Teachers, Book Nooks, and Reading as Relational: Understanding & Cultivating Meaningful Reading Experiences in Worcester Public Schools

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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Abstract

This project examines the connection between for-pleasure reading and literacy development, as well as trends around non-academic reading skills in schools through the perceptions of educators in Worcester Public Schools. Data was collected through an initial survey and subsequent interviews. This research, coupled with an intervention in the form of a Book Nook built at Columbus Park Elementary School, aims to explore the ability of reading to serve as a transformative experience with the capacity to improve students' connections to themselves, their community, and the world as a whole. The findings demonstrate the present state of for-pleasure reading in the classroom and educators' perspectives and beliefs on the teaching of reading, as well as providing actionable methods through which positive student relationships with reading can be built and sustained.

Introduction

Vignette: Why Libraries?

Because of my father's service in the United States military, my family completed several cross-country moves, landing me in a new town, school system, and life each time. In many places that we lived, I started out knowing absolutely nobody in my area and having to make connections and build my relationships from the ground up. As one can imagine, this was a lonely experience at times, but one that my parents helped me get through by providing me an outlet in the form of reading. They read to me, I read by myself, we read together. By turning to books, I was able to fall into the worlds created by these authors to escape from the often untethered nature of my world.

Additionally, our trips to the public library in whatever town we lived in helped me make friends and find new avenues for community. Whether it was starting conversations with other kids roaming the children's literature section, participating in a group craft activity, or chatting with one of the staff, going to the public library helped me connect with other people when I needed it most. Books and library culture shaped my life at the time on several levels. Not only did I develop a genuine love of reading during these years, the sharing of books and space with others that is an integral part of libraries gave me a place for connection and community. It was also a huge help in school– through reading, I built a significant basis of knowledge which, when going into different school systems, enabled me to dive into new topics and curriculum with ease and excitement.

Commentary on Vignette

The inspiration for this project stems from my background as a lifelong reader, my planned career as a K-12 or youth services librarian, and my belief that meaningful reading experiences in early childhood can be a massive catalyst for change in both the lives of youth and the future of our society. Having these kinds of relationships with stories changed my life as a child, as described in the above vignette. Within the sphere of Praxis, I wanted to honor the impact that early childhood reading had upon my life by implementing a project influenced by these experiences. I knew it probably would not be through any public library programs, or even directly through the Goddard Library at Clark. I was interested in something that relied on active community participation and maintenance. In search of this, I came across the concept of "Little Free Libraries."

A Little Free Library is a structure containing reading material that is situated in a public space. It follows a take-a-book, leave-a-book system, meaning that it is entirely community-oriented, maintained, and engaged. I had seen these around from time to time in both Worcester and in my hometown, but had no idea what their purpose was or how they functioned. That is, until the spring semester of 2024, during which I enrolled in Dr. Cara Berg-Powers' *Civics in Action* class. The final project for this course was to put together a proposal for a civically engaged project that could be enacted in a local capacity, within Main South or Clark. My partner for this project, Maggie Connors, and I narrowed in on the civic properties of a Little Free Library installment.

We began with the intention of constructing and maintaining a Clark-specific Little Free Library on campus, one that would attempt to bridge a gap between the Clark community and Main South and focus on stocking political education texts and culturally diverse literature.

However, after meetings with Dr. Berg-Powers and Laura Robinson, the head of Goddard Library Services, we came to the conclusion that an on-campus Little Free Library fit with neither our scope of interest in youth work nor with our desire to branch out off-campus for Praxis. Through several months of deliberations and research, Maggie and I altered our concept to be more tailored to our passions and ability, but it was only within the first semester of our Praxis sequence that we began, in earnest, to build out the bones of what would become our Praxis Project.

Over Spring and Summer of 2025, Maggie and I connected with Beth Orsini of the Community Book Nook Initiative (or CBNI). Beth has built several Book Nooks in schools in and around Worcester County, and she graciously agreed to partner with us in developing and constructing this Book Nook. Something to note– Beth was not involved in the research portion of our project. Casey Starr, the director of Family and Community Engagement for Worcester Public Schools, was an instrumental figure in the early stages of our project. She enabled us to receive approval and placement at a Worcester Public Schools site, which ended up being Columbus Park Elementary school. It is here that we were connected with Lisa Carignan, the principal of Columbus Park and our primary contact at this school.

During the Fall 2025 Semester, we took a two-pronged approach for what we wanted to accomplish. We first wanted to get the Book Nook itself completely constructed in order to give the students of Columbus Park access to an in-school source of reading material. Simultaneously, we planned to complete our research; interviewing educators to understand the value and present state of reading for pleasure in the classroom. We aimed to synthesize these elements of the project in order to situate our Book Nook in practical application while also gaining deeper insight into how it could be used to support reading for pleasure in a day-to-day sense. During

the Spring 2026 Semester, we completed our data analysis, compiled, and edited material into our respective finished theses.

Problem Statement

Access to Literature

It is extremely important to acknowledge the social and political factors that heavily affect one's *access* to literature (and thus pleasure reading), especially in a student's elementary school years. Many low-income families do not have ready access to books at home, leading to "book deserts." "Book Deserts," a term heavily referenced by Unite for Literacy, are geographic regions in which households are very unlikely to contain >100 books, signifying an "area[s] of structural inequality where families historically do not have access to a regular stock and flow of culturally and linguistically relevant books" (Unite for Literacy, 2024, para. 5). Many areas in Worcester, MA are situated within book deserts, which presents a problem in the form of limited access to reading material for young children living in Worcester. This is exacerbated by the fact that many elementary schools in & around the Worcester area do not have in-school libraries, creating another barrier for early childhood reading development. Without abundant access to books (especially of the aforementioned culturally representative variety) in the home, children may not develop a consistent and positive relationship with reading.

Socioeconomic Status in Main South

It is important to acknowledge the overlap between socioeconomic class and book desert locations. Unite for Literacy (UFL), in collaboration with ESRI and with data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the US Census Bureau, has developed the Book Desert

Map; a visualization of several datasets that, in short, indicate the likelihood of households in a given area having 100+ books in comparison to other households in the United States of America. Estimates for the Main South area put the neighborhood's likelihood of having 100+ books in any given home at "Below Average" (Unite for Literacy 2024). UFL has identified this area as a "Book Equity Focal Area," the organization's term for an area in which there must be significant attention paid to improving book access for the area's population. Why 100 books? UFL posits that this metric represents a tipping point for positive literacy development at several stages of a child's life and educational experience, enabling students with these resources to "consistently read at grade level" (Unite for Literacy 2024).

Research Questions

My research questions have changed greatly as my identity and positionality within and outside of this project has evolved. I began with an interest in exploring educator observations and preferences around reading and Book Nooks, respectively. Below are the research questions that Maggie and I began with, which we built our IRB, survey, and interview questions around.

1) How do Worcester Public Schools educators perceive their students' relationships to reading and literacy?
2) What impact do educators think a Book Nook being built at a Worcester Public Schools site will have on student experiences with reading?
3) What are educators' thoughts, opinions, and preferences regarding the implementation of a Book Nook within their school?

However, over the course of this project, I began to feel more connected with exploring reading for pleasure (RFP) and reading as meaning-making, and thus will be looking at the data through that lens rather than the initial, more surface-level research questions.

1) What are WPS educators' observations around RFP and reading as meaning-making as concerning their students?
2) What are their central beliefs around how literacy is taught and acquired in both an academic and personal setting?
3) What do educators do to strengthen RFP within their classrooms, and what supports or roadblocks do they encounter while doing so?
4) Finally, what are actionable ways educators can help students to build meaningful relationships with reading?

The new questions were devised after we collected data via our initial survey, but before we conducted interviews with our three participants. My updated research questions changed the way I collected data in our secondary collection period (the interviews), but not in our initial collection period (the survey.) Additionally, our core interview questions did not change, but given that we opted for a semi-structured interview format, there was some room for unscripted follow-up questions that enabled me to gather information relevant to my focus.

This shift emerged over the course of several months, prompted by a reconsideration of my planned career and degree path. At the beginning of the Praxis sequence, I planned to complete Clark University's 4+1 Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program with the eventual goal of working as a K-12 school librarian. In the fall semester of 2025, I began reconsidering this choice and moved towards pursuing public librarianship with a focus on youth and children's services; transferring from the MAT program to the 4+1 Master of Arts in Public Administration

(MPA) program as a result. Moving away from a school-based focus in my career trajectory altered the way I thought about this research.

Literature Review

Reading for Pleasure

There is a significant body of research supporting a link between frequently practicing reading for pleasure and improved academic, social-emotional, and mental benefits for children and young people. According to Scholastic, "providing interesting written materials to children increases their reading behavior and achievement, which then, in turn, further increases their desire to read and acquire more books" (Bridges 2013, p. 54). A study exemplifying this, conducted collaboratively by the University of Cambridge and Warwick in the UK and Fudan University in China, explored adolescent relationships to reading and the long-term benefits of reading for pleasure in early childhood (Sun et al., 2024). This study looked at the reading habits of over 10,000 American youth and utilized a range of methods to assess brain structure, cognitive ability, and mental health; including surveying caregivers, neurocognitive assessments, neuroimaging data, and more. The results revealed:

> Early-initiated long-standing childhood RfP [Reading for Pleasure] (early RfP) was highly positively correlated with performance on cognitive tests and significantly negatively correlated with mental health problem scores of young adolescents. These participants with higher early RfP scores exhibited moderately larger total brain cortical areas and volumes… These brain structures were significantly related to their cognitive and mental health scores, and displayed significant mediation effects… MR analysis revealed beneficial causal

> associations of early RfP with adult cognitive performance. (Sun et al., 2024, p. 359)

The greatest insights from Sun et al. are the measurable positive correlations in cognitive ability and mental health demonstrated by people who had higher RFP scores early in life, relevant to this project's research interests in the long-term benefits of RFP & meaning-making through reading. The time over which this study measured RFP outcomes is key– one goal of this project is to lay the groundwork for children in Columbus Park to become lifelong readers. The positive outcomes recorded by Sun et al. over the years of research constituting this paper speak to what we hope will happen at Columbus Park.

The National Literacy Trust's (2024) most recent Annual Literacy Survey stated that youth (specifically youth ages 8-14) who reported enjoyment of reading scored, on average, significantly higher on standardized reading tests than children who reported not reading for pleasure. The authors write,

> "Children and young people who read in their free time at least once a month said it helps them to relax (56.6%) and feel happy (41%), learn new things (50.9%), understand the views of others (32.8%), learn about other cultures (32.4%) and be confident (26.0%). Indeed, twice as many children and young people who enjoy reading in their free time have above average reading skills than children who don't enjoy it (34.2% vs 15.7%)." (para. 17, 2024).

Achievement & Autonomous View

I would like to focus on the "achievement" piece for a moment. By *achievement*, it is meant that these benefits are shown in a more autonomous sense—that is, theories that are based

around “essentializ[ing] the technical components of language… focus[ing] primarily on individuals’ reading skills” (Liebel, 2021, para. 6). This autonomous sense places great importance on numerical indicators revealed in standardized tests and assessments to measure student success. This is the general way of thinking about literacy in K-12 schools, apparent through common phonics and oral reading measures such as the DIBELS assessment and standard curriculum around teaching reading. Autonomous views of literacy are not metrics I wholeheartedly agree with; I think that numerical indicators of success do not capture the whole student and instead often serve to quantify and demoralize young readers. Quantitative data in these settings can be reductive and does not place enough emphasis on students as people who grow and develop throughout their whole lives. Thus, there is a gap in the majority of literature around reading for pleasure, as many of the studies measure academic achievement and these numerical indicators, which does not directly align with my interests in researching reading as a transformative and reflective experience.

Culturally Relevant Literature, Enabling Texts & Meaning-Making

Reading for pleasure is possible with a range of material, but culturally relevant and enabling texts are a particular category within pleasure reading which is uniquely important to our project. Rudine Sims Bishop’s (1990) piece *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors* highlights the importance of multicultural children’s literature and self-affirmation in books . Sims Bishop (1990) characterizes books as windows (into worlds), sliding glass doors (which one can walk through to enter these worlds), and mirrors (reflections of our own lives and experiences). Books as mirrors are particularly important, as they transform reading into a form of self-actualization, and thus help readers understand their relationships with themselves and the

world that surrounds them. Sims Bishop uses this metaphor to illustrate the importance of varied racial, ethnic, and linguistic representation in children's literature in helping young students in their literacy development and relationships to reading.

For students in schools, having meaningful textual experiences with material of an enabling nature helps them to understand themselves and their environments better, giving them pathways to navigate the world. But what exactly is an *enabling text*? Alfred Tatum (2014), the originator of this term, delves into enabling texts and their impacts on students by laying out the idea of enabling texts versus disabling texts. Enabling texts encouraged African American male students to "*become, act,* or *think* differently as a result of what they read" (Tatum, 2014, p. 37), whereas *disabling* texts "reinforced students' perceptions as struggling readers and delegitimized reading as a lever for human development" (Tatum, 2014, p. 37). Earlier, Tatum fleshed out the parameters of enabling texts, laying out the following outcomes as necessary to the classification:

1. Provide a road map for action
2. Connect to personal and community experiences
3. Nurture identity development
4. Stimulate inner reflection. (Tatum 2008, p. 141)

Largely, the texts concerning African American male voices and identities that are taught in schools are of the disabling type, resulting in less meaningful experiences in reading for African American male students. I believe that Tatum's work here is relevant to the experiences of other racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, especially within the scope of our project. Many Main South elementary schools do not have in-school libraries. Those that do often do not have a diverse multicultural array of books reflective of the diversity of students in Main South,

Worcester. All of this serves to reduce student access to enabling texts within school. Overall, Tatum's work highlights the importance of meaningful literacy exchanges– especially in minoritized populations– and the impact of reading as a transformative and enabling experience for youth.

The idea of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors outlined by Sims Bishop (1990) is interlinked here with Tatum's *enabling texts*. Enabling texts represent a place somewhere between mirror and sliding glass door. They are avenues through which one can see themselves and their life experiences reflected, which also act as a gateway through which one can have new and transformative experiences through reading. Sims Bishop also emphasizes the importance of books (as windows and sliding doors) helping to bridge the gap of understanding between people of different identities, saying "[Literature] could, however, help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitude towards difference… we can celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us human" (Sims Bishop 1990, p. 2). This aligns with the way I conceptualize meaningful reading, in that it initiates reflections both inwards and outwards; or, in other words, it uses enabling texts not just for one to understand their own experiences, but also for one to understand the experiences of others.

Gaps and Critiques

The body of scholarship around the intersection of these three factors' (race, class, and book deserts) impact on reading for pleasure is limited. While Tatum, Sims Bishop, the National Literacy Trust, and Sun et al. tap into various combinations of each factor, no meaningful exploration of all these considerations *together* has been comprehensively undertaken. This is meaningful within practical application and academia both. The site of this project– a high-needs

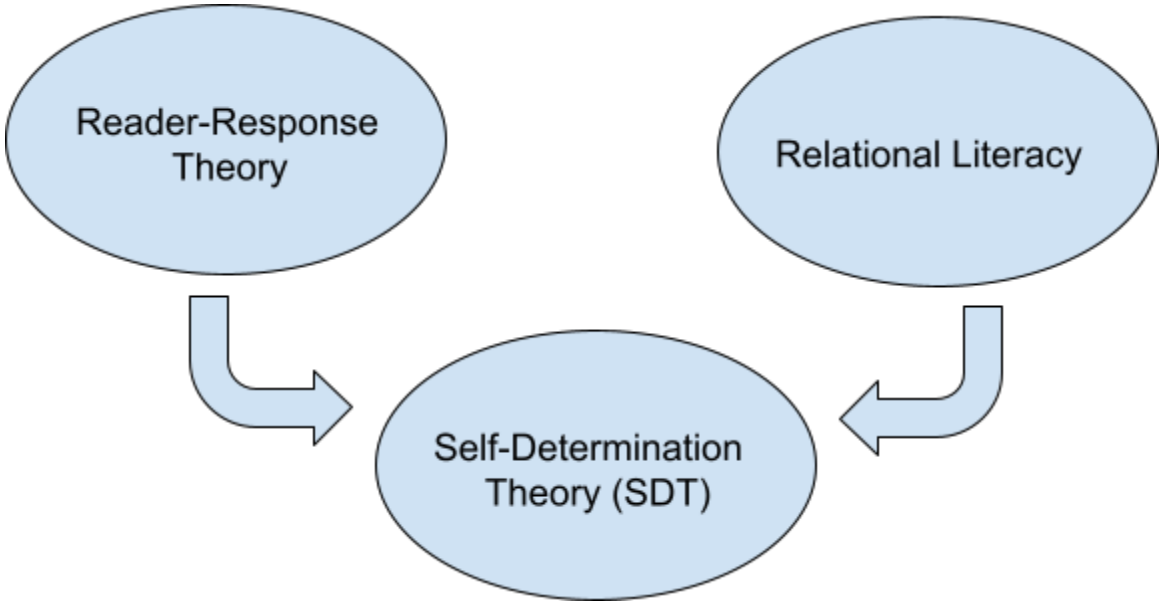
school with primarily non-white and economically lower-class students within a book desert– is far from unique within the United States. Our study aims to fill this gap in the educational literature by explicitly questioning educators on this intersection, synthesizing and interpreting the data with this deficiency in mind.

Additionally, with the aforementioned focus on autonomous views of literacy used to determine success in reading, there is not much attention paid to reading's relational and enabling nature in wider studies. Sims Bishop and Tatum have undoubtedly done much heavy lifting in this department, but even so, their work (Tatum's in particular) has placed emphasis on autonomous results like improved test scores and academic performance. I am interested in the relational and joy-centric benefits of reading, which are heavily under-researched in comparison to these aforementioned performance-based benefits. I intend to be critical of the autonomous concepts, in alignment with my personal values and interest in exploring the under-explored benefits of RFP for students.

Finally, existing RFP research in the field of education is primarily centered around the experiences of *students* with RFP and culturally relevant literature. Granted that this perspective is valuable and noteworthy and has provided us with a structural foundation for this project, we rarely see consideration for the perspective of *teachers* in these matters. Educators are responsible for the in-school teaching & implementation of RFP practices, as well as observing a high frequency and variety of student behaviors around reading. They play an integral role in children's literacy development, building their relationships with reading in a lifelong sense. Exploring their perspective helps us to view the state of classroom RFP through the lens of the teacher and improve educators' ability to foster meaningful engagement with reading for their students.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework is primarily derived from three structures of thought, the first two of which are reader response theory and relational literacy. When these are coupled together, reading becomes meaning-making and identity-forming, enabling people to use reading as a way to understand and connect with themselves and the world around them. Reading then becomes an inherently interpersonal process, building towards reading as relational practice (or relational literacy). These two theories, when fostered in connection with each other, meet students' needs as per the Self-Determination Theory framework, leading to fulfilment and connectedness.



(fig. 1)

Reader-Response Theory

Reader-response theory views readers as more than just passive consumers of a text; instead, they become active meaning-makers through the experience of reading. This theory posits that interacting with texts is not a static action or simply the funneling of information from

book to reader. Rather, reading is transformative, a way to connect with oneself and their lived experiences through stories. One is changed by the text, and in tandem the text itself is transformed by one's interpretation of it. Within an educational environment, reader-response theory aims for students to develop a deeper understanding of and connection to a text by encouraging text-to-self and non-evaluative engagement with the piece (Mitchell 1993, p. 44).

For an example of this concept in action, take my own experience with a book that is incredibly meaningful to me. I first read the book *A Man Called Ove* in 2021. Almost instantly, its story became fundamental to my personality. Not only was it a great book, I also deeply connected with one of the characters, Sonja. She became disabled due to a traumatic accident and dealt with mobility issues and infertility as a result. Both before and after she developed a disability, Sonja lived a rich and wonderful life. She had a wonderful husband and friends, a teaching job that she was fulfilled by, and an accessible home and workplace. At the time, I dealt with near-constant chronic pain and had a hard time believing that I could live life as fully as I wanted to. Reading *A Man Called Ove* and seeing myself in Sonja gave me a sense of fulfilment and hope, the knowledge that my chronic pain was not the end-all-be-all. This was a text-to-self connection, leading to reflection, satisfaction, and an evolution of my sense of self; a primary example of reader-response theory.

Relational Literacy

Reading is inherently relational. A reader consumes a piece of writing that has been created with time, effort, attention, and care, by another person. Using a transformative approach to reading, the reader develops an understanding of and connection to the work and, by extension, its author. Likewise, the author writes a piece in hopes of reaching someone, whether

that be intellectually or emotionally. Expanding further, the books one reads can become a topic of discussion within and outside of one's circle, *and* as a way to bridge the gap between oneself and others' stories and experiences. It is a co-creation of meaning from all parties: author, reader, and community. This brings us to the topic of relational literacy; a practice designed to encourage readers to see reading as a means of connection to others. "Relational literacy is the thread that weaves connections, nurtures friendships, and transforms societies. As educators, it's our duty to prioritize this skill and empower the next generation with tools for building bridges and creating a more united world" (Bloomberg 2023). Relational literacy and reader-response theory often exist in tandem with one another. Similarly to reader-response theory, this school of thought calls for seeing reading as more than just text on a page; unlike reader-response theory, relational literacy specifically calls for reading to become a means of connection from self-to-others rather than an internal way of meaning-making, as reader-response theory is.

To illustrate relational literacy, let's return to my previous example. After initially reading and connecting with *A Man Called Ove*, I read it to a close friend of mine who was autistic– something that Ove, the main character, likely is as well. In our discussions about the book, our relationship with each other deepened and evolved as we recontextualized ourselves in the world of the story and the characters with whom we identified. I felt like I understood her better after we shared this experience, and I believe her experience was likewise. She and I bonded over our respective connections to Backman's book in a way that felt uniquely intimate and interconnected between the two of us. In doing so, we co-created our own special form of meaning triangulated between herself, myself, and the story.

This is relational literacy; a book becoming a means of connection and transformation between people– and yet, it began with the basis of reader-response theory from when I read the

book initially. This example shows how interconnected the two theories are in practice: one can easily lead to another, or they can happen in tandem. It also shows a distinction between the two: the participants and the way through which this connection is formed are distinct to each theory. When discerning between relational literacy and reader-response theory, one should ask themselves: who or what does the reader connect with to create this meaning? Is the textual connection internal or co-created with another person?

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) views people as proactive agents in their own lives with intrinsic desires to explore, learn, and grow through experiences. It posits that people are in possession of a baseline human motivation to better themselves and the world, which is the path to living a meaningful life. However, many of these instincts are opposed by existing social structures, thus inhibiting individuals from living truly fulfilling lives. SDT then calls for addressing a person's psychological needs (such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness) in order to experience this fulfillment.

SDT's presence in the education space largely stems from the Free Schools movement of the 1960s, a push for student autonomy in education spaces. The movement advocated for "radical humanity and freedom in education" (Richard, 2021, p. 4), calling for tearing up the rigid social structures that, in this view, kept students from having a fulfilling educational experience. Self-determination theory advocates for schools to "help satisfy (rather than thwart) the basic psychological needs of both adults and students" with the aim of creating a restorative, growth-oriented environment built on mutual respect and empowerment between students and educators alike (Self-Determination Theory, n.d., para. 4). One of many ways schools

discourage freedom in practice is through controlled reading. As Ferlazzo puts it, "We crush intrinsic motivation by dictating what a child reads based on refusing to allow them to choose based on a kid's reading level, textbook assignment, or other adult-centered reason that keeps books kids love out of their hands" (Ferlazzo, 2020, para. 16). Without freedom of choice and agency in reading (which is not built into most educational frameworks), students' natural desire to learn and grow runs the risk of being stifled; further blocking children from reaching self-determination.

Synthesis

Referring back to my theoretical diagram (fig. 1), I believe that reader-response theory and relational literacy can be applied in conjunction in order to foster the development of self-determination skills in young people. I find this quote from *Encourage Students 'to See Reading as a Relational Experience'* to accurately capture the way these concepts are intertwined and co-sustaining.

> [Relational literacy can] foster intrinsic motivation in our young readers by helping them to see reading as a relational experience rather than a solitary one… We become closer to others in our reading community through dynamic explorations of textual ideas, whether we are crying, laughing, or feeling meditative. We want to talk about those things that seize us with delight, wonder, and awe. (Ferlazzo 2020, para. 11).

Here, Ferlazzo interweaves the intrinsic motivation component central to SDT with the community-oriented element of relational literacy to illustrate a link between the two concepts. While this passage lacks direct connection with reader-response theory, I would like to call back

to the example of *A Man Called Ove*, an instance of co-sustaining reader-response theory and relational literacy, one leading to the other. Finding meaning and transformation in a book happens on many levels, and although it isn't explicitly stated within Ferlazzo's work, the framework I use allows for connection between all three concepts.

I believe that through a combination of relational literacy and reader-response theory oriented interventions, students in schools will have their psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness met, thereby enabling them to learn, grow, and build fulfilling lives as per the framework of SDT.

Relevancy to Project

Within the scope of the Book Nook and pleasure-reading centered research, I view the implementation of the Book Nook as one of the aforementioned interventions. Columbus Park, a school with a high-needs student body operating without a library, has limited access to books that may foster these transformative and fulfilling experiences with literature. Additionally, with the freedom of choice that is a built-in component of the Book Nook, students are able to circumvent the controlled reading so common in schools (and so loathed by SDT and the Free Schools movement). This is not a situation where a child is handed a book by their teacher that has been pre-selected based on their perceived reading level, interests, and abilities– rather, students are able to independently choose a book on their own time and with their own preferences, encouraging a practice of their own agency and ability while also paving the way to transformative textual experiences through reading.

Theory Of Change

Theory of Change

My theory of change in light of this project centers around understanding and meaning-making as agents of change; when one is able to make sense of themselves and the world around them, they are able to self-actualize and become change-makers in their own right. I believe that this can be done through meaningful experiences with literature, outlined in my aforementioned "reflections both inwards and outwards" concept. Access to resources that serve as catalysts for this meaning-making (enabling texts) is a starting point, which I hope to both learn more about and provide through my Praxis project. The intervention part of this piece is the most salient in terms of enacting this starting point; by constructing the Book Nook in a high-needs school and stocking it with enabling texts, I believe that this will serve as an early step in a long journey of self-discovery for the students in Columbus Park Elementary School.

Methods

Methodology

Our project was designed with a mixed-method approach in mind. We chose to use an initial quantitative and qualitative survey and then employ qualitative follow-up interviews for participants who indicated that they were interested in further conversations. This is what Creswell et al., define as sequential explanatory design (sequence A); beginning with quantitative data collection and analysis, moving to qualitative data collection and analysis, and ending with interpretation of the entire analysis (Creswell et al., 2008, p. 193). From this, we attained a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, gleaning unique insights from both types of

information. Additionally, we reached out to the principal of Columbus Park over email several weeks post-construction to better understand the impacts of the Book Nook once it was opened, and will be utilizing that response within our analysis as well.

Epistemological Stance

My epistemological stance informs the lens through which I view my data, the questions and research design, and the framework through which this project was built. This is my understanding of how knowledge is created and developed, and it is directly impacted by my lived experiences and positionality both within and outside of Praxis. I believe that knowledge is connection, and vice versa. Whether this is connection to a text, oneself, or another person, each instance of relatedness that we experience in this world teaches us something. Everything is interpersonal, and I would be remiss to say that this research is an exception. I also believe that stories are a form of data; ripe with meaning and new learnings for all involved. Especially given that interviews were our primary source of information, I felt that understanding the story that emerged from the questions and answers was pivotal to my work on this project. This translates into my methodology, where I interpret my data through the narrative analysis lens.

Site Description

Given the mixed-method nature of our research project, our site is a multi-piece puzzle. The construction of the Book Nook occurred at Columbus Park Elementary School in the neighborhood of Main South. However, our research involves participants from a range of Worcester Public Schools locations. I will lay out a description of the wider environment of Main South and Worcester and Columbus Park School separately.

Main South, Worcester, Massachusetts

Best Neighborhood's Household Income map indicates that the median household income in the neighborhood of Main South falls anywhere from slightly below average to low compared to the median household income across Worcester (Best Neighborhood 2025). The United States Census Bureau also backs this up, albeit on a wider scale. The median household income for the whole of Worcester is between $55,313 and $69,661 (United States Census Bureau). This is the second lowest income category in Massachusetts listed by the Bureau and is significantly lower than the current real median household income of the United States as a whole, which is $80,610 as of 2023 (Guzman & Kollar 2024). In Main South specifically, the median household income was reported in 2023 as $26,376– a significant disparity when compared to the rest of Worcester, and even more in the United States as a whole (Main South CDC p. 1).

It is also important to acknowledge the racial and linguistic population of the area. A 2023 report from the Main South Community Development Corporation (accessed through the Massachusetts State Government) states the socio-ethnic population of the area is primarily BIPOC, identifying approximately 71.1% of the area as being non-white individuals; "43.3% Hispanic or Latino, 32.9% Caucasian, 16.1% African American and 11.7% Asian." (Main South CDC 2). The CDC also states that "21.1% of Main South residents over the age of 18 do not consider themselves proficient in the English language" (Main South CDC p. 1).

Columbus Park & Demographic Information

Columbus Park Elementary School is a public elementary school in the Main South neighborhood of Worcester, Massachusetts. With 381 total enrolled students across Pre-K

through 6th grade, Columbus Park has one of the smaller student body populations in Worcester. Columbus Park's largest racial/ethnic group is Hispanic or Latino at 58.8% of students in the school belonging to this category. 64.3% of the student body is made up of English Language Learners (Mass DOE, 2025). It is located in the Main South neighborhood of Worcester. Around 83% of students are from a low-income background and almost 92% of students are identified as high-needs (Mass DOE, 2025). The school's MCAS average in ELA (fitting into the "Partially Meeting Expectations" range) is 481; several points behind both the district's average score of 483 and Massachusetts' average score of 494 (Mass DOE 2025).

Our main contact at the school is Lisa Carignan, the principal of the school and the person who established the space for the Book Nook. As a result of spatial needs, the school's former library was converted into a classroom– thus, Columbus Park has been operating without an in-school library for several years. The principal of the school, Lisa Carignan, has been our primary contact at the school throughout this process. She shared with Maggie and I the information that Columbus Park had been operating without an in-school library for several years. They had one at one point, but it had to be turned into a classroom as the school was running low on space. The room we are building this Book Nook in is only available because it was too small to be used as a classroom or office, and thus is currently only being utilized as a cool-down regulation space for students.

Positionality

As a researcher and co-designer of this project, I felt it was integral to understand my positionality and background in order to grasp how these two things impact my work. A piece that became more and more salient for me as I developed and continued this project was my

status as a former teaching master's degree candidate. When Maggie and I began conceptualizing our Praxis research and intervention, I planned to pursue Clark University's 4+1 Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Elementary Education program, spending 2025-2027 immersing myself in the study of teaching at an undergraduate and then graduate level. The spring semester of 2025 was both when the MAT application process began and when our first semester of Praxis, where we designed and planned out this project, took place. Most of my research interests at this point were centered around a school-based lens; asking if reading for pleasure would impact students' academic performance, wondering how educators perceive their students' relationships to reading, and planning an intervention based around increasing in-school access to texts students could read for fun. I spent several years angling my career path towards the destination of a K-12 school librarian position, and thus doing Clark's MAT 4+1 program and teaching for a period of time fit into this course.

Over the summer, I began seriously considering the field of youth services librarianship in a public library as an option for my future. In doing so, I found that I was much more passionate about pursuing a career in this area rather than my original plan of K-12 school library work. Realizing that the MAT program was not suited to this career path as much as other 4+1 options were, I began looking into other options and found the Master's in Public Administration (MPA) program. It was in the fall semester of 2025 that I changed paths, transferring out of the MAT program and into the MPA program.

This shift caused a real-time change in my positionality. I went from being someone who planned to work in traditional K-12 schools to being disconnected with teaching environments in a way that I did not anticipate. In tandem with this, my research interests shifted. When this project began, I was interested in researching how teachers encourage for-pleasure reading in

schools and the behaviors they observed in their students in an academic achievement sense when pleasure reading was pushed. As I became more of an outsider in the world of education and refocused my interests to this interpersonal take on reading and literacy development.

As this is a co-research project done with Maggie, our positionality to each other is also important. Maggie and I have known each other since August of 2022, when we met in our Creative Actor course at Clark University. We have been in at least one class together per semester for seven out of eight semesters in our college career, and are good friends outside of classes as well. Our relationship as friends is distinct from our relationship as research collaborators, but they are heavily interlinked and inseparable in many ways. I value both our friendship and our working relationship greatly, but acknowledge that our connection and closeness at times positions others (like our community partners) as outsiders to our dynamic.

I am an outsider in Columbus Park and, for the most part, an outsider in Worcester Public Schools. I spent a semester as a volunteer literacy tutor in Jacob Hiatt Magnet School and volunteered in a few elementary schools around the Main South neighborhood of Worcester as part of the arts-in-education group Main IDEA during my freshman and sophomore year of college. However, these experiences were in a limited capacity and were often parsed in short blocks of time. I still classify myself as an outsider within WPS because, unlike a full or even part-time staff member, I had limited and sporadic contact with the majority of students and staff and was not integrated into daily life within any of the schools I was involved at. That said, I was able to get a sense of the general campus life and youth population of elementary schools within the Main South neighborhood, so I would say that I possess a very basic semi-outsider understanding of elementary school environments within Main South.

Within Columbus Park, however, I was fully an outsider before this project began. Maggie and I were placed at this site after meeting with Casey Starr. Neither Maggie nor I had ever visited or had contact with anybody at Columbus Park before Casey connected us. It has thus become very important over the course of this project to develop and maintain awareness of my own blind spots as an outsider in the various capacities that I am.

Participants

For both our survey and our interviews, our intended subjects were educators within Worcester Public Schools. These subjects could teach any grade within the schools range of 1st through 12th grade, but had to be currently employed as full-time educators in Worcester Public Schools. We relied on our network of Clark alumni to connect with WPS teachers. We asked subjects who completed the survey to contact us via email if they were interested in being interviewed. Four educators reached out, but only three completed the interview portion of this project.

For all components of this project, Maggie and I made research choices based on what was possible within the given access and opportunities we had. As such, we chose to limit our research population for the survey and interviews to graduates of Clark University's 4+1 Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program who were still teaching full-time in Worcester Public Schools. Clarkies like to help each other out (especially those in the Education Department), so we knew that our response rate would likely be bolstered by reaching out to Clark MAT graduates specifically. Within the survey distribution process, we had a valuable resource in the form of Andrea Allen, Clark's Teacher Education Program Coordinator, who had knowledge of and access to the contact information of the former MATs, thus they became our target

population. Andrea emailed the survey to our research demographic without giving us any information on the specific people who received it, thereby maintaining anonymity for the initial survey.

Participation in the secondary component of our research, the interviews, was an option given to any participant that had filled out the initial survey. In the final page of said survey, Maggie and I asked participants to reach out independently if they were open to a follow-up interview and provided our contact information for this purpose. Four educators expressed interest in continuing their participation in this study, but only three completed the interviews. These three educators (known as Educators A, B, and C) were our interviewees.

Data Collection

As previously mentioned, our data collection consisted of an initial survey and a select set of 3 follow-up interviews. The survey took place through Qualtrics, and the interviews were conducted over Zoom. An audio recording was taken of the Zoom meeting, and then subsequently transcribed and analyzed in a textual format rather than a recording. Additionally, Lisa, the principal of the school, provided a follow-up statement after the Book Nook had been running for around one month.

Data Analysis

Within my data analysis, I focus almost exclusively on data collected during Part 2 (i.e. the interview transcripts and the feedback from Lisa via email). While the initial survey data in Part 1 was a helpful preliminary benchmark and method of connecting Maggie and myself with our interviewees, it was not as rich as the conversations we had during our interview period, nor

the testimonial from Lisa after construction. I felt like I got to know these educators during our conversations, forming connections and understanding a fundamental facet of their identities—their roles as educators. Referring back to my epistemological stance, I chose to interpret the interview data through an inductive narrative analysis lens. This means that I view each set of data as a story– one that presents valuable information about the speaker, their lived experiences and belief system, and their interpretation of student reading and meaning-making.

Findings: The What and How

Our project consisted of two parts: research and intervention. Research consisted of an initial survey and follow up interviews asking teachers currently in WPS about what they see in their classrooms regarding reading, their beliefs on best practices in teaching language arts, and the factors that they think impact students' relationships with reading. Educators are responsible for fostering literacy and helping their students build positive relationships with reading in a school setting, and they observe the highest frequency and variety of student behavior around reading. Knowing more about their approaches to teaching and what they notice in their classrooms can help us to better understand and support educators and students both in developing positive relationships with reading. Their perspective is meaningful to us, as well as being under-researched within the RFP field. As for our intervention, Maggie and I constructed a Book Nook in Columbus Park Elementary School in collaboration with the Community Book Nook Initiative. Before we constructed the Nook, Columbus Park did not have a functional centralized library– teachers relied on their in-class book collections. This reality limited meaningful engagement to culturally relevant and enabling texts; but by building the Book Nook, students now have ready access to books germane to their ethnic and linguistic identities.

While the research and intervention did not both take place at Columbus Park, they are complimentary to each other in several ways. This research was not designed to understand student relationships with reading at Columbus Park exclusively; rather, it was intended to reflect the wider environment of WPS in its analysis. Additionally, both components of this project position educators as vital components of students' journeys with reading. I believe reading is inherently relational and built on human connection, and I believe the same thing about teaching; making the WPS educators interviewed here incredibly useful sources of information on both of these topics.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the practical constraints that led us to this structure of research and interventions. Maggie and I did not know what our site for the Book Nook would be when we submitted our initial research proposal for Clark IRB approval, so our intended research population (limited to educators teaching at the site only) was not possible under the given timeline constraints. I will admit that this is a drawback of "finding a solution and working backwards to the problem", something that our advisor for our first semester of Praxis, Dr. Jie Park, warned us against pursuing. However, this ended up being a beneficial challenge, as it exposed us to a perspective we may not have otherwise pursued– that of non-elementary educators in WPS. Maggie and I have been involved in elementary-age education for the majority of our youth work careers, and thus we were quite biased towards pursuing elementary school teachers for our primary research population. The end result of combining this research with this intervention gave us perspective on teaching reading beyond the earliest stages, which became more meaningful when considering the idea of "lifelong readers" and the long-term benefits of a love for reading.

Impact of our Intervention

At Columbus Park, students began using the Book Nook almost immediately after the build was completed, although it wasn't technically "open" for almost a month after that. Students picked out and brought books home for their winter break, and many of them kept said books. Presently, a good portion of material remains in circulation following a more traditional lending library model, but some books have found their place in a Worcester home. Given that Columbus Park, as a Main South School, is classified as a "Book Desert" by Unite for Literacy, this becomes all the more meaningful to families who likely do not have 100+ books in the house. Students took advantage of the updated space as well. Lisa, the principal, told us that kids had been taking tests in the room, choosing books with their teachers, and using the Nook as a quiet social-emotional regulation space. This is something Maggie and I hoped would happen, although didn't explicitly plan for. The room originally began as a "Zen cool-down spot", so in keeping with that, we tried to gear the decorations and furnishings in the room towards a cohesive and calming visual aesthetic. It seems to have worked, as students are benefitting from the environment as well as the materials we provided. All in all, it is clear that students were in need of this resource even before the official opening… but what happened when it opened?

Since the Book Nook began running in its full capacity, it became an institution at Columbus Park for more than just book borrowing. I reached out to Lisa for an update on how kids and teachers are using the Nook one month after it had opened. The following is a direct quote from her:

> At Columbus Park, the Book Nook has quickly become a favorite space for both students and staff. They regularly use it to check out books and enjoy selecting their own reading materials. Students feel proud when they choose books that match their interests… The

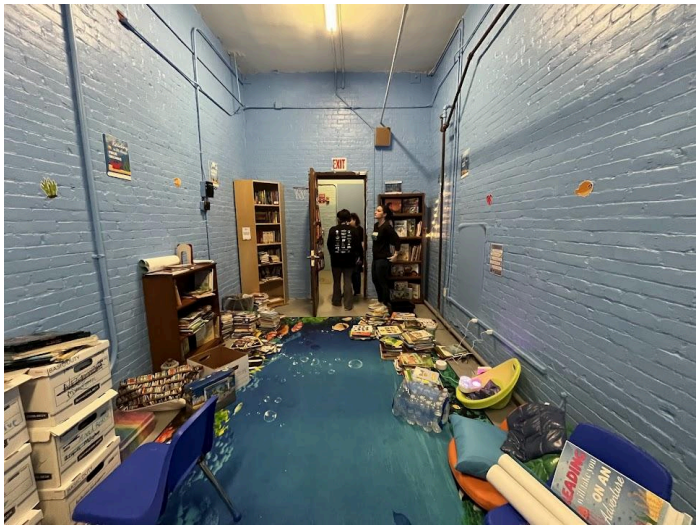
> Book Nook helps teachers meet different reading levels and interests by offering a wide variety of books. Teachers have noticed that students are more motivated and excited about reading activities in the classroom… Overall, the Book Nook has made reading a stronger part of the culture at Columbus Park. We are also seeing improvement in our literacy data as students continue to build their skills because they have more opportunities to read. It is more than just a place to get books. It is a safe and calm space where students can grow as readers, make their own choices, and feel part of a community. (L. Carignan, personal communication, March 3, 2026)

The outcomes we expected from the Book Nook portion of this project were as follows:

a) A permanent space constructed in Columbus Park dedicated to for-pleasure reading.
b) Teachers and students using the Book Nook collaboratively, students using the Nook to select books based on their preferences & interests.
c) A mixture of books remaining in circulation and going home.

From its initial construction to now, the Nook has already seen tremendous growth in visits, book circulation, and engagement. As evidenced by its increasingly high usage by teachers and students alike, the improved literacy data, and the pride students feel exercising their reading autonomy, the Book Nook is a deeply impactful intervention for all at Columbus Park. It shows significant potential for continued development as those at the school become more familiar with using and maintaining it– for example, in the future, teachers may submit district requests or grants to buy books for the Nook that their students asked for, or materials that they envision using to teach. The facilitation & construction of the Nook on our side was about setting up the physical space and system needed for Columbus Park to have a functioning lending library. Now,

the controls are in their hands as they use their own needs and resources to steer the Nook towards longevity & success.




(Above: the Book Nook mid-construction at Columbus Park Elementary School, Dec. 11th, 2025. Below: the Book Nook post-construction at its official opening on Feb. 3rd, 2026.)

Access Beyond Books in Hands

A sentiment often expressed in pro-literacy circles is “getting books in hands,” serving as a sort of gateway to literacy development. It positions access alone as the most pivotal factor in facilitating a love of reading in children; once they have books, they’re on their own. However, what educators said in these interviews was in opposition to that philosophy– access alone is not enough. It was positioned as an important component of fostering joyful readers, but it was *meaningful* access that remained most important: access to enabling texts or books that students could engage with and enjoy, access to modeled reading early in life, and access that led to making a book one’s own by annotating and having ownership over it.

Educator B made the distinction between *enjoyment* and *engagement* in a classroom setting. He first posited enjoyment most often leads to engagement, but then added his belief that a certain type of engagement can exist without enjoyment. However, this kind of engagement is more surface-level and geared towards achievement of autonomous benchmarks in the student’s mind, thus shying away from the transformative or relational power of reading. Educator B stated:

> I think when people enjoy, they are more engaged, so I think enjoyment leads to engagement, but engagement often does not lead to enjoyment, right. So if the kids are enjoying what they're doing, then they're going to be more engaged in the material. But you can get some really, like, motivated students… you give them the right type of assignment, and they'll be really engaged to, like, get a 100 on it, or if you tell them there'll be a reading quiz, right, then they'll pay attention, but that doesn't necessarily

> mean that they'll enjoy it. (Educ. B, Interview, Dec. 8th, 2025)

I found this quite interesting in light of my theoretical framework and criticism of autonomous metrics of success. Often, when these metrics become students' primary motivator within school, their educational experience is less fulfilling on an intrinsic and personal level. I am reminded of Alfie Kohn's article *The Case Against Grades* here; particularly his assertions that prioritizing grades over all else often results in students taking fewer intellectual risks, reducing their ability to think critically, and whittling down their interest in what they're learning. He states:

> A 'grading orientation' and a 'learning orientation' have been shown to be inversely related… every study that has ever investigated the impact on intrinsic motivation of receiving grades (or instructions that emphasize the importance of getting good grades) has found a negative effect. (Kohn, 2011, para. 6)

My conversation with Educ. B coupled with Kohn's writings puts SDT in education front and center— specifically, the theory's claim that the school system actively works against meeting students' needs for competence, autonomy, and fulfillment. Putting good grades over genuinely meaningful educational experiences is an expression of this problem, and one that we see the consequences of through Educ. B's insights. He touches on intrinsic motivation by connecting enjoyment with motivation here, as well as separating extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (or as Kohn puts it, a 'grading orientation' and a 'learning orientation') by juxtaposing grade-based motivation and true enjoyment of learning.

Educator A talked at length about the importance of annotation and ownership, and was perhaps the most vocal out of our three participants on this piece. He strongly believed in ownership as a huge factor in getting kids to reframe reading to be more than "just a school thing." At one point, Educator A said "I think one of the big things is having access to books, to

books that they own, not just books at the library." (Educ. A, Interview, Dec. 3rd, 2025) He used his own experience of annotating a religious text as an example of how one's understanding of a concept can deepen when they feel some form of ownership or autonomy over it, in addition to sharing his practices as a parent. Educ. A still indicated that libraries *are* a significant factor in access and enjoyment, but put them in a secondary position compared to ownership of books. In doing so, he pushed back a bit on libraries and Book Nooks being the *most* significant type of intervention for meaningful reading, which I thought was quite interesting given the fact that mine and Maggie's project is fundamentally built upon the belief that these interventions make the greatest impact.

All three educators attested to the primary role of modeled and shared reading from family and caregivers in facilitating meaningful relationships with reading. This is important both to ensure that children have the *time* to read for pleasure, as well as to *reframe* reading to exist beyond the confines of school. "The biggest thing [is] telling caregivers, 'read around your kids, have books open around them, talk to them about what it is that you're reading,' so they understand that it's not just a school thing" (Educ. A, Interview Dec. 3rd, 2025). Educ. A's specific emphasis on treating reading as a social activity as well as his assertion that caregivers are an integral part of building positive associations with reading demonstrates the importance of human-to-human connection at home to the teaching and learning of reading. Educ. A later discussed how he is raising his own child to love reading, bringing him to the library weekly and reading in front of him often. The theme of calling back to their personal lives regarding this topic continued with Educ. B, who tapped into his own experience with reading as a child. He relayed stories of his mother taking him and his sibling to the library and reading together, citing this as a reason for his enjoyment and competence in reading at an early age and ultimately his

choice of profession as an English teacher. Educ. C talked at length about his connection with the library both when he was a child and now as a teacher, replicating his experience of signing up for a library card by bringing other children to the public library to do the same. All participants demonstrated a strong personal and emotional connection with reading in an interpersonal sense, linking these early interventions with their present-day love of reading.

As a whole, these educators indicated that simply plunking a book into a child's hands and setting them free, on its own, does not inherently lead to meaningful reading experiences. Rather, choice, engagement, connection, and modeled reading *paired* with access makes a child's reading experience meaningful to them. Each piece has some component related to my theoretical framework, whether that is reading *with* another person (relational), experiencing a text-to-self connection (reader-response), or exercising agency and feeling fulfillment through choosing and owning a text (SDT). Each interviewee defined "meaningful access" slightly differently, but in each case, it was clear that intervention does not end at access; rather, access must have something more bolstering it.

The Powers that Be

All educators expressed a tension between a higher-up power (whether that be "district", "curriculum", or "system") and their students' attitudes towards readings. Often, this power tied their hands in terms of ability to reach the student, provide them with proper materials, or design curriculum that fits the needs of their class. In the American school system, many metrics used to determine what reading is valuable are autonomous– that is, pertaining to numerical indicators or standardized benchmarks. Thus, the vast majority of reading material assigned within school curriculum is included with the goal of meeting said autonomous metrics; enabling texts that

reflect student identity are neglected in favor of texts that more closely match the efforts to achieve specific metrics. This achievement often comes at the cost of meaningful reading experiences for students. Educator C in particular cited mismatched expectations between what "the powers that be" expected and what his students actually benefitted from.

> Yeah, and reading's supposed to be fun… That there was something that [schools] were trying to provide artistically or emotionally that, you know, gets lost when we start thinking about, like, standardized testing or, like, even without the MCAS, still thinking about, like, all right, what, like, the books cost money. And they will count the number of milks going in and out of a school… I wish that there was a lot more flexibility. (Educ. C, Interview, Dec. 10th 2025)

There are often roadblocks for people when sweeping standards are set by those who are not directly involved in the day-to-day life of an organization, and school curriculum is no exception to this. The impacts are felt by teachers and students alike, and their consequences extend across both curriculum and material detriments. Educ. A, B, and C all cited what seemed to be a fundamental disconnect between the actions of these higher powers and the actual support needed in their classrooms. As Educ. A expressed:

> There's always the one piece of the fact that there very rarely is enough copies for every student. So the idea of having every kid just take something home and read it is not necessarily doable. (Educ. A, Interview, Dec. 3rd 2025)

The "powers that be" do not only enact these material inhibitions, however. Students are conditioned to have a dislike and borderline distrust of classes, reading—anything that they see as a "school activity." This can largely be traced back to the present emphasis on autonomous results and numerical indicators of success rather than meaningful learning experiences. This

system gives students limited support in accomplishing these demands, so they resign themselves to getting through the school day without an expectation that they will be well-supported and prepared for success. Educ. B shared that, in his experience, English as a Second Language (ESL) students especially have faced significant discouragement in reading due to their treatment within school:

> I think [ESL] students in particular, it's challenging because a lot of their classes are not particularly accessible to them, and while I feel mine is, I think that they get discouraged… a lot of the time, these kids have been not really fully supported in the ways that they need to for years, and so they just kind of have developed a mindset that they're not going to be supported, they're not going to be able to understand the materials, so why bother trying? (Educ. B, Interview, Dec. 8th, 2025)

In my conversation with Educ. B, there was a distinct tension between the results of the system and the efforts of the teacher, demonstrating a concentrated push towards undoing the damage done by previous educational experiences. This educator also stated that he translates every text used in his classroom for his students into any language that they speak, offers extra credit for reading, and actively prompts students to read for non-class purposes. I would like to disclaim that the second intervention is admittedly extrinsically motivated in nature, and therefore presents a bit of a paradox to the critical-of-autonomous metric stance expressed previously. However, I would argue that this is an act of subversion given the systems we have, by incentivizing something traditionally not rewarded in order to encourage student agency in reading for pleasure. The other two educators expressed that they implement similar incentives and encouragement in their classrooms. Educators are asked to untangle years of sensitive and complex feelings for students who have been continually underserved as a result of systemic

issues *and* meet benchmarks, standards, and goals. This is not due to an educator's lack of effort; rather, it is the burden of undoing years of demoralizing educational experiences for one's students created by external mandates from "the powers that be."

Building off of this, a focus on autonomous results and standards means that in schools there exists a hegemonic meaning of *reader* as an identity that students are fed for their entire educational career. Comparisons to the "model reader" lead to students ascribing labels such as "good", "bad", "strong", and "weak" to themselves and others. Educ. B and I talked about what this looks like in a classroom social sense, and he pointed towards interactions between students at either end of the reading proficiency spectrum; where better readers become unkind to those currently reading at a lower level:

> [Some students] are at a fourth or fifth grade reading level, and so it's really important for those kids to just sound out words and work their way through it. I try really hard to make sure it's a shame-free space in that regard, too, because that can be really intimidating and embarrassing for a lot of kids who, like, they know they're not good at it, and they can immediately tell, you know, if some kid is snickering or giggling while they're trying to read, then that, I think that's really embarrassing for them. (Educ. B, Interview Dec. 8th 2025)

I had a lengthy conversation with Educ. A about this in particular, who cited a disconnect between this "model reader" benchmark and his students—and the damage done on both an academic and personal level by ingraining this standard into them. Students comparing themselves to this ideal show signs of lower self-esteem when it comes to reading, according to this participant. He stated:

> But also, I found that a lot of students, I don't think, understand what it actually means to be a strong reader. I think most of them think that being a strong reader, or liking reading, being a good reader, means that you read fast, you understand every word. (Educ. A, Interview, Dec. 3rd, 2025)

When "liking reading" gets warped into meaning only that one possesses good speed and comprehension skills, something has gone terribly wrong. It is much harder for students to form connections and a positive relationship with books when they continually hold themselves to a standard like this, and Educator A has surely picked up on this. As a result of learning under systems that have underserved them and distorted their perception of reading for so long, students can become disempowered and limit themselves in reading efforts– essentially pumping the brakes before the car warms up. When there are both social and educational consequences for trying, students understandably don't want to take reading risks. This value-based idea of themselves and others as readers can be quite damaging for students' relationships with literacy and learning. All in all, this section speaks to the larger consequences of allowing an autonomously incentivized system to determine how students see themselves as readers and learners.

Expectation v. Reality

In each interview, I noted a disconnect between "then" and "now" as noted by my interviewees. Educators referenced time and temporal shifts as a sort of "character" or, perhaps a driving force behind the perceived change in their students and thus their approach to teaching reading. I sort these instances into two categories: time itself and MAT plus time. Time itself was a trend I noticed in educators who had been teaching longer (5+ years). In each interview, it

became a sort of "character" or, perhaps a driving force behind the perceived change in their students and thus their approach to teaching reading. There is a sense of students "then" and students "now." Often, time itself was cited regarding students' decreasing attention span, apathy towards or dislike for reading, and general behavior in school—but never with malice or judgement from any educator. Rather, they viewed it as a new benchmark from which they would adapt their teaching and expectations. Educator A illustrates this:

> We talk about the idea of the fact that over the past three to four years, students kind of live 15 seconds at a time. And so understanding that with the idea of reading, the fact that I know that standard educational research shows that people can't grasp more than one concept in 45 minutes… now it's– you can't even hold their attention for 45 minutes. You're lucky if you can hold their attention for 45 seconds. (Educ. A, Interview, Dec. 3rd, 2025)

The shift in what his students are able to handle in terms of classroom focus is not lost on Educ. A— juxtaposing standard educational research with the reality of his students demonstrates both a commitment to maintain current knowledge of his field and a conscious awareness of how his students function in a practical, everyday sense. Encountering this dichotomy challenges many educators to reevaluate the ways in which they teach; balancing theory and practice in an effort to ensure best outcomes for their students.

In addition to the temporal shift, educators also expressed differences between their expectations of teaching from their days as MAT student teachers to their full-time professional career. This referenced a range of difficulties; from the difference in material access (one educator mentioned that he was able to easily get books for his class while he was in the MAT—now, not so much), dilemmas encountered approaching teaching a class of students who

have vastly different reading levels, or simply a question of what to do without the supports of a wider program. While not directly citing a feeling of unpreparedness or dissatisfaction with their teacher prep program experience, all of the respondents made allusions to the difference between their expectations of teaching as informed by the MAT program and the reality of full-time teaching. As Educator C notes, "And I wish that there was a lot more training around trying to teach a class where maybe not everybody's reading the same thing. Although I do think there is value to doing that" (Educ. C, Interview, Dec. 10th, 2025). I would like to clarify that "then" is an unspecified and murky timeframe, especially for long-term educators. Often, I couldn't tell whether they were talking about the beginning of their MAT student teaching, the beginning of their teaching career, or something else entirely.

I interpret these observations as educators practicing resiliency and reflexivity: growth as teacher and growth as self. Whatever the origin of the "student you're taught to teach" may be, educators do conscious work, *choosing* to release this hegemonic view. In doing so, they do not approach teaching as a static practice. Rather, it is a profession that one continually learns from. It changes and adapts with one's students, their needs, and one's own lived experiences. While they can be a struggle at times (as noted by our participants), shifts away from your expectations aren't inherently negative. In fact, these challenges become *more* meaningful when one makes a conscious effort to reframe them as a self-growth opportunity. In other words, teaching cannot be a practice that an educator is personally removed from and inflexible within; it must be the subject of consistent growth and transformation for the development of both themselves and their students.

On the previous point, I urge the reader to keep in mind the possibility that these Clark MAT-specific observations may have been at the forefront of our participants' minds during

interviews due to the fact that we reached out to them *because* they were in the program. Although we had no intention of collecting data on the MAT program in particular, having this part of their identity as the primary determiner of their participation likely, in some way, informed the observations that we came away with here. I would also like to disclaim that the shifts mentioned here are likely not exclusive to Clark's MAT program. The burden of moving from student teaching to teaching full-time is something many MAT graduates struggle with regardless of the school that they attended, and speaks more to educators' need for transitional support across the board than an issue with Clark in particular.

Independence With Scaffolding

One of the most effective ways to set kids up for meaningful reading experiences as expressed by these educators was independence with scaffolding in conjunction with meeting kids where they're at. The former refers to teacher-supported student autonomy, where a student sets a goal or intention and the teacher helps them work towards it. The latter is sort of a broader extension of that which involves teachers altering their curriculum or classroom practices to meet the needs and present capability of their students, rather than students changing to fit the "student you were taught to teach."

Educator C referenced the dangers of throwing a developing reader a book beyond their capacity. From experience, he has seen kids get their confidence crushed by a book that was too challenging at their current reading ability. If a student isn't able to comfortably work with a text, he hesitates to stick them with that book and send them on their way for fear that the child's relationship with reading will be set back significantly stating:

I don't want you to bite off more than you can chew, because a kid having a book that's

> not necessarily fit for their abilities or might be too long is like throwing a log onto a fire that you only just started to get going. Like, you're going to smother it." (Educ. C)

This isn't an end-all-be-all denial, however. All three educators indicated that they don't outright say "no" if a child wants to read a book that is presently too challenging for them. Rather, they build the kid up to the book by matching them with similar texts at their present level or a little higher, gradually increasing their reading capability and eventually getting them to the book that they want to read. This way, the student gets exposure to books that may interest them secondarily while working towards the goal of reading the original book. This matches with SDT in my theoretical framework—when students engage in educational challenges that they find meaningful and eventually meet their goal, their need for competence and autonomy is met and they experience fulfillment.

It's All Interpersonal

My greatest takeaway from this research was how significant interpersonal connection is in education and reading. Trust and intentional relationship-building between teachers and their students was denoted as *essential* to building positive relationships with reading & learning in general. Educ. B spoke in depth about his process of getting his class to trust that different expectations and assignments are given to different students for valid reasons; his approach is less about equality and more about equity, tailoring assignments to students and ensuring that they get the most out of their educational experience. He stated:

> I think there's a level of unfairness… that they perceive sometimes…So I have to just kind of be like, trust me, like, I'm doing what's right for everybody and I just need you guys to like, to let me do my thing. And they do. I think that a lot of that comes from

> building relationships with students and getting them 'bought in' to you as a person and respecting you and your practices… they're like, okay, you're asking more of me than you're asking some of my fellow students, but that's because you believe in me. And so I'm going to try to do that, to do what I can. (Educ. B, Interview, Dec. 8th, 2025)

Different expectations for different students isn't something that high schoolers grasp easily– I know that when I was that age, I griped more than a few times about the amount of work I was expected to do versus the work expected of students with different needs than mine. The fact that Educ. B has such a strong relationship with these kids makes their learning experience all the more meaningful, because they trust that he makes choices with their best interests in mind.

Educ. B also cited the importance of balancing social dynamics within their classroom, namely among readers along the English proficiency spectrum. Educ. B told us about the stigma from other students when emerging multilinguals sound out words and read aloud, which verbally indicates their English proficiency and sets up a basis for comparison between students. He spoke to the importance of creating a "shame-free" space for his students where *trying* to do difficult things is respected, even and especially if the attempt is not up to autonomous standards. High school is a deeply tumultuous time for many students, both outside and inside of the classroom. Add a social stigma around an ELL student's English and you get a discouraged learner… but purposely create a space where shaming an attempt is unacceptable, and you get students who are able to take risks and challenge themselves in their academic development.

Finally, all three participants pointed to the pairing of reading with social connection as deeply important to early childhood reading development. Each educator referenced back to an experience in their personal life where they encountered the benefits of interpersonally involved reading firsthand. Educ. A discussed taking his own child to the library, keeping many shelves of

books in the house, and practicing modeled reading on a consistent basis. Educ. B recalled memories of reading at the public library with his mother and brother and connected them to his current love of reading. Educ. C also drew a personal association with his literacy development, speaking about the full-circle moment of taking kids to sign up for library cards at the library where he was once taken to sign up for his first library card. On many levels, reading is linked with social connection and engagement, which is deeply important for educators to keep in mind as they teach reading in all stages of a student's educational journey.

Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?

What Just Happened?

Throughout both the research and intervention process of this project, several consistent themes emerged when considering the initial research questions. Firstly, educators perceived access to books alone as not enough to ensure positive relationships with reading– rather, access must be *meaningful*, consisting of enabling and engaging texts, modeled reading, and feeling some form of ownership or agency over a book. Secondly, systemic constraints have consequences on reading in the classroom, both materially and mentally, significantly inhibiting students from forming positive and fulfilling relationships with reading. Additionally, these educators noted tension between "then" and "now", whether that was the difference from when they started teaching to now *or* what they learned in their teacher preparation program versus the reality of teaching full-time in Worcester schools. Teachers also commonly cited the practice of "independence with scaffolding" as an effective way in which they help develop readers in their classrooms. Finally and most importantly, the social element of teaching and reading is absolutely integral to their successful implementation. An emphasis on interdependence,

collaborative growth, and trust between teacher and students is pivotal to helping children develop positive relationships with reading and learning.

Within Columbus Park, children benefitted from the Book Nook before construction was even finished. Students brought books home en masse over the winter break, many of them to keep permanently. When the Nook opened and became fully operational, its presence in the school became even more useful— students proudly picked out books to read, teachers had access to a whole new range of materials for their classes, the space began being used as a quiet room for testing and cool-down time, and kids were able to choose from a range of texts reflecting their ethnic and linguistic identities. The intervention overall positively impacted Columbus Park's population; students and teachers alike.

Educators' perceptions of reading for pleasure– particularly their support of meaningful access, social & relational practice, and "independence with scaffolding"– largely align with the results observed after the Book Nook was constructed. Lisa mentioned several times (both over email and in-person) the importance of culturally relevant literature in the Nook for the kids at Columbus Park. Particularly, she noted that the books written in Spanish and centered around Hispanic characters significantly helped the language development and sense of cultural belonging in her students. Additionally, the teachers in Columbus Park began bringing their students to the Nook to pick out books collaboratively, using a student-led and teacher-supported approach that promotes both student agency and relational practice. In my view, these are the most important results from this entire project.

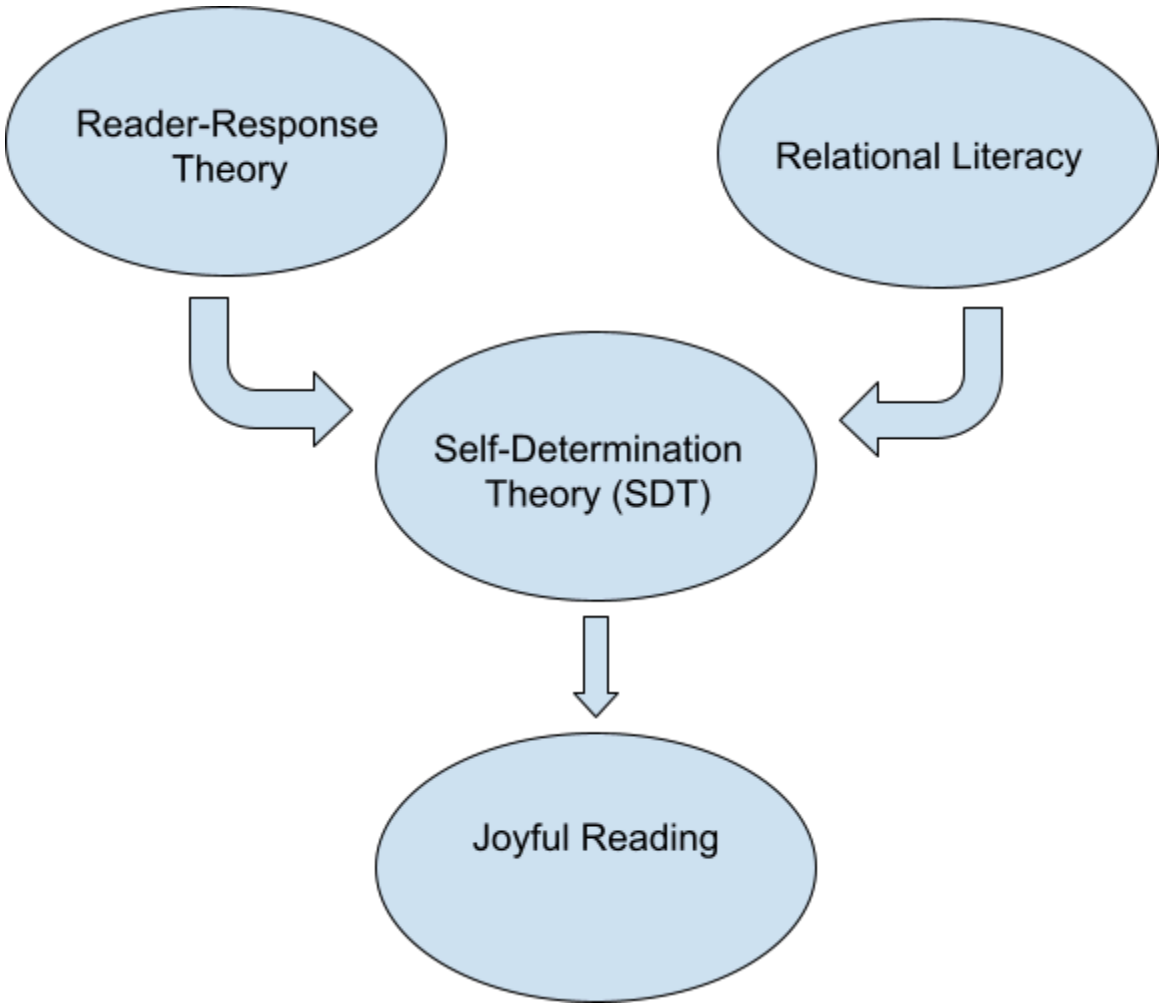
One complication that emerged from this research that opposes some of my personal views is conceptualizing ownership of books as a means of agency and autonomy. Several educators mentioned this to some extent in our interviews– the act of annotating a book and

access to books that they own (not just books from the library) being two examples of this. Teachers directly linked ownership of books to childhood RFP, which is a bit at odds with my perception of libraries and community-sustained reading initiatives as the most meaningful way to build a love of reading. I'm interested in exploring this within my future career as a librarian– how these two concepts meet and coexist and how libraries can support both ownership and community lending of books for their patrons.

Theoretical Implications

A theoretical concept emerged throughout this research that later became quite central to my project, which is the practice of finding joy through reading. "Joyful readers," i.e. readers who gain meaning, relatedness, and fulfillment from their reading experiences, are the ideal of what I hope that my interventions and suggestions accomplish long-term. I began considering the inclusion of joy in this project after hearing the word used consistently by all three educators interviewed when we discussed what constitutes a positive relationship with reading. In doing so, I came across the work of Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a professor at Clark who wrote a wonderful piece on the theory of joy. Arnett designates joy as "an intense, temporary feeling of *elation* combined with an appraisal of *right relation* between ourselves and the world, a sense that there is an ideal fit between ourselves and the world around us at that moment… joy is inherently social because its origins are social" (Arnett 2022, pgs. 1 & 3). The idea of joy as an inherently social act is linked with the importance of relational literacy as explored in this research. There is also a connection with reader response theory in that it is an expression of right relation, and SDT in the elation of fulfillment. As a result of this concept becoming more salient, I have

revised my theoretical framework and included “joyful readers” as the end result of applied reader response theory, relational literacy, and self-determination theory.



Practical Implications

Consider this a call to support teachers in more meaningful ways than a Starbucks gift card on Teacher Appreciation Day, or showing up to Meet the Teacher night at the beginning of the year. While these actions are thoughtful and helpful in an interpersonal sense, helping teachers help students form positive relationships with reading must be achieved through wider social and systemic change and engaging in one’s own community on a smaller scale. This could

come in the form of large-scale activism & advocacy for curricular autonomy, purchasing and maintaining of classroom library materials, and overall showing up for one another in a sustained and continuous sense. Additionally, reading with and around the children in one's life was the most commonly cited way to facilitate a meaningful and joy-centered experience with reading in early childhood. Modeled reading is an integral step towards taking books out of the in-school testing and grading context with which children are mostly familiar, making reading approachable and even aspirational for kids. Within my future career as a librarian, I plan to take what I've learned through this project and prioritize these actions in a library setting. Hosting events and book clubs centered around the joy of reading, collaborating with schools and educators to further children's access to culturally relevant literature, and consistently tapping into the needs and desires of the community I serve are all things I will commit to in whatever role I pursue.

Limitations & Areas for Further Study

As valuable as this work was, there were significant limitations to our study; the greatest two probably being population size and time constraint. We only had three participants for the main segment of our research– all of whom were male upper-school teachers who graduated from the same school and work in the same city. In other words, this study is highly concentrated on a specific type of person who teaches a specific population of students, and thus may struggle with a "single-story" issue. I ask readers of this research to take our results not as a wide and generalized blueprint for the way all educators think about reading, because no three people can possibly hold all of the same viewpoints and experiences as everybody else in a certain demographic.

Instead, I hope that this serves as a sort of case study for the state of RFP in Worcester Public Schools and a contribution to an emerging body of scholarship, hopefully to be expanded on in the coming years. I believe that our research design and questions have the capacity to evolve in the hands of future researchers with the intention to gain perspectives from a variety of other backgrounds, locations, identities, and more. There is also room to explore the role of teacher prep programs in all of this– what can be done to better prepare future educators for a career with constantly shifting populations, benchmarks, and resources? If I had more insight earlier on, I might have pushed to evaluate Clark's MAT program in relation to how it prepares teachers for the present state of reading in the classroom. I also would have looked further into the "science of reading" framework that school curriculum is currently based around and evaluated it in relation to this project if I had figured out that would be valuable earlier on.

The other main limitation, time, is prominently on my mind as I write this in March of 2026– nearly at the end of the spring semester and my undergraduate college career. What more could Maggie and I have done if we had another year to complete this project? Could we have built more Book Nooks? Interviewed more teachers? Could I have come to the realization of my shifting research interests earlier in the process? If we weren't constrained by time early on in our IRB planning, could we have situated all of our research at Columbus Park, making it a case study centered around an even smaller population? The real answer is that we'll never know what could have been if any number of things could have been different, but asking oneself this question is central to finding avenues for improvement and further research.

So What?

Ultimately, why did we undertake this several-year-long process? Why should anyone take the time out of their day to read this thesis? For one, reading an academically under-publicized perspective on reading and literacy development is helpful for anyone who hopes to broaden their viewpoints on topical youth work issues. It is valuable to challenge the dominant narrative of reading as an action that should be autonomously measured in order to assess if this actually benefits our students, and, if it doesn't, work towards other ways of approaching literary instruction. This project gives educators, families, and communities several actionable and researched ways to improve students' relationships with reading. Additionally, through the implementation of the Book Nook, children at Columbus Park were able to access and interact with culturally relevant literature in a way they likely would not have been able to if our project had not happened. Reading this thesis all the way to the end is a means of supporting this project with one's attention and interest.

Reflection on Self, Project, and Relationships

Over the course of Praxis and project development– around two and a half years in total, from Maggie's and my conceptualization of the Book Nook to now– I have grown and changed in a fundamental, intrinsic sense. This project has grown and changed as a result of me, and vice versa. I'd be lying if I said that Gwenne at the end of sophomore year had envisioned the scale of effort, learning, and achievement that has contributed to making our Praxis project what it is today. The setbacks, alterations, and sheer *push* that it took to get everything done (and done well, which is another battle entirely) in time isn't something that I would have thought I was

capable of back when we first presented our civic-engagement Little Free Library, or when I first signed the CYES major declaration paperwork.

Personally, I believe that this project has made me much more self-aware and reflective. Praxis as a cycle is all about evolution and reflection through one's experiences, and you can't escape that without at least a little personal growth. Through the experience of designing an inherently people-focused intervention from the ground-up and initiating "cold call"-style communications with people around Worcester, I developed my competence and confidence in community outreach, as well as leveraging my existing connections to form new ones. Time management was a huge area I grew in as well—I already had a pretty decent ability to pace my own work and schedule, but taking on such a self-directed project meant that this ability had to be dialed up tenfold. While developing all of these capabilities was definitely an enormous learning curve that at times felt insurmountable, I am proud of my growth as a result of praxis and CYES as a whole.

I also couldn't have predicted the incredible relationships I would form with Beth, Lisa, my Praxis cohort, advisors, and my research as a whole. Maggie and I have built a deeper bond than ever before, becoming friends, confidants, and research partners. I would be remiss not to mention the connection I feel with the educators who so kindly volunteered their time and stories for this project. Within both the interviews and the later data analysis, I feel like I became closer with them, as well as tapping into the world of K-12 education in a way that has taught me so much. Sappy paragraphs aside, I will always be incredibly grateful for the experiences, assistance, and growth I have undergone as a part of this project and this major. I can only hope that the research and impact that Maggie and I have created even begins to pay back the wealth of community and support we have been fortunate enough to receive.

a)

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questions

1) Reading for pleasure is something I encourage in my classroom.
    a) Strongly agree
    b) Somewhat agree
    c) Neither agree or disagree
    d) Somewhat disagree
    e) Strongly disagree
2) The way I teach reading has changed over the time I've been an educator.
    a) Strongly agree
    b) Somewhat agree
    c) Neither agree or disagree
    d) Somewhat disagree
    e) Strongly disagree
3) Children who enjoy reading have an easier time developing other academic skills.
    a) Strongly agree
    b) Somewhat agree
    c) Neither agree or disagree
    d) Somewhat disagree
    e) Strongly disagree
4) I find it easier to teach when my students enjoy reading.
    a) Strongly agree
    b) Somewhat agree

c) Neither agree or disagree

d) Somewhat disagree

e) Strongly disagree

5) An in-school library is helpful in an elementary school.

a) Strongly agree

b) Somewhat agree

c) Neither agree or disagree

d) Somewhat disagree

e) Strongly disagree

6) The best way to measure success in student literacy is…

a) Numerical indicators (standardized test scores, number of books read, homework assignments completed, etc.)

b) Positive student behavior around reading (choosing to read during downtime, content of assignments, etc.)

c) Other (write-in)

d) Neither

7) Abundant access to books has a positive impact on enjoyment of reading in elementary school students.

a) Extremely negative

b) Somewhat negative

c) Neither positive or negative

d) Somewhat positive

e) Extremely positive

8) Providing children with culturally relevant books can build a positive relationship with reading.
    a) Strongly agree
    b) Somewhat agree
    c) Neither agree or disagree
    d) Somewhat disagree
    e) Strongly disagree
9) What do you prioritize in your classroom when teaching reading?
    a) I prioritize for-pleasure reading.
    b) I prioritize teaching academic reading skills (e.g. comprehension, vocabulary, etc.)
    c) I prioritize a mix of these skills.
10) I think my elementary school does or would benefit from having an in-school library.
    a) Strongly agree
    b) Somewhat agree
    c) Neither agree or disagree
    d) Somewhat disagree
    e) Strongly disagree
11) Books tailored towards racial, cultural, or linguistic minority student populations in my school would positively impact their enjoyment of reading.
    a) Extremely negative
    b) Somewhat negative
    c) Neither positive or negative

d) Somewhat positive

e) Extremely positive

12) I would be interested in being contacted for a follow-up interview regarding reading in the classroom and books in elementary schools.

a) I am interested in being contacted for a follow-up interview.

b) I am not interested in being contacted for a follow-up interview.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

2) Tell us about yourself and your experience as an educator in WPS.

a) How long have you been teaching?

b) What grade or age group have you worked with most frequently?

3) How do you teach reading and literacy in your classroom?

a) Has this changed over the time you've been teaching?

b) What markers do you/would you use to determine a student's level of success in literacy?

4) Describe what a positive relationship with reading looks like in the classroom.

a) How does it develop over the course of elementary education?

5) Do you think that access to books has a direct impact on literacy development?

a) Do you believe a positive relationship with reading is important to early childhood development? Why or why not?

6) If your school received a Book Nook, how do you think that would impact your students' relationship to reading?

a) What additions or supplements would encourage students to use the Nook? (Examples include book authors, language preferences, incentive programs, etc.)

b) What would your ideal Book Nook look like as a teacher? Why?