

# Girls as “Struggling Readers”: Delineating the Sociopolitical and Sociocultural Terrains of Books and Reading

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Many people consider books to be one of life's treasures and often embark on pleasurable and transformative literary journeys. Unfortunately, struggling readers' journeys are often arduous, if not painful. Recent reading mandates under No Child Left Behind often limit the scope of literary resources purchased with federal funds and appear to alter conceptions of what reading is and what quality texts are, without necessarily including student readers' input. The dissonance between what teachers and students consider “engaging reads” (Brooks, Waterman, & Allington, 2003; Ivey & Broadus, 2001; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999) and text accessibility disparities between low and high socioeconomic communities (Allington, Guice, Baker, Michaelson, & Li, 1995; Neuman & Celano, 2001) further compound the problematic literary journeys of economically disadvantaged youth who struggle with reading.

Research indicating the power of self-selection of reading materials (Gambrell, Codling, & Palmer, 1996), continual and rich reading opportunities (Donahue, Finnegan, Lutkus, Allen, & Campbell, 2001; Stanovich, 2000), and the ever-expanding range of youth's preferred reading resources (Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Dyson, 2003) continue to fuel inquiries about how educators can provide youth with a rich repertoire of reading material. Decades of book-selection research have provided us with much knowledge of youths' book selections and preferences over time. Yet, most book-selection studies have overlooked economically disadvantaged youth and struggling readers and have neither extended beyond survey data nor extended beyond youths' initial selection rationales. In addition, these studies have often assumed that children select books for the primary purpose of reading and actually read their books upon selection. These limited understandings and assumptions inspired this eight-month,

qualitative, book-selection study with struggling female readers.

My focus on struggling female readers stems from the social perception that reading is a literacy practice at which girls excel and which they enjoy (Simpson, 1996; Sullivan, 2003) and from National Assessment of Educational Progress data indicating that a substantial number of girls continue to struggle with reading (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Although I label this study a *book-selection study*, it extends beyond girls' book-selection rationales to include their book interactions and conceptions of reading. Readers' textual interactions can influence their reading motivation and engagement and provide a more comprehensive understanding of their book-selection rationales, which are often guided by personal conceptions. Personal conceptions, as motivational factors, influence the appeal of particular books and experiences with those books. Thus, by investigating each component simultaneously, we can gain more insight to the relationships between youth and books.

Sociocultural (Au, 1997) and hermeneutical lenses (Gadamer, 1960/1975), as well as transactional theories of reader response (Bakhtin, 1981; Rosenblatt, 1995), undergird this study. Such perspectives view reading as a social process and practice imbued with cultural distinctions and interpersonal interactions. Reading is a dynamic and transactional process between the printed word, the social world, and the situated position of the reader. Meaning constructed by the text–reader interaction and reified through language is individual and collective, personal, and social. Furthermore, understanding occurs as one vacillates between the self and society and reflects upon how one's preunderstandings influence one's current understanding (Gadamer, 1976). This dialogic interplay between self and society is inherently mobile as understanding is continually reflected

upon and (re)constituted through language. Given the interwoven relationships among self, society, and the language used to construct and convey meaning within these arenas, my overarching questions for this study were as follows: (a) What rationales undergird preadolescent girls' self-selections of books for personal use and (b) how does access to and interactions with culturally relevant literature reflect and reshape their conceptions of reading and interactions with books?

I conducted this eight-month study in a federally subsidized after-school program at a rural elementary school in the southeast United States. The majority of the school's student population was eligible for free or reduced-cost school meals and more than half of the intermediate students (grades 3–5) had yet to make grade-level expectations for reading. The seven participants, all fourth- and fifth-grade girls aged 10 and 11 years old, were situated within a "perfect storm" of reading resistance. They were (a) disconnected from school-based literacy practices, (b) eligible for free or reduced-cost school meals, (c) had limited access to reading materials outside of school, (d) school-identified as struggling readers on the basis of their latest state reading assessment performances, and (e) had scored below the 50th percentile on the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990). They all had also professed animosity or apathy toward reading prior to the study.

This study occurred at the after-school program site during the school year and at the girls' respective homes or preferred locales the following summer. There were three phases to the study, with the first phase involving independent interviews with each girl about her reading perceptions and experiences, and a collaborative development of a library containing 161 picture books, informational texts, and novels purchased with a local grant. The second phase included two book fairs and involved the girls independently discussing their initial and final book selections, borrowing books from our library, and sharing their book experiences via interviews or girl-initiated conversations. In the study's final phase, the girls participated in follow-up and concluding interviews about their experiences in the study and their current conceptions of reading. Each girl also received up to 12 new books they wanted for ownership. Data sources analyzed included 14 semistructured initial and final interviews; 14 open-ended, book-selection interviews; up to 56 open-ended, ongoing-book-experience interviews and/or spontaneous conversations; as well as my field notes and reflective journal entries detailing interactions and observations throughout the study. The girls and some colleagues verified the transcribed interviews and conversations.

Discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were used to better understand the girls' cognitive and sociophysical (book

selections and interactions) experiences as well as the sociohistorical influences of the girls' conceptions of reading and books. All girl-initiated conversations and formal interviews, except the initial and final book-selection interviews, were analyzed using discourse analysis. This method incorporates macro and micro levels of analysis that represent the social (building blocks) and linguistic structures (words, lines, and stanzas), respectively. The more sequential and deterministic tone of the girls' book-selection interviews necessitated a thematic analysis. Field notes and my reflective journal were also thematically analyzed. The identified themes complemented the results of the discourse analysis and detailed the broader social contexts that influenced the girls' book selections.

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## Conclusions

The girls selected books that were previously denied to them at school, representative of their peer culture, and reflective of their cultural personhood within contemporary settings. Mass media books and award-winning multicultural literature, both of which the girls considered culturally relevant, were selected to (a) minimize the "riskiness" of selecting "bad books," (b) increase personal and academic self-efficacy, (c) assist younger siblings with reading, (d) resolve familial discord, (e) dismantle walls of peer resistance, (f) gain power through their new positions as "gatekeepers of the books," and (g) initiate dialogue about racial tensions. References to personal interests or hobbies, as well as peer and teacher book recommendations, were distinctly absent.

The girls' book interactions and commentaries revealed nuanced conceptions of reading as well as of the political and social arenas in which books and reading are constructed. The girls initially constructed reading as an impersonal and punitive act and constructed school as an "academic prison" with fluency and state reading assessments as primary conditions for parole. However, their evolving discourses evoked differentiations between the more rewarding "readin'" (textual transactions for personal or social pleasure) and the punitive "reading" (performance of school-based skills). In addition, the girls' public diatribes about the debilitating effects of their school reading practices and policies illustrated the transformative effects of unmitigated book access and autonomous reading opportunities. Books also held social capital, as the girls loaned their teachers multicultural picture books in exchange for class status as "a good reader" and exchanged (but didn't necessarily read) mass media books for homework, food, friendship, and money. Within these scenarios, girls became cultural brokers, with books as currency.

These findings invite further contemplation about our conceptions of books, reading, and “struggling readers.” For these girls, books and reading operated on perpendicular horizons, intersecting on occasion. They read for various reasons and within different cultural spheres, depending on the book’s perceived exportability (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) and worth. Their struggles, successes, and social savvy elicit further contemplation about how the socialized nature and political climate of reading influence personal and social perceptions of both reading and readers.

Although “gaining meaning from print has always been a goal of reading instruction” (Venezky, 1987, p. 257), meaning extends beyond comprehension questions. It is critical that educators and students authentically dialogue about books, reading, and the ways in which both are purposeful and purposeless. By distancing themselves from the current consolidation of reading as a set of skills to be mastered, and by viewing reading as complex practices and processes involving genuine and critical inquiries of self and society, educators can better assist struggling readers in becoming lifelong readers.

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