy that 50% are reading.” When asked why the others weren’t reading, she pointed out that many students have explained that they’re behind in other classes or need to catch up in other areas of the English course. Shirley expressed understanding for the situations in which students found themselves this semester. Shirley found that “because my students who already have some struggles with reading, they oftentimes have struggles with managing time, executive functioning skills. All of those challenges are exacerbated with remote learning.” Shirley explained that students would tell her that they couldn’t read because they were working on other things that mattered or were more pressing to accomplish, and that she was okay with this.
Other teachers also expressed this idea of that it was better to have some students reading than none. Steven reflected, “I don’t think I’m kidding myself when I say I think the top half is doing just as well. I think it’s working well and we’ll keep it that way.” Lynne tells the story that parents have asked her at conferences why she spends ten to fifteen minutes having students read online when it’s the only time she gets to connect with students. She quips, “I can totally see that critique, but my answer is, even if kids aren’t reading, the kids who are reading wouldn’t be if I was talking. So it’s zero kids reading if there wasn’t that time.” She estimates, based on anonymous surveys that “75% of them on average have said they read most of the time. The most common reasons they aren’t reading is because they’re working on other homework or late work.” She also acknowledges that some of her students have reported in their anonymous surveys that “they’re working on other homework or late work” during independent reading time. And some, she says, admit that “they just never do it,” preferring to sleep or start class ten minutes later after independent reading time is over.

Though not all of their students were benefiting from or experiencing independent reading, teachers seemed to both understand why students weren’t reading, giving them grace during this unprecedented time to make their own decisions. This did not deter teachers from continuing the practice because, intuitively, they felt that the benefit of having some of their students reading outweighed the detriment of having none read.

Additional Insights

One factor that emerged outside of the framework was the impact of the teacher’s awareness of the amount of time the school would be closed. When Amelia’s district went virtual in spring 2020, she didn’t know when or if she would return to in-person teaching, whereas in the winter of 2020, she knew that the school closure would last for approximately one month. Not
knowing when they would go back in the spring led to a stronger desire to incorporate independent reading into her virtual classrooms, whereas knowing they would be back in-person in a month in the winter led to a decreased desire to continue the practice because the school closure was only temporary and independent reading could resume once students were back in classes. However, the other five teachers did not know when they would be returning to in-person teaching and, because of this, they were more compelled to make the practice work virtually.

Teachers in this study also had the benefit of administrative support. When asked, each teacher expressed that their administration either fully supported them or didn’t interfere with what they were doing. From pulling books on school library bookshelves to providing money from school budgets for more books, school administrators played a key role in supporting teachers’ decisions to implement independent reading.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the five major themes using the words of the teachers to illustrate the barriers, teacher factors, strategies, and outcomes of adapting independent reading to a virtual platform. Understanding these themes enables a discussion of the implications and potential paths of future inquiry stemming from these findings, as detailed in Chapter 6: Virtual Independent Reading: Implications and Future Directions.
CHAPTER VI

VIRTUAL INDEPENDENT READING: IMPLICATIONS and FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Study in Review

I started this project because I believe independent reading is a valuable pedagogical practice in secondary English Language Arts classrooms. This belief is based on my own experiences as a student, a teacher, a mother, and a reader. When schools closed due to the pandemic, I was curious to see if and how English teachers adapted the practice for their virtual classrooms. In large part, this was because I struggled to envision how I would transform this routine to a virtual space if I was still teaching high school English, yet I believed the practice was all the more important during this time of isolation and social distancing. After initial research, I found that this independent reading in virtual classrooms had not been studied. This is, in part, because teachers hadn’t been forced to go virtual en masse prior to the pandemic, and these unique circumstances created a new, creative solutions. Another reason virtual independent reading may not have been studied previously is because the practice relies so heavily on in-person factors that are hard to achieve virtually, such as book access and conducive classroom environments, or factors that may be perceived as awkward, like reading silently on camera. Given that many schools are still implementing online learning and given the reality that school closures may happen again in the future, understanding how this practice can be transformed for virtual learning is vital so that teachers can better understand how to implement it effectively.

When I started this research, I sought out secondary teachers that had successfully implemented independent reading in their in-person classrooms. After getting their consent to participate in the study, I asked them how they originally arrived at the practice, how they
implemented it in in-person learning, and how they implemented it virtually. From these conversations and subsequent coding of the data, five themes emerged which show the main barriers, teacher factors, and strategies that influence the teachers’ adaptations of the practice as well as the outcomes of the adaptations on teachers. These themes are: (1) The barrier of book deserts amid e-book floods, (2) the intuitive appeal of independent reading, (3) adopting e-resources, (4) creating book access, and (5) feeling the free fall of independent reading.

Now that the project is complete, however, I see that not only did this study generate these themes, but it also shed light on the variety of ways in which teachers approach the practice, both in-person and virtually, the history of the practice, and the affective needs of teachers during this transition. These findings are valuable primarily for teachers and teacher educators, but may also inform policy makers, including superintendents, district administrators, and legislators. These audiences and their respective takeaways are addressed in this chapter.

**Implications for Teachers**

This year has required a tremendous amount of perseverance for teachers. Given the extraordinary teaching contexts they have navigated, there is much to be learned from the decisions and adaptations made during this time. This study gives insight into one adapted practice—the implementation of independent reading—and the implications will help inform teachers who use this practice.

*Coping with the Free Fall*

One of the consequences of adapting to virtual independent reading is that it led teachers to believe that they weren’t doing it as well as they had in-person. This resulted in feelings of “free falling” where they didn’t know if students were reading or getting as much out of independent reading as they had in-person. Teachers expressed that they had to sacrifice a lot in order to make
virtual independent reading work, and this was difficult for them because of the value they place on the practice. These sacrifices included having consistent physical access to books and the successful in-person reading experiences they had created in their pre-pandemic classrooms. Naturally, letting go of these components resulted in frustrations and feelings of inadequacy, but there was also a sense that teachers felt they were doing the best considering these challenging circumstances. This is an important feeling to acknowledge and prepare for, especially for new teachers or teachers who are just starting out with implementing virtual independent reading practices. Teachers must approach the practice with an understanding that they are not likely to achieve 100% participation in this practice while virtual, nor will they always have 100% participation in-person. Virtually, there are too many factors that can’t be controlled, including the students’ home environment, the students’ right to have their camera off, and the students’ choice whether or not to participate. Interestingly, however, despite these challenges, independent reading proved to be a practice that the majority of teachers in this study found valuable enough to continue its implementation virtually, and because of that, they were able to create unique adaptations to the process.

One strategy for dealing with this free fall feeling was providing students with anonymous surveys to gauge students’ use of independent reading time. The results of these surveys allowed teachers to see students’ perceptions of how well they were meeting their reading goals as well as whether or not they were participating in and enjoying their virtual time spent reading. These results gave the teacher more confidence about her decision to continue to implement independent reading virtually because she found that the majority of her students reported that they were reading and enjoying the time. Another strategy was checking in with students in one-on-one
breakout rooms to gauge their time spent reading. These quick checks can be used to assess whether or not virtual independent reading is working in the classroom.

Finally, it was clear that teachers in this study had various purposes for independent reading and that keeping these motivations in mind helped them cope with feelings of free falling. Each of the teachers expressed that they wanted to strengthen their students’ reading and critical thinking skills and believed that independent reading helped achieve this. However, one other very important reason for providing this time was to fostering students’ well-being through books that address their social emotional needs, affirm their identities, engage with relevant issues of social justice, and bring joy to their lives. This was especially important during what has certainly been a challenging year for students.

_Nurturing Teacher Reading Lives_

Teachers must understand the value of nurturing their own reading lives. Being a reader was a trait that not only assisted teachers in making book recommendations and modeling readerly habits, but it is also part of the reason why teachers chose to implement independent reading in the first place—because they understand the value the practice holds for themselves—and continued the practice virtually. When teachers read with their students during independent reading time, it not only models the trait of being a reader, it has the recursive benefit of enabling teachers to have time to nourish their reading lives. Teachers might consider setting goals and keeping track of the books they read throughout the year, like Lynne and Amelia, and sharing these lists and recommendations with students. They may also consider starting or joining professional or personal book clubs for motivation and accountability. In addition to showing students what they are reading during independent reading time, there are also subtle actions teachers can take to advertise their reading lives to students such as including books in the background of their online
meetings or including what they’re reading in their email signatures and on their teacher websites. Teachers should also take time to read young adult books and graphic novels that they can then recommend to students.

_Fostering Virtual Independent Reading_

In this study, teachers used a variety of methods to foster online reading communities with their students. Some commonalities across implementations in this study include the basic tenets of the practice such as time set aside for reading at the beginning of class, providing access to books, teacher modeling, and authentic opportunities to discuss books with peers and teachers. However, there were also many variations on the way the practice was implemented. Though many of the professional resources available for in-person independent reading give detailed checklists for successful independent reading, teachers need to take into consideration the specific needs and variables unique to their classrooms and virtual contexts. Teachers may benefit from an awareness that independent reading can look different in different classroom settings. Below, these variations are organized by what teachers did before, during, and after virtual independent reading time.

_Before Reading_

Teachers may benefit from learning about the variety of methods participants in the study employed to get students excited about books and advertise a variety of titles. One strategy was to include virtual book tastings, as in Lynne and Amelia’s classes, where students were able to peruse and interact with different books online. Both teachers created Google Slides presentations categorized by genre with a selection of books to peruse. Students could interact with the presentations, looking at the covers, reading a few pages of a book, and writing down their initial impressions including a rating for how interested they were in the book and things they liked or didn’t like about it. Lynne also provided a weekly WakeLet document with curated bookmarks to
articles, blogs, tweets, etc. that provided other engaging material for students to read. In Steven and Shirley’s classrooms, students were provided links to their librarians’ webpages which included book trailers—promotional video summaries—and reviews to pique students’ interest in different titles. Librarians at Steven and Shirley’s schools also made it easy for students to request books on their library websites. Robin fostered student engagement via a virtual author visit, which can be an opportunity for students to get interested in books or hear from a favorite author. Franklin guided his students’ text selections by co-researching independent reading material with his students to inform their understandings of issues that were important to them, such as bringing more responsive and representative texts into English curricula. These various means to build interest in reading go a long way toward motivating students to read.

During Reading

Teachers may also benefit from learning that the participants in this study varied in the time and structure of virtual independent reading. More time with students yielded more time for independent reading time, ranging from 15-40 minutes for teachers who had separate reading intervention time with their students. For teachers who didn’t have this separate time with students and had to fit independent reading into their daily or bi-weekly meetings with students, 10-15 minutes on average were devoted to independent reading time. One teacher, because of time constraints, did no independent reading during class time; however, she acknowledged that this was, in part, because she knew she would be returning to in-person learning within a month’s time. These various units of time devoted to independent reading illustrate that independent reading can look different in different classrooms that are impacted by different time and curricular constraints.

The ways teachers structured their independent reading time varied as well, and teachers who are thinking about implementing virtual independent reading in their classes can benefit from
knowing there are a variety of options. These formats included putting students into individual breakout rooms, small groups, whole-class formats, and allowing students to be off-camera. There’s value in each of these online organization arrangements. For Shirley, the individual breakout rooms enabled her to check in on her students and confer with them individually during independent reading time. Individual breakout rooms also take away some of the awkwardness of sitting and reading with a camera on, but still allow the teacher to check in with students and have some measure of accountability. For Robin, small reading groups allowed her students to be able to talk with one another about what they were reading and built small reading communities. The whole-class arrangement in Steven and Lynne’s courses imitated the whole-class experience of in-person reading time; however, many students chose to have their cameras off during this time, and so knowing whether or not they were reading proved difficult.

While all teachers acknowledged that they would’ve like to read with their students during this virtual reading time, this also proved difficult. Teachers used this time instead for conferring with students about their reading or checking in with students about other work or concerns. Only one teacher expressed that she was able to read consistently with her students. Time constraints and the steep learning curve of online teaching may have factored into this decision to not read during this time. This is a choice teachers need to be prepared to make as they consider virtual independent reading. As mentioned in the literature review, an important component of independent reading is that teachers read alongside students. This longstanding recommendation may need to be revised for the reality of virtual settings.

After Reading

Each teacher in this study had different approaches for holding students accountable for their independent reading. Robin chose not to hold students accountable at all, instead prioritizing
student joy with reading and noting that to implement reading logs would shift the focus away from joy and to artificial and easily faked accountability. Other teachers, such as Amelia and Steven held students accountable with online reading notebooks, where students were able to write about their thoughts, questions, and reactions to the books they read. This also enabled Amelia and Steven to respond back to students about their reading. In her breakout rooms, Shirley held students accountable for their reading through conversations about the books. These one-on-one conversations had the added benefit of building relationships with students. Franklin’s approach toward holding students accountable was that their independent reading was leading toward a larger project where students used their readings to inform their understandings of a self-selected issue.

*Prioritizing Physical Book Access*

Teachers felt that access to physical books was a priority and that students benefited from being able to have books in their hands rather than e-books. They pointed out that this was because of issues such as the distractibility of reading on one’s phone or computer and screen fatigue. However, teachers also adopted a variety of e-resources, including online reading platforms and the use of audiobooks. Though not perfect, these resources enabled students to continue reading when they didn’t have access to physical books.

Teachers also need to model the ways of accessing these online resources so that students understand how they work and where they can find them. Teachers need to continue to model how to access e-resources and e-books as they become available. Teachers may also need to model their own struggles, strategies, and successes with the use of e-resources so that their students have a better idea of how to access and overcome online obstacles.
Implications for Teacher Educators

The results of this research also prove useful in teacher preparation courses. When asked about how they arrived at the practice of incorporating independent reading into their classes, only one teacher mentioned that she had been exposed to the idea in her undergraduate teacher preparation courses. Two teachers noted that the practice was addressed in their master’s level coursework. Though this is a small sample, the majority of teachers in this study expressed that their understandings of independent reading came from their upbringing, their own passion for reading, on-site professional development with librarians or reading specialists, or their own pursuit of information on the practice. Explicit teaching of independent reading in preservice teacher education courses may lead to better understandings of the history and research about independent reading. This, in turn, may better prepare teachers to implement independent reading as well as defend and rationalize its use in their classrooms.

Teacher educators may also work toward building teachers’ readerly identities. This may take the form of building in independent reading time into their classes to strengthen preservice teachers’ reading repertoires as well as allowing them to experience independent reading’s benefits. Teacher educators should help preservice teachers understand the resources available for finding high-quality young adult literature, as well. They may consider including studies about teacher reading habits so that teachers understand the connection between their reading lives and those of their students.

Implications for Policy Makers

Though we live in a digital world, it is still essential for students to have access to physical books. This can’t fall solely on teachers’ shoulders because it’s not sustainable, both in terms of time and money. For teachers who were able to provide sustainable access to books, this was in
large part due to their school librarians and media specialists. These faculty play an essential role, and should be funded and supported accordingly, in making books accessible to students. Additionally, librarians played a key role not only in getting books to students, but also building excitement around reading through book talks, book trailers, and other means of advertising and building enthusiasm about books to students. They play a key role in matching students’ interests to texts, helping teachers find books for students, and as resources to teachers on young adult titles.

It is also worth noting that all of the teachers in this study chose to implement independent reading on their own, not because the practice is required or encouraged in their school districts. Rather, the sense is that these teachers are in the minority and that the majority of secondary English teachers in their schools may not be implementing independent reading in-person, let alone virtually. Given the benefits of the practice, and the emerging strategies to engage in virtual independent reading, school districts are encouraged to prioritize ways that they can support teachers who are new to the practice as well as foster a school-wide appreciation and acceptance for independent reading.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study explored the experiences of six secondary ELA teachers who were adapting independent reading in virtual learning settings. Future studies should expand the sample size to include populations of teachers from various school contexts to glean additional barriers, teacher factors, and strategies for adapting the practice as well as outcomes. Additional research may also focus on different teaching populations, including how elementary teachers adapted the process for their students, or how special education teachers or reading specialists and others who provide reading interventions adapted the practice while teaching virtually. Additionally, all teachers who participated in this study had administrative support. This isn’t the case for all teachers, and so this
research does not weigh in on the added barriers that lack of administrative support may pose, nor does it suggest solutions to that challenge. All teachers in this study were implementing virtual independent reading for the first time. Future studies may seek to look at teacher practices after they have had time to further develop, test, and refine strategies for virtual implementation. Future studies may also elaborate on any one of the themes discovered over the course of this research. For example, studies may focus on how to foster teacher reading identities and the effect this has on independent reading practices or other ways that teachers cope with the feeling of the free fall of independent reading. Last, while various studies on the academic and affective impacts of independent reading in in-person formats exist, very few studies are available on how this practice benefits or limits students in virtual learning contexts. This may prove to be the most interesting future direction for studies about the impact of virtual independent reading as it centers those the practice is intended to affect—students.
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Appendix A

Information Letter

Principal investigator: Jonathan Bush
Student investigator: Ellen Foley

Title of Study: Adapting Independent Reading for Virtual Classrooms

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “Adapting Independent Reading for Virtual Classrooms.” This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions you have.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
We are interested in learning about how you have implemented Independent Reading in your classes prior to the pandemic and how you’ve adapted these practices for virtual learning during the pandemic.

Who can participate in this study?
Secondary sixth through twelfth grade ELA teachers who have a passion for and commitment to implementing Independent Reading in their classes can participate. Teachers must also be teaching virtually for at least part of the 2020-2021 academic year.

Where will this study take place?
Interviews will be conducted via video calls.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
If you participate in this study, we will ask you to participate in two hour-long, video call interviews scheduled at your convenience. We may ask you to participate in a short follow-up interview if we have more questions for you.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
You will be invited to participate in two one-hour interviews and possibly a short follow-up if we have further questions. We will record the interviews.

What information is being collected during the study?
In this research, our goal is to understand more clearly what independent reading looks like in 6th-12th grade ELA classrooms and how those practices are adapted for virtual learning. This information will be published in a dissertation and may also be shared in future publications and presentations that will reach other educators and researchers.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
There are very few risks involved in this study. You may feel uncomfortable by an interview question. The interviewer will tell you at the beginning of the conversation that you can choose not to answer any question. If you prefer not to answer something, tell the interviewer that you would like to move on to the next question.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**
There are several benefits of participating in this study:

1. You may help other teachers and teacher educators understand the practice of Independent Reading, its benefits, and its challenges.
2. You may help other teachers understand how to adapt this practice to virtual spaces.
3. You may contribute new understandings of Independent Reading for teachers and teacher educators.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**
There are no costs to you for participating in the study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**
We are inviting you to volunteer for this research project. There is no compensation.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**
Only myself and my advisor and co-advisor, Dr. Jonathan Bush and Dr. Karen Vocke, will have access to your interview information. When the information is shared in the dissertation and in any future publications or presentations, a pseudonym will be used to protect your identity and school information.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**
You may choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. There is no penalty for withdrawing from the study. The researcher also reserves the right to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Jonathan Bush and jonathan.bush@wmich.edu or the Research Compliance Office at 269-387-8298.
Appendix B

Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jonathan Bush

Student Investigator: Ellen Foley

Title of Study: Adapting Independent Reading for Virtual Classrooms

1. I have read this informed consent document. By clicking "YES," I confirm that the risks and benefits have been explained to me and that I agree to take part in this study. *

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

2. Full name *

   Enter your answer

3. Email address *

   Enter your answer
Appendix C

HSIRB Approval Letter

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: September 14, 2020

To: Jonathan Bush, Principal Investigator
   Ellen Foley, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: Approval not needed for IRB Project Number 20-09-01

This letter will serve as confirmation that your project titled “Adapting Independent Reading for Virtual Classrooms” has been reviewed by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Based on that review, the IRB has determined that approval is not required for you to conduct this project because you are not collecting personal identifiable (private) information about individuals and your scope of work does not meet the Federal definition of human subject.

45 CFR 46.102 (f) Human Subject

(f) Human subject means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains:

(1) Data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or
(2) Identifiable private information.

Intervention includes both physical procedures by which data are gathered (for example, venipuncture) and manipulations of the subject or the subject's environment that are performed for research purposes. Interaction includes communication or interpersonal contact between investigator and subject. Private information includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a medical record). Private information must be individually identifiable (i.e., the identity of the subject is or may readily be ascertained by the investigator or associated with the information) in order for obtaining the information to constitute research involving human subjects.

“About whom” – a human subject research project requires the data received from the living individual to be about the person.

Thank you for your concerns about protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects.

A copy of your protocol and a copy of this letter will be maintained in the IRB files.