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# Understanding Reading Sponsorship Through Analysis of First-Year Composition Students' Literacy Narratives

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UNDERSTANDING READING SPONSORSHIP THROUGH ANALYSIS OF  
FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION STUDENTS' LITERACY NARRATIVES

BY

NANCY A. BENSON

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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## ABSTRACT

Through qualitative coding and analysis of 121 literacy narratives, this study examines first-year college students' references to former reading sponsors, defined as the people, institutions, and entities that played a role in their reading development. The study was designed to locate the sponsors present in the narratives, to determine patterns that emerged in their experiences, and to examine factors that were formative to the participants' reading identities.

The study reveals the highly social nature of reading development, providing evidence that the participants' perceptions of themselves as readers are shaped by the individuals, institutions, and entities who sponsor them including parents, grandparents, teachers, tutors, school systems, authors, and books/genres. Participants' earliest memories of reading development reveal the uneven nature of early reading sponsorship, particularly for ESL or slower readers. Participants also share accounts of a dramatic reduction in reading involvement during high-school which is linked through the participants' narratives to lack of choice with regard to book selection, teacher-driven topics, excessive quizzing, and standardized testing.

The researcher discovered three meta-themes in the data providing evidence that many participants are engaged readers both in and out of school, but that a large percentage lose or gain interest in reading, report that they hate or hated reading, and desire more choice in reading and topic selection. The researcher suggests that there is a correlation between reading proficiency and reading engagement, calling for more studies and curriculum re-design.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DEDICATION

For Connor, Casey, and my students--past, present, and future.

## PREFACE

Literacy sponsors are the people, places, texts, institutions and hobbies that shape our literacy identities. As Deborah Brandt informs us in *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), literacy sponsors are powerful entities that shape our personal and professional successes and failures—potentially offering, or withholding, support and opportunity. The study that follows borrows from Brandt’s definition of literacy sponsors, while focusing specifically on reading sponsors and their roles in the lives of the 121 students who participated in the study.

We carry our memories of sponsors with us, and those memories have tremendous power. I remember my first-grade teacher Mrs. Mayerhoffer as a powerful reading sponsor. By some stroke of heavenly luck, Mrs. Mayerhoffer lived in our neighborhood, and she invited me and my brother to her house regularly for cookies, milk, and of course, to borrow books. Michael and I both have fond memories of the role she played in our reading development. Michael recalls that he was frustrated as an early reader and Mrs. Mayerhoffer generously spent time both in and out of school encouraging him. Although I was an early and avid reader, Mrs. Mayerhoffer focused on my needs and interests as an individual reader by supplying me with lots of books to read. Years later when I was in college, I bumped into her at the Bousquet Ski Lodge in Lenox Massachusetts, and she remembered me and recalled how much I loved to read. She was an amazing reading sponsor for both of us.

There was also the Lenox Public Library, a large gothic Hogwarts-style building in the center of Lenox village where our mom took us regularly to read and

borrow books--there were welcoming cozy reading nooks where you could settle in with a book, and the stacks were bountiful and endless. We could borrow up to ten books at a time, and I always did. This library also was a strong reading sponsor for me.

Although my brother and I didn't own many books, we had easy access to books through teachers, libraries, and family friends. When I was in third and fourth grade, my mother would bring me home book collections that her friends' kids had lost interest in, so I owned complete sets of *Little House on the Prairie*, *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys* that I read and re-read until they were ragged. I blasted through SRA reading program in fourth and fifth grade. As a reader, I was highly motivated, interested, and engaged.

After my parents divorced, my mother began her college career, and I began my lackluster high school career in a school that would lose its accreditation two years after I graduated. Like so many of the participants in this study, my experiences with reading in high school were unremarkable; engaging sponsorship was nonexistent as most of the teachers plodded through the usual Shakespearean plays and standard high school reading fare.

Although I was uninspired by high school reading curriculum, I also shared books, ideas, and interests with my mom, and continued borrowing from local libraries wherever we lived. I tackled the Bronte sisters, Tony Morrison, Ayn Rand, and James Baldwin on my own. I also read to learn about the hobbies I was engaged in. I became an inspired cook, gardener, and seamstress--hobbies informed by reading and sharing information with my mom and grandparents. As a new college student, my



mom was an intellectual inspiration, and even though we lived in relative poverty after the divorce, reading became a larger part of our family culture—for me, reading was a way to learn, to experience other ways of seeing the world, and a reprieve from the unpleasant realities of adolescence. Later, as young independent college student, I waffled when it came to selecting a major, but my heart was in the English Department at University of Massachusetts Amherst, where I took every English class I could. Eventually, I finished a degree in English Literature at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (UMassD), where I would complete a Master’s Degree in Professional Writing in its first graduating class.

I started teaching composition in 1985 at age 23 as a teaching assistant in the Professional Writing Program, and when I think back on those early teaching experiences I cannot recall issues related to students not completing course readings. At the time, I was teaching Business Communications and Technical Writing to sophomores and juniors—maybe their reading habits were better than those of first-year students at the time--still students’ relationships with reading seemed more intact than they did later on.

My first real awareness that students were not completing required readings came more than ten years later in 2002 when I returned to teaching in the First-Year Writing Program at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. I remember asking my English 101 class, at the end of the semester, to take a piece of paper and anonymously write down whether or not they had completed the readings from the course textbook--most wrote **NO**. Frankly, I didn’t blame them—the text the department was using was the exact same text that had been used for the past 20 years,

since 1983; although it had been updated, students did not find it engaging and neither did I.

When I began researching textbooks, I found John Trimbur's *The Call to Write*. Parts of Trimbur's text focused on "literacy events," and he had a literacy narrative assignment that I started using as a diagnostic tool at the beginning of the semester. Students shared their reading experiences in these narratives—through the narratives I began to better understand my students as readers and to appreciate how former experiences with reading shaped them as learners.

At this point, I was raising two young children, and both of my sons were developing into strong readers—yes, they liked to game too, and we had our struggles with setting boundaries and limitations on how much gaming they were allowed—but they kept reading, both for school and recreation, throughout their childhoods.

I remember the day I first met with Bob Schwegler to discuss the Rhetoric and Composition Program at URI. I told Bob in my initial interview that I was interested in rhetorical theories on invention, and in my mind I linked this to reading and research, but I don't think I articulated this to him. Later I would learn that he was already engaged in larger conversations about how students read. In Ellen Carillo's 2015 *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition*, Carillo mentions Bob's post on the Writing Program Administrator's Listserve on the first page of her introduction to the book:

In the final months of 2009, the WPA listserv (WPA-L) saw an onslaught of detailed responses to an initial post with the deceptively simple subject line: "How well do your students read...?" The

complete question, posted in the body of the email, sent to the listserv on October 27 by Bob Schwegler (2009) from the University of Rhode Island read: “How well do your students read complex texts—other than literary texts?” With more than fifty responses in just a few days, it became clear that this was an issue that interested a range of subscribers, many of whom responded to the question by drawing on their teaching practices. (p. 2).

As I began to attend national writing conferences I gravitated toward the workshops and symposiums that addressed reading and began contributing to larger conversations about reading in composition at forums such as CCCC’s Reading SIG. I read the work of Charles Bazerman, Alice Horning, and Michael Bunn, all concerned with how reading can and should best be integrated into writing classroom.

My hope is that this dissertation offers educators and other reading sponsors insight into how students’ reading identities are shaped by the people, places, and books they experience in their lives. My research makes clear that students’ prior reading experiences with sponsors shape and inform who they are as both readers and writers. Reading is a powerful tool, and it can offer human beings opportunity. As reading and writing sponsors, we have the responsibility to carefully consider how our interactions with our students shapes their identities as readers. As my research suggests, bad sponsorship can cost a student years of reading development, and good sponsorship can invigorate a reluctant reader. The more I understand about my students as readers, the more devoted I become to offering them reading opportunities that *they* believe can substantially enrich their lives as individuals, students, and

professionals. Students will readily talk about reading and share their reading experiences with us if we allow them the opportunity and provide a penalty-free zone where these conversations can take place.

If we want to sustain or reinforce a culture of readers we must take specific actions to engage our students in reading practices. This may require a concerted and deliberate effort on the part of reading sponsors.

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# Chapter 1

## **Introduction and Review of Literature**

College-level reading is a complex act. In *Reconnecting Reading and Writing* (2013) Alice Horning and Elizabeth Kraemer define reading as:

getting meaning from print, whether the print is viewed on paper or on a screen. In college courses in writing and elsewhere, however, reading must go beyond just getting meaning: Readers must be able to analyze texts to see how parts fit together. They must be able to synthesize different readings on the same topic or issue so that they can see a range of perspectives and/or research on the topic or issue. In addition, students must be able to evaluate the materials they read. Finally, critical reading entails students' ability to make use of what they read for their own purposes. (p.10)

Although it is clear that effective reading is critical to college students' success, many first-year college students are underprepared for the college-level reading that will be required to complete their degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In response, because they perceive reading and writing as interconnected processes, a growing number of professionals in the field of composition believe that writing instructors should spend more time addressing reading practices and processes in their classrooms (Bunn, 2010; Carillo, 2015; Horning & Kraemer, 2013; Salvatori & Donahue, 2012; Sullivan, Tinberg & Blau 2017). This belief stems, in part, from an awareness that first-year college students bring a wide range of reading competencies with them to



college, that many first-year students have substantial difficulty reading academic texts, and that reading and writing are counterparts in the construction (or composition) of meaning. Thus, many scholars advocate that composition studies focus on reading because they believe reading is a deliberate intellectual practice that “helps us make sense of and interpret that which surrounds us,” and this interpretive capacity is essential to a student’s ability to think and write clearly (Carillo, 2015, p. 5).

In order to better understand students’ reading and writing histories, and to help students better understand their *own* literacy histories, instructors in first-year composition classes may ask students to write what is known as the “literacy narrative.” John Trimbur has included a literacy narrative assignment in several editions of his textbook *A Call to Write*, and a multitude of approaches to the genre are widely available on the Web. Students’ literacy narratives—stories about prior experiences with reading and writing—may offer instructors some insight into students’ backgrounds which can assist composition instructors in understanding the personal, educational, behavioral, and cultural entities that shape students’ reading practices (Chandler, 2013; Patterson, 2001; and Young, 2015). Through qualitative analysis of first-year composition students’ literacy narratives, this study aims to better understand the literacy experiences students bring to the first-year composition classroom by analyzing students’ references to *literacy sponsors* (Brandt, 1998), which I will define as people, institutions, and entities that play an influential role in a student’s literacy development, particularly with regard to reading (sponsors will be further defined below). Specifically, I seek answers to the following questions:

- To what extent do students refer to sponsors of reading in their literacy narratives?
- What patterns emerge in students' narratives with regard to literacy sponsors?
- What factors regarding literacy sponsors and reading development do students report as being formative to their identities as readers?

In “Sponsors of Literacy,” literacy theorist Deborah Brandt (1998) references *literacy sponsors* as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). Brandt formulated the concept of literacy sponsorship as a concrete analytical tool to investigate the economic, technological, and social issues that shape individuals’ literacies, whether referencing reading or writing. The concept of literacy sponsorship provides a useful frame or exemplar for this study as it defines my role as instructor and investigator and provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the experiences students report in their literacy narratives. I will use Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship to assist in examining people, institutions, and other forces that shape students’ reading experiences as reported in their narratives.

Brandt (1998) mentions several common sponsors of literacy, including “older relatives, teachers, priests, supervisors, military officers, editors, and influential authors” (p. 26). For my research, I will add to this to create an operative definition which will allow for coding of data. For the purposes of this study, reading sponsors are defined as entities that students report helped or hindered their reading literacy,

including teachers, schools, parents, siblings, friends, authors/books, genres, places of worship, organizations, technologies, and hobbies.

In the conclusion of her book, *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt (2001) calls on educators to build more “realistic, socially responsive pedagogies” (p. 194). In response to this call, this study will provide new insights into first-year college students’ reading experiences (involving sponsors) that could assist composition instructors in understanding how the reading identities of first-year students are shaped by sponsors.

### **National Reports on Preparedness for College-level Reading**

National reports on reading find that many first-year college students are underprepared for college-level reading. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report finds that only 38% of U.S. high-school seniors are likely to possess the reading skills necessary for college success (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014) while the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that roughly 70% of U.S. high-school graduates attend college (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2012). These statistics, when conflated, are concerning because they suggest that many new college students may be unable to manage the demands of college reading. Similarly, according to a National Endowment for the Arts study (NEA, 2007), only "one-third of U.S. 13-year olds are daily readers, and little more than one-third of high school seniors now read proficiently" (Groenke and Scherff, 2009, p. 1). Many of these high-school students reading below proficiency levels become our college students. Literacy narratives are a useful tool for gathering information about reading sponsors

because the narratives often reveal information about the people and conditions that shape students' reading abilities and interests.

### **Literacy Narratives: Students' Self-Reports**

A literacy narrative can be defined as a story told or written by an individual about experiences with reading and writing. Historically, narratives have been written as autobiographies (Rose, 1989; Villanueva, 1993) or delivered orally or in writing to a researcher through an interview process or ethnographic study (Brandt, 2001; Brice-Heath, 1983). Early qualitative case studies of American literacy, such as Shirley Brice-Heath's *Ways with Words* and Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, focused on how literacy is shaped by social, political, and economic forces; these studies paved the way for future research on literacy. Sally Chandler's *New Literacy Narratives from an Urban University: Analyzing Stories about Reading, Writing and Changing Technologies* (Chandler, 2013) uses participatory action research (PAR) to analyze the literacy experiences of five student co-authors. Chandler's work extends the work of Deborah Brandt, Cynthia Selfe, and Gail Hawisher by integrating narrative analysis and reflective participant collaboration with students from an urban university (4).

Composition instructors began to use literacy narratives as a tool for understanding and sharing students' reading and writing processes and experiences in the 1990s (Trimbur, 2013), and there is currently renewed interest in literacy narratives. Approximately 230 dissertations on literacy narratives have been conducted in the past ten years; however, no current studies using literacy narratives to better understand the reading sponsors of a large number of first-year students in

composition classrooms could be located in the Proquest or MLA Dissertation databases. Although there are many studies associated with literacy, I have yet to find one that examines the reading narratives of first-year college students with a focus on using students' self-reports on reading to better understand their interactions with literacy sponsors for the purpose of informing the design of reading curricula for the college writing classroom. If composition instructors are to better understand their students as readers and how their experiences and identities as readers shape their writing and learning experiences, more research on how students are shaped as readers is required—this dissertation is one such study. Resources for this dissertation will be drawn from many fields including English (Rhetoric and Composition), Education, Linguistics, Reading, Neuroscience, and Psychology.

### **Reading and Composition Theory**

It is clear to many composition theorists that a substantial number of college students need help navigating the texts they will encounter in college, and most composition scholars agree that students' prior reading experiences shape their ability to manage college-level reading. Composition scholars are becoming increasingly vocal about students' reading abilities and habits, noting that students do not like to read (Thelin, 2012), lack experience as critical readers of difficult texts (Tetreault and Center, 2009), lack appropriate skills for academic success (Mason-Egan, 2009), and read differently because of technology (Gere et al., 2008). As Alice Horning notes with regard to college readers, some “don't, won't, and can't” (Horning & Kraemer, 2013). This study aims to examine how students report their experiences with prior reading sponsors, from their own perspectives.

The following posts on the Writing Program Administrator's Listserv (WPA-L) in the summer of 2014 reveal that some composition scholars believe "inadequate" reading competency may be a major impediment to college success:

- *Students are more likely to succeed at every level if they are in a standard FYC class with support to get them through that class, and that support tends to be with their reading.*
- *On a college campus like ours, which, er, prides itself in offering no "remedial" coursework ...reading competency is presumed acquired through the aether, the skill that nobody wants to teach directly...yet for our incoming Pathways students, reading competency—from sheer vocabulary to cultural background to rhetorical constructs—may be the unmentioned ball and chain that sinks their success.*
- *What do we do when there aren't developmental reading courses, but reading still needs to be taught developmentally?*

In *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition*, Ellen Carillo (2015) suggests that many composition instructors do not teach reading because doing so would "lower" themselves to do work that should have been done by K-12 teachers" (p. 9). In other words, instructors may be aware that many of their students do not complete or cannot understand required readings, but they may not have developed a pedagogy to help their students become better readers. A closer analysis of students' experiences with literacy sponsors through their literacy narratives will assist with understanding the challenges and successes that first-year students have had regarding reading.

Composition instructors may be unsure of how to help students manage difficult texts or may not understand the challenges students face as they strive to complete and understand required reading. Although many composition scholars believe that first-year composition classrooms provide a natural environment for developing reading skills (Adler-Kasner and Estrem, 2007; Bartholomae and Petrosky, 2008; Bunn, 2010; Carillo, 2015, Horning & Kraemer, 2013) many writing instructors may not have received training for teaching reading or designing curriculum that supports reading development. In "I Don't Teach Reading," using data generated from teacher interviews and document analysis, Lisa Bosley (2008) studied how composition instructors teach reading. Although their class outlines had objectives for teaching critical reading skills, Bosley found that most of the instructors she surveyed do not teach reading explicitly. In "Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom," Linda Adler-Kasner and Heidi Estrem (2007) also call for a more productive approach to reading instruction and for more studies that will assist composition instructors with their reading pedagogies. This is one such study.

### **Factors Involved in Reading Development**

Reading development is complex and involves a multitude of variables. Maryanne Wolf (2008), neuroscientist and professor of child development at Tufts University, writes about reading processes and the brain in *Proust and the Squid*. She describes reading as a "neuronally and intellectually circuitous act, enriched as much by the unpredictable indirections of a reader's inferences and thoughts, as by the direct message to the eye from the text" (16). French neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene (2009) claims that it takes years for this neural circuitry to become highly efficient.

Dehaene states, "Surveys indicate that about one adult in ten fails to master even the rudiments of text comprehension. Years of hard work are needed before the clockwork-like brain machinery that supports reading runs so smoothly that we forget it exists" (2). Dehaene explains that after years of practice, when our reading processes become automatic and unconscious, we are "under the illusion that reading is simple and effortless" (8). Wolf and Dehaene's work suggests that college-level reading may be cognitively problematic for first-year students who have not been regularly engaged in sustained reading activities nor exposed to a wide variety of advanced texts. Wolf also emphasizes the importance of early reading experiences:

Learning to read begins the first time an infant is held and read a story. How often this happens, or fails to happen, in the first five years of childhood turns out to be one of the best predictors of later reading. A little-discussed class system invisibly divides our society, with those families that provide their children environments rich in oral and written language opportunities gradually set apart from those who do not, or cannot. A prominent study found that by kindergarten, a gap of 32 million words already separates some children in linguistically impoverished homes from their more stimulated peers. In other words, in some environments the average middle-class child hears 32 million more spoken words than the young underprivileged child by age five (p. 20).

For strong reading skills to develop, Wolf and others emphasize the importance of early exposure to environments rich in oral and written language. Because these early



environments require interaction with sponsors (according to my operative definition), first-year students' literacy narratives often reveal information regarding students' early exposure to language and reading and to the individuals and institutions, or sponsors, that provided or denied access to that exposure. Any insight that instructors can gain about a student's former interactions with reading sponsors may assist both the instructor and the student in understanding how a student's reading habits, interests, and identities were shaped.

Literacy narratives also often reveal the genres of reading and writing with which students are familiar and can inform instructors about a student's interest or lack of interest in reading. These prior experiences may also shape students' reading behaviors. According to composition theorist Charles Bazerman et al. (2009), "Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action...Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact" (1). Genre theory recognizes that there is a variety of discourse communities with "their own norms and conventions for constructing and debating knowledge" and that texts vary linguistically according to purpose, context, and community. As such, students may be familiar with particular genres of poetry, or say, a Shakespearean play, but very unfamiliar with the variety of genres they will be called upon to read and write in college and their professional lives, such as analytical reports and scholarly articles.

Students, bringing their own roadmaps from their previous experience, would also benefit from signs posted by those familiar with the new academic landscape. However, guideposts are only there when we construct them, are only useful if others know how to read them, and

will only be used if they point toward destinations students see as worth going toward. (p. 1)

Because genres and books both entice students to read and also dissuade them from reading, they may act as sponsors and play a key role in a students' reading identities. An understanding of the kinds of genres students have engaged with in their pre-college years and how those genres have shaped reading practices and behaviors will be helpful in understanding their reading experiences and capabilities and, perhaps, their assumptions about the reading that will be required of them in college. These issues may surface in students' literacy narratives as they share information about their interactions with books, authors, families, friends, and discourse communities and other sponsors.

Affective issues, such as motivation to read, or lack of it, may emerge during interaction that occurs between a student and various reading sponsors. Reading experts John Guthrie and Alan Wigfield (1997) assert that motivation is cognitively generated, but with "considerable impact from affective factors" (v), yet few studies have been done to explore how affective factors shape students' learning behaviors while reading. Guthrie and Wigfield lament the fact that during the 1990s, interest declined in studying motivation and other affective factors with regard to reading instruction and practice. How literacy sponsors develop curriculum and present instruction relating to reading may play a key role in determining what texts students value and their motivation to read.

In her 2010 plenary address at the National Reading Conference, "Why Can't We Read Something Good?" Gloria Ladson-Billings (2010) complains that "every

year millions of young people enter our schools and classrooms and find themselves subjected to a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of required texts that do little more than push them away from our so-called stated goal—to educate all students so they can...use their minds well” (15). Ladson-Billings links choice and motivation in her address, calling on instructors—as literacy sponsors—to integrate new genres of literature into the classroom that will be more appealing to students based on a student’s cultural background and personal interests. Students often reveal in their narratives how reading prescribed texts in high school reduces their motivation to read; literacy narratives provide insight into how the texts selected by reading sponsors have both positive and negative effects on reading engagement and motivation.

As the numbers of English Language Learners (ELL) and English as Second Language (ESL) students continue to grow in public colleges and universities, it is also essential that literacy sponsors understand each student’s cultural background. Many first-year students in public institutions have had limited exposure to academic texts and language through family sponsors and are further hindered from success by language barriers; some have had limited exposure to Standard English because English is not a first or second language. New Literacy Studies proponent James Paul Gee (2012) argues that language acquisition (literacy) is not purely cognitive; it is, in fact, largely social and cultural and stems from discourses or “socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or a social network” (Gee, 2012, p. 1). Even among speakers of English there are socio-culturally different

primary discourses; lower socio-economic black children use English to make sense of their experiences differently than their middle-class counterparts (4). For example, in *Social Linguistics and Literacies* Gee notes that:

Many lower socio-economic African-American people in the United States, though they are literate, have ties to a former rich oral culture, both from the days of slavery in the United States and from African cultures, and are at the same time less influenced than mainstream middle-class groups by essay-text literacy and the school systems that perpetuate it. (p. 69)

Gaining a better understanding of a student's cultural background may help literacy sponsors better understand a student's identity as a reader. Gee stresses the importance of understanding how different cultural practices call for certain uses of language and suggests that one major motif of contemporary socio-cultural approaches to literacy development is to study the features of various communities' social practices. A better understanding of the roles students' communities and families play as literacy sponsors may assist instructors in helping students acclimate to academic conventions while honoring their particular backgrounds.

In *Diversity Matters*, Lynn Spradlin and Richard Parsons (2008) claim that as the American classroom becomes increasingly diverse, such diversity has "important implications for educators" (p. 2) They call for the professional development of all educators (literacy sponsors) on the concepts of culture, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, gender, status and marginalization (p. 3). They also suggest that teachers should be sensitive to the values of each particular student noting that not all

cultures and communities share the values of the dominant culture; this process starts by examining one's values to see how they shape one's pedagogy and approach to teaching.

Our cultural heritage and background influence our lives in many ways. No aspect of human life is not touched and altered by culture. Our personalities, the way we think, and the ways we solve problems, as well as methods we use to organize ourselves, are all given shape, in large part, by cultural experiences. However, we frequently take the great influence of culture on our lives for granted and fail to identify the significant and sometimes subtle ways culture affects our behavior (p. 4).

Understanding literacy sponsorship through students' literacy narratives may offer insight into students' cultural backgrounds, helping composition instructors to better understand how each student's reading identity was shaped by the sponsors within that particular culture.

As Alice Horning and others suggest:

Because first year writing is a common, shared experience, and because it is meant to help students develop key abilities they will need to succeed in other courses, it is surely a good place to work on reading in conjunction with writing. Writing teachers can help students become better readers through reconnecting reading and writing. (p. 7)

The goal of my research is to *hear* what students report about their experiences as readers through analysis of their literacy narratives, using sponsorship as a

preliminary frame. Through the analysis of students' reports of their literacy sponsors, this research may offer rich insights as to how reading sponsors shape students' reading identities.

## Chapter 2

### Methodology and Procedures

#### Developing the Research Design

This study was designed to explore first-year college students' reading experiences through their literacy narratives using Deborah Brandt's (1998, 2001) work on literacy sponsors as a preliminary frame. The study first aims to investigate the people, places, and things that students report influenced their reading development. Building on Brandt's definition of sponsors, I am defining sponsors as entities that students report helped or hindered their reading literacy, including teachers, schools, parents, siblings, friends, authors/books, genres, places of worship, organizations, technologies, and hobbies. Additionally, I am interested in what can be learned from students' narratives about their formative experiences with reading sponsors that might help any individuals interested in reading sponsorship including college-level writing instructors.

The primary texts used for research design were John Creswell's *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (2013) and his *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2009), both used widely by graduate students and faculty in post-secondary education. These texts were supplemented by Johnny Saldana's *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2013), *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014), and W. Newton Suter's *Introduction to Educational Research* (2012). To prepare for the research, I attended a four-hour hands-on training at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)

Qualitative Research Network Forum in Tampa Florida led by Gwen Gorzelsky and Kevin Roozer. I also completed the IRB training and certification process for both University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and University of Rhode Island (URI). The data set, 121 literacy narratives created by first-year composition students, was approved for use under “exempt status” by both URI and UMass Dartmouth.<sup>1</sup>

### **Why Use Qualitative Research?**

Creswell states that researchers use qualitative research when a human problem, social problem, or issue needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013). During the qualitative research process, the focus must be kept on learning the meaning *the participants* hold about the problem or issue, not on the perceptions researchers bring to the research. Additionally, Creswell notes that qualitative research should “reflect multiple perspectives of the participants in the study” (2013, p. 47). According to Creswell:

We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study. To further de-emphasize a power relationship, we may collaborate directly with participants by having them review our research questions, or by having them collaborate with us during the data analysis and interpretation phases of research. We conduct

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the first round of coding, Robert Schwegler and I discussed using Brandt’s work as a frame. I also met jointly with Theresa Deeney and Julie Coiro from URI who assisted me with designing the first two rounds of coding, and Nedra Reynolds assisted me with the design of the third round of coding, which was necessary for verification.



qualitative research when we want to write in a literary, flexible style that conveys stories ... (p. 48)

While noting that there is no single specific research design for qualitative research (research design often evolves during the research process), Creswell offers five possible approaches: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnographic research, and case study research. For the purposes of determining the role literacy sponsors play in students' learning experiences specifically related to reading development *and* for discovering more about students' reading experiences, habits, and behaviors, a qualitative coding research approach was developed for this study. This allowed the researcher to examine how a large cohort of student participants articulate their lived experiences as readers as shared through their literacy narratives (written texts).

As Creswell notes, "the type of research best suited for this kind of research is one in which it is important to understand several individual's common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). W. Newton Suter explains that, "To understand a complex phenomenon, you must consider the multiple 'realities; experienced by the participants themselves—the 'insider' perspectives" (Suter, 2012, p. 344). Suter also asserts that the "depth afforded by qualitative analysis is believed by many to be the best method for understanding the complexity of educational practice" (352). In phenomenological studies, the researchers' intent is to make sense of or interpret the meanings others have about the world, to look for patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings, in this case through students expressed experiences with reading prior to entering college. Rather than starting with

a theory, researchers generate *patterns* of meaning during the research process based on the data they interpret (Creswell 2009, 8). For this study, researchers coded the data in three cycles as explained below in the data coding section. Qualitative research is *interpretive* which means that researchers must assign meaning to data using the participants' *expressed experiences*. The results for this study will be presented in Chapter Three: Findings and interpreted in Chapter Four: Discussion. Finally, qualitative research should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers' lives (Creswell, 2013). Suggestions to address the findings will be found in Chapter 5: Implications.

#### **Student Researcher's Disclosure: Positioning Myself as Researcher**

As a teacher/student/researcher, self-disclosure about my initial interest in this study is important. I returned to teaching writing, after a six-year hiatus from teaching, as an adjunct faculty member in the English Department at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in 2002. In 2006, I became a benefitted lecturer and continued teaching at UMass Dartmouth until 2016, when I was hired as a full-time faculty member at Bristol Community College.

During 2003-2004, I was becoming increasingly concerned about students who reported that they did not like to read or were not reading for coursework. For example, many students claimed that they did not think it was necessary to read their college texts to pass a class and some shared that they had not read a complete book since the start of high school. This lack of interest bothered me for many reasons. As a lifelong reader, I was troubled by student reports that they "hated" reading. What did they really mean when they said they didn't "like to read"? I was also concerned

with my students' lack of information literacy, which made teaching academic and evidence-based writing difficult. Where and how were they getting information? How could they, as Charles Bazerman discusses in his 1980 "Conversational Model" essay, become "informed respondents" to important ongoing conversations, let alone successfully complete their coursework, if they were not strong and habitual readers? These questions troubled me, and through discussions with colleagues it seemed some instructors were convinced many students "just don't read anymore." I wanted to explore what and how students were reading and what experiences were shaping their attitudes and behaviors towards reading.

In 2008, searching for a pedagogical model for the writing classroom that addressed reading more directly, I located a literacy narrative assignment in the third edition of John Trimbur's *A Call to Write*. Although I only used the textbook for a few semesters, I continued modifying a literacy narrative assignment in my first-semester writing classes as a way to diagnose students' writing abilities, orient myself with their literacy experiences, and start conversations about the connections between reading and writing. Since the classes were run as workshops, sharing narratives would often initiate class conversations about students' prior reading and writing experiences. In 2010, I also began taking graduate classes towards a doctorate at the University of Rhode Island as a non-matriculated student, ultimately becoming a graduate student in the English Department focusing on Rhetoric and Composition in the Fall 2011.

In 2013, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UMass Dartmouth and began collecting data in the form of literacy narratives for

information regarding students' histories with reading and writing. The data were collected at the beginning of each semester from my first-year writing classes between February 20, 2013 and October 2, 2015, and some preliminary findings regarding students' reading habits were presented at the College Composition and Communication Conferences between 2013 and 2016. This same data set was approved by the University of Rhode Island's Internal Review Board for use in this current dissertation project.

### **Researcher's World View**

I approach this research from the perspective of a social constructivist—that is, of a researcher striving to understand what is happening with students' reading experiences from their own reports and perspectives and from an awareness that students' reading experiences, habits, and behaviors are also a product of their individual, cultural, and social experiences. Although quantitative reports are highly useful in understanding reading levels and trends on local, regional, and national levels, a qualitative approach may help reveal individual and group experiences with reading, helping educators to better understand how approaches to reading in the writing classroom may be reconsidered and improved.

As a social constructivist, I seek to understand the complexity of views of the situation being studied, questions should be constructed to be broad and general so as to allow participants to construct their own meaning of the situation to be studied (Creswell, 2009, p.8). "The more open ended the questioning the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings" (8). From a social constructivist world view, rather than starting with a theory, researchers develop

a *pattern* of understanding from analyzing and interpreting the subjective meanings of others as those meanings are shaped by each individual's experience.

#### My Assumptions as Researcher

1. Consideration of reading and its relationship to writing is, or should be, a fundamental concern for writing instructors.
2. Students can assist teachers in better understanding students' individual experiences with reading and literacy development.
3. The student narrative can be an effective vehicle for conveying students' experiences to instructors, particularly if students feel comfortable articulating their experiences. The "open" nature of narrative allows for more freedom of expression than might interviewing, questionnaires, or surveys.

From the perspective of the social constructivist, the literacy narrative seemed the ideal method of data collection for this qualitative research.

#### **Participants and Location of Study**

The participants for this study were first-year English students at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, a state university located in Southeastern Massachusetts. The university is well known for its College of Engineering and College of Nursing, and it has traditionally served students from this region, including a large number of first-generation college students. In the 2013-2015 first-year cohorts, 30% of students were first-generation college students. Roughly 40% of all students were students of color, and roughly 40% were Pell Grant recipients. The average SAT scores for these

cohorts of students was 1035 with an average math score of 527 and an average verbal score of 509 (Trial, 2016).

All students entering the university must complete two semesters of English composition, unless they have transferred these credits from another institution. Most students complete both English 101 and 102 in their first year of college, and passing these classes is considered a strong indicator of college success. English 101 and 102 both require students to meet objectives related to reading and information literacy; thus the English 101 classroom is a fitting place to assign a literacy narrative assignment which may illuminate students' previous reading experiences. The narrative assignments were both distributed and collected in on-campus writing classrooms.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In order to best hear students' voices and understand their experiences, I used student literacy narratives to gather data which were collected over a twenty-two month period. Literacy narratives are generally defined as "reflective stories about reading and writing, and they have been created either through autobiographical, reflective writing, or through the collection and analysis of interviews or oral histories" (Chandler, 2013, p. 2).

To collect data about students' reading experiences, I invited students in their first semester of first-year English (whether spring or fall semester) to participate in the study during the first two weeks of class before they wrote their literacy narratives. I explained to all of the students that after the semester was over I was planning to conduct a study in which I would analyze their narratives to see what I could learn

about their prior literacy development with the intention of better understanding the literacy backgrounds of first-year college students. All students were welcome to participate if they were interested, and all participants signed a consent form and were told that no data would be analyzed until the semester was completed. Students were also told that their narratives would be de-identified before the analysis began. In total, 230 students agreed to participate in the study, although only 121 narratives were used in this study because only 121 narratives were directly related to students' prior reading experiences. As noted above, these narratives were collected over a twenty-two month period from four separate semesters, or 12 different sections of *English 101: Critical Reading and Writing I*, providing a range of data from four consecutive semesters.

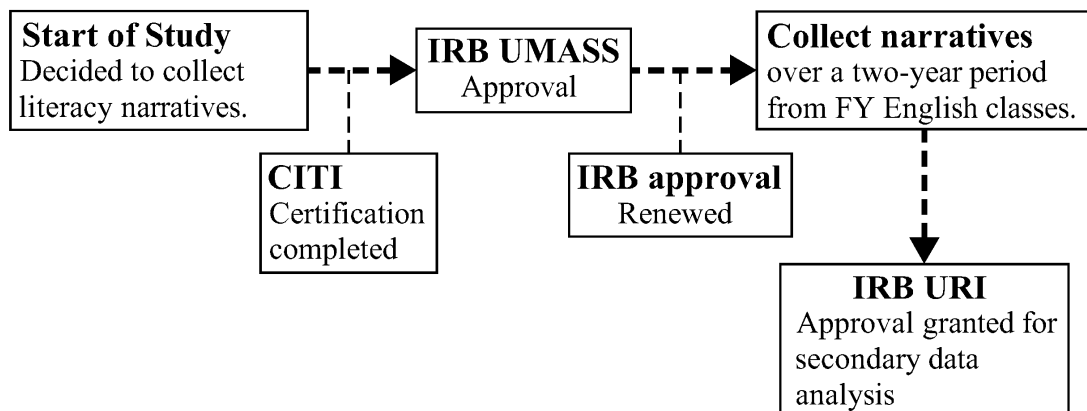
In keeping with a social constructivist framework, the narrative writing prompt was designed to gather a wide variety of participant responses; the questions were developed to be open-ended and general so as to gather a variety of experiences and encourage the complexity of views. "The more open-ended the questioning the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). The prompt (Appendix A) was used as a guide for the student writers who participated in the study. The use of literacy narratives for this study makes sense for the following reasons:

1. The narrative allows students the freedom to discuss the experiences they feel are most relevant to their individual lives.
2. Most students are comfortable with writing narratives.

3. The narrative format can give the researcher a substantial amount of data (2-4 pages per essay).
4. The data set allows the researcher to build from individual's specific experiences to larger themes or categories of meaning.
5. The data set has been created by students in natural settings (the classroom, at home or in a dorm room/library etc.).
6. Students may be more apt to provide details in writing than they may express verbally.

No effort was made by the researcher to guide student responses other than encouraging them to write what seemed most important to them using the questions to prompt their responses. All papers were de-identified and stored in a file cabinet for future analysis. My data collection process is depicted below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Data Collection Process





## **The Qualitative Coding Process**

As discussed earlier, John Creswell describes qualitative research design as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). This process includes collecting data in a natural setting, analyzing data from particular to general themes, and interpreting the data. Creswell describes the coding process as “preparing and organizing the data for analysis then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables or discussion” (Creswell, 2013, p. 18). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana believe that coding is its own form of analysis and allows for deep reflection of the data’s meaning (Miles et al. 2013, p. 72). The cycles of qualitative coding employed in this study are as follows:

Cycle One: Identifies sponsors in 121 narratives. Begins to look for themes that emerge related to students’ reading identities.

Cycle Two: Verifies sponsors. Develops and refines eight thematic categories from patterns located in the narratives related to students’ reading identities.

Cycle Three: Verifies sponsors and Cycle Two categories and confirms three meta-themes.

### Cycle One Coding

During Cycle One, I read through all of the 230 narratives and removed the narratives that did not specifically address reading, which left 121 narratives for further analysis. The 99 narratives that did not fit the data pool because they were not about reading were either only about writing or another form of literacy development such as learning to play a sport or a musical instrument. Rather than using an

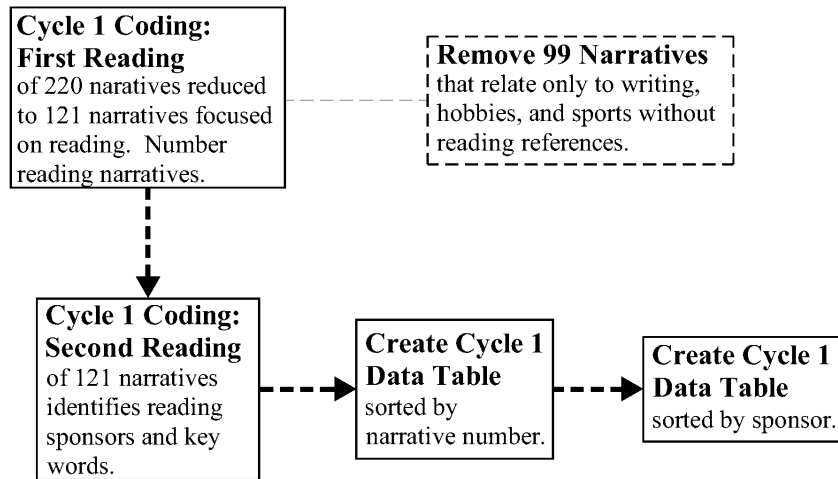
electronic form of coding, I chose to code manually, and store findings in Excel spreadsheets. Manual coding was done for purely pragmatic reasons, as I felt it would be easier to work more closely with print copies that could be duplicated and annotated easily during Cycle Two and Cycle Three coding sessions. According to Saldana:

Trying to learn the basics of coding a qualitative data analysis simultaneously with the sometimes complex instructions and multiple functions of CAQDAS programs can be overwhelming for some, if not most...I recommend that first-time or small scale studies code on hard-copy printouts first...There is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that gives you more control and ownership of the work. (p. 26)

At the outset, hard copies of the narratives offered more options and fewer limitations for all coders involved in the research process.

During Cycle One coding, I recorded the dominant sponsors in the participants' narratives. In other words, I selected a passage that I felt best reflected students' references to our working definition of sponsorship (entities who students report helped or hindered their **reading** literacy, including teachers, schools, parents, siblings, friends, authors/books, genres, places of worship, organizations, technologies, and hobbies). These sponsors were recorded on an Excel spread sheet designated by number along with a notes column where I recorded key words and potential themes. Figure 2 below depicts the Cycle One coding process.

Figure 2: Cycle One Coding Process



### Cycle Two Coding

During Cycle Two coding, 50 narratives (or 41% of the data pool) were randomly selected from the data pool to be coded by two coders. To prepare for Cycle Two Coding, the coders read and discussed Creswell’s “Data Analysis and Representation” chapter from *Qualitative Inquiry and Design* (Creswell, 2013) and practiced coding for sponsors with a sample literacy narrative. Although neither of the second coders had ever engaged in a formal coding process, both were familiar with the literacy narrative genre and both were familiar with the college-level writing of first-year students.<sup>2</sup> I also provided the coders with a working definition of literacy sponsors and an excel spreadsheet for storing the following data: Narrative #, Sponsor(s), Key Words, Potential Categories/Themes.

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<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Lehr holds an MA in Professional Writing and is a seasoned writing instructor and coordinator of a first-year college experience program, while Steve Scallon holds an MA in Education and is a graduate student in a Professional Writing Program. Scallon has worked in both writing classrooms and a writing center as a tutor/advocate. Both Lehr and Scallon are colleagues of mine from UMass Dartmouth.

In “Data Analysis and Representation,” Creswell describes data collection, analysis, and report writing as interrelated activities that go on simultaneously in a research project. Qualitative researchers learn by doing (182). As such, the coders were instructed to read through the narrative several times, to immerse themselves in the details and get a sense of the text as whole (183). I then asked them to identify the sponsor(s) according to the definition provided and to consider what the student was conveying about his or her experiences as a reader (his or her reading identity)—these experiences would be categorized by themes. After the coders completed their coding, I met with each to discuss his/her findings, and as a cohort we developed eight thematic categories related to the participants’ reading identities.

### Cycle Three Coding

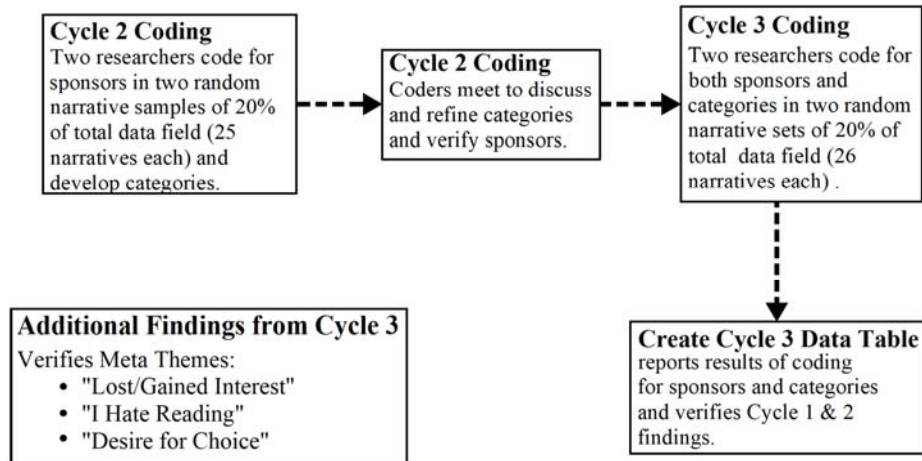
In order to verify the findings in Cycle One and Cycle Two—verification of both sponsorship and thematic categories related to reading identity--two randomized sets of 26 narratives were created and provided to an additional two coders.<sup>3</sup> These coders, both experienced composition instructors and qualitative researchers, were provided with the working definition of sponsorship and the thematic categories related to reading identities created during Cycle Two coding, as well as a sample narrative for practice coding which I conducted with them. They were asked to identify the *primary* sponsors in the narratives (as opposed to all sponsors present in the narrative), select passages from the texts that they felt represented students’ experiences and

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<sup>3</sup> Anicca Cox is the former Assistant Director of First-Year English at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and holds an MA in English with a focus on Rhetoric and Composition. Susan Hagan, MA in Professional Writing, is the online Writing Tutor at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and an instructor in the UMassD First-Year Writing Program.

meanings, assign the categories provided *if* those categories fit, and to identify additional potential categories if necessary. (See sample data sheet in Appendix B). In other words, they were asked to look for what the first and second cycle coders might have missed in the data set as a means of *verifying* second cycle findings and presenting new insights about the data. Figure 3 below depicts Cycles Two and Three of the coding process. As the chart shows, Cycle Three Coders also verified three meta-themes related to students identified labeled the “I Hate Reading Category” and the “Desire for Choice” categories.

Figure 3: Cycles Two and Three Coding Processes



The findings from qualitative coding will be shared in Chapter 3: Results and discussed in detail in Chapter 4: Discussion.

## Chapter 3: Results

Chapter Three shares the results of the study and is divided into four sections: Sponsors, Thematic Categories, Meta-Themes, and Coding Reliability. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the results with limited corresponding examples from the narratives.<sup>4</sup> The results will be elaborated upon in much more detail in Chapter 4: Discussion.

### **Sponsors**

In this study, sponsors are identified in all but four of 121 narratives. Many of the narratives reference more than one sponsor; therefore, coders focused on sponsors and passages that they felt were central to participants' expressed experiences. As Figure 4 and Table 1 depict, Teachers are the dominant category of sponsors found in 51 out of the 121 narratives coded during Cycle One. Books/Authors/Genres, Mothers, Parents, Friends and Fathers make up other primary categories. The thirty sponsors that fall in the Other category include Schools, Grandmothers, Peers, Music, Grandfathers, Tutors, Sisters, Cousins, Video Games, Brother, Uncle, Grandparents, Television, Technology, Boys and Girls Club, Family, Principal, Special Needs School, and Girlfriend. Clearly, many participants found reading sponsorship from relationships with people and entities one might not expect.

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<sup>4</sup> Student excerpts have not been edited, and students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout the dissertation.

Figure 4: Cycle One Coding for Reading Sponsors

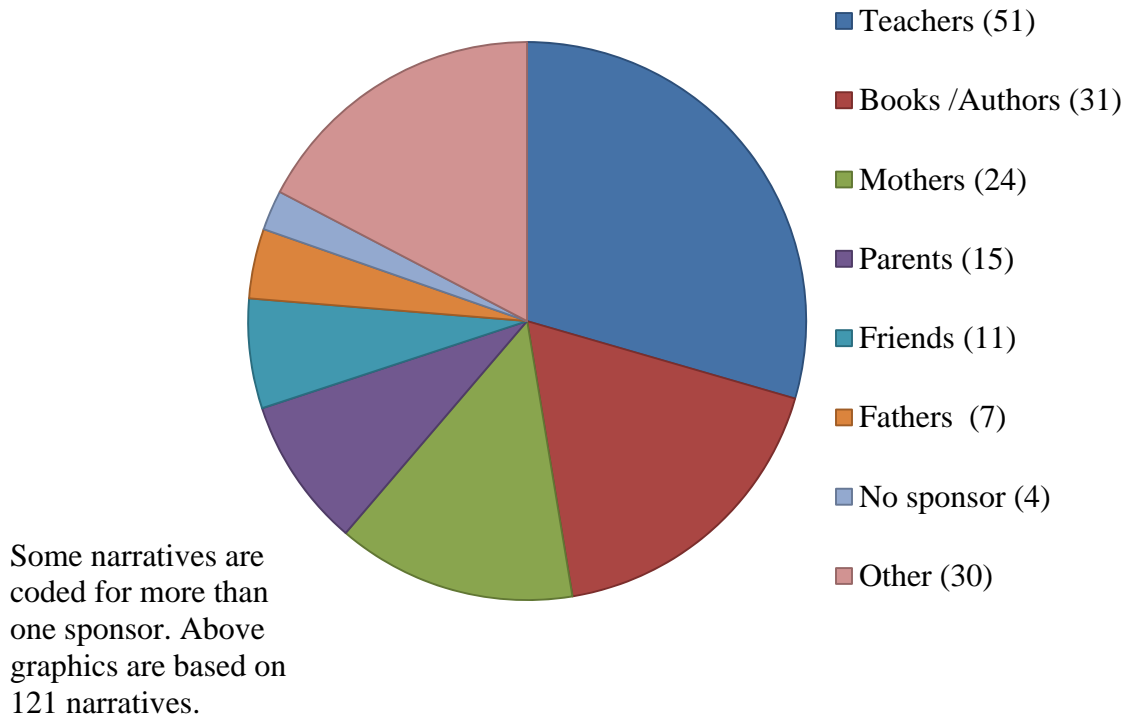


Table 1: Cycle One Coding for Reading Sponsors

| Sponsor              | # Coded |
|----------------------|---------|
| Teachers             | 51      |
| Books/Authors/Genres | 31      |
| Mothers              | 24      |
| Parents              | 15      |
| Friends              | 11      |
| Fathers              | 7       |
| No sponsor           | 4       |
| Other                | 30      |
| Schools              | 3       |
| Grandmothers         | 3       |
| Peers                | 2       |
| Music                | 2       |
| Grandfathers         | 2       |
| Tutors               | 2       |
| Sisters              | 2       |
| Cousins              | 2       |
| Video games          | 2       |
| Brother              | 1       |
| Uncle                | 1       |
| Grandparents         | 1       |
| Television           | 1       |
| Technology           | 1       |
| Boys and Girls Club  | 1       |
| Family               | 1       |
| Principal            | 1       |
| Special Needs School | 1       |
| Girlfriend           | 1       |

Table 1 shows a wide range of sponsors especially in the Other category.



## Teachers as Sponsors

As Figure 4 and Table 1 show, teachers were coded as sponsors in 51 narratives comprising the largest category of sponsors. Students reported a wide range of experiences with teachers, often including excerpts about teachers who inspired them to read and curricula that they found engaging and/or helpful. Example:

- *She taught me how to sound out the word. I should not have been rushing just so I could finish the book like the other kids, it wouldn't benefit me at all. She also didn't force me to read huge books like other teachers had in the past. She gave me easier books and when she thought I got better she would give me another book that was a little more difficult but not extremely difficult. She helped me get my confidence back in reading.*

Students also reported reading-related problems they associated with teachers. Often, these excerpts reveal frustration with early reading problems or “boring” high school curricula. Example:

- *I remember like it was yesterday, the day I started to hate reading to the point where I didn't want to pick up another book. It all started when I was in first grade. The teacher asked who wanted to read a picture book out loud for the class and I raised my hand. I then sat on the rocking chair; I read the first few pages with no problems. I got nervous that I couldn't finish reading the book. The teacher took this book from me and told me to sit on the rug because I didn't want to*

*finish reading. I was so ashamed and from that day on, I hated reading.*

Although students reported diverse and highly individualized experiences with teachers in their narratives, it is possible to summarize some of their experiences. In general:

- Most students name the teachers they had, and they can recall in detail whether or not they had positive or negative experiences with individual teachers and their curricula.
- Students make emotional associations between the curricula and the teacher—if they report liking their teachers it is usually because they had a positive learning experience.
- Students who write about positive reading experiences with teachers use words like amazing, passion, motivation, confidence, favorite, love, journey, proficiency, knowledge, mentor, and trust.
- Students who report negative reading experiences with teachers use words and phrases like struggle, hate, killing creativity, difficult, nervous, boring, forced, lost passion, aversion, enemy, and double-edged sword.

#### Books/Authors/Genres as Sponsors

Thirty-one student narratives were coded for books, genre, and/or authors as sponsors. Books/Authors/Genres as sponsors is characterized largely by students who report that they located genres, books, or authors (either on their own or through the help of a teacher, parent, or friend) that inspired them to continue reading. Students in

this category report largely positive experiences with reading once they locate topics, genres, and/or authors of interest. For example:

➤ *I'll also never forget the time I got my first manga. A manga is a Japanese version of a comic book and it's pretty much the only thing I read even now...the first manga I got was Neon Genesis Evangelion, also my favorite anime...the ideas that are in that manga are very relatable and I think it has helped me become a better person. Some of the books that I've read in school have actually been some of my favorite ones, such as the Outsiders, Of Mice and Men, Animal Farm, Night, and The Great Gatsby. Although I did not enjoy the work that came along with reading these books such as the long essays, the constant tests to see if we read the book when we were supposed to, and the presentations about whatever chapter you got assigned.*

Narratives in this category provide details about students' previous encounters with books and usually include the author's name and book title. Students almost always convey their feelings (affective concerns) about the book in the narrative. In general:

- Typically, students report that positive experiences with a book in a particular genre leads to more reading in that genre and/or more reading in general.
- Students often reported liking a book, but not the assignments and tests associated with it.

- Students in this category may continue to read books of interest outside of school while not completing reading for school.
- Students often reported that they prefer to select their own books.
- Students reported locating books of interest both in and outside of school.

### Mothers as Sponsors

The third largest category of sponsors coded for was that of Mothers. Mothers played an important role in 24 of the student narratives. Thirteen of the twenty-four (more than half) of the narratives in the “Mothers as Sponsors” category were written by English Language Learners or L2 students, providing information about the roles mothers play in their children’s literacy development.

Mothers often surface as advocates for their children in and outside of school settings. In addition to reading to their children, in many instances, mothers act as role models by inspiring their children to read and sharing their love for reading as in the following excerpts:

- *My mom always helped me compete and win prizes by reading me stories like “Clifford the Big Red Dog” and “Madeline.” I loved spending time with her; she was such a good story teller and she inspired me to want to read.*

The narratives in this category portray mothers as having a strong investment in their child’s literacy development. Additionally:

- Mothers often require their children to participate in out-of-school literacy development at home or with a tutor or other sponsor whether or not the child willingly cooperates.
- International students report that mothers are proactive in assisting them in mastering English skills.
- Mothers frequently intervene in their child’s literacy development problems, assisting them with addressing developmental issues and/or anxieties.
- Shared reading with mothers creates strong bonding experiences.

As Figure 4 depicts, references to parents, friends, fathers, grandparents, peers, tutors, and siblings are also present in students’ literacy narratives, and many of these sponsors play a vital role in both motivating and assisting with reading development. Some will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. Most of the interactions with sponsors denoted as “Other” are described by participants as being both positive and beneficial. In this data set, the sponsors reported most frequently as providing the most negative sponsorship were teachers.

#### Others as Sponsors

For ease of depiction in Figure 4, thirty-three sponsors coded for less frequently were grouped in a category called “Other.” These sponsors include a wide range of individuals and entities including Schools, Grandmothers, Peers, Music, Grandfathers, Tutors, Sisters, Cousins, Video Games, Brother, Uncle, Grandparents, Television, Technology, Boys and Girls Club, Family, Principal, Special Needs School, and Girlfriend. As the excerpt below shows, sponsors who fall in the “Other” category also

provided strong sponsorship. For example, Television was listed as a sponsor in the Other category:

#### Television

- *“My first language was not Standard American English. My first language was actually Greek. I started to learn English when I was about five years old. I learned the language by listening to TV shows like Caliou, Dragon Tales and Spongebob. I also learned by listening to other children talk and listening to teachers read to me...So after I learned the alphabet in English, whenever I tried reading a book I would sound the letter out. Reading didn’t take long for me to learn. All I have to do was pronounce the letter correctly in each word and eventually I got it down.”*

#### **Thematic Categories**

Rather than be linked directly to a sponsor, the thematic categories are largely connected to each individual participant’s identity as a reader. To develop these categories, coders were asked to read the narrative and identify passages that they felt were most reflective of that individual’s experiences with reading. In total, 101 narratives were coded for the following eight categories: Lost/Gained Interest, Empowerment, Conflict, Reading & Writing Connections, Sponsor Responsible, Knowledge Seeker, Reading Process, and Inauthentic. Findings for these categories is shown below in Figure 5 and Table 2. Additionally, coders identified three meta themes in the narratives. For the purposes of this study, meta themes are defined as categories pertaining to 25 or more narratives. The meta themes are “Lost/Gained

Interest,” “I Hate Reading,” and “Desire for Choice.” These are depicted in Figure 6 in the upcoming section on meta themes.

Figure 5: Thematic Categories (101 narratives)

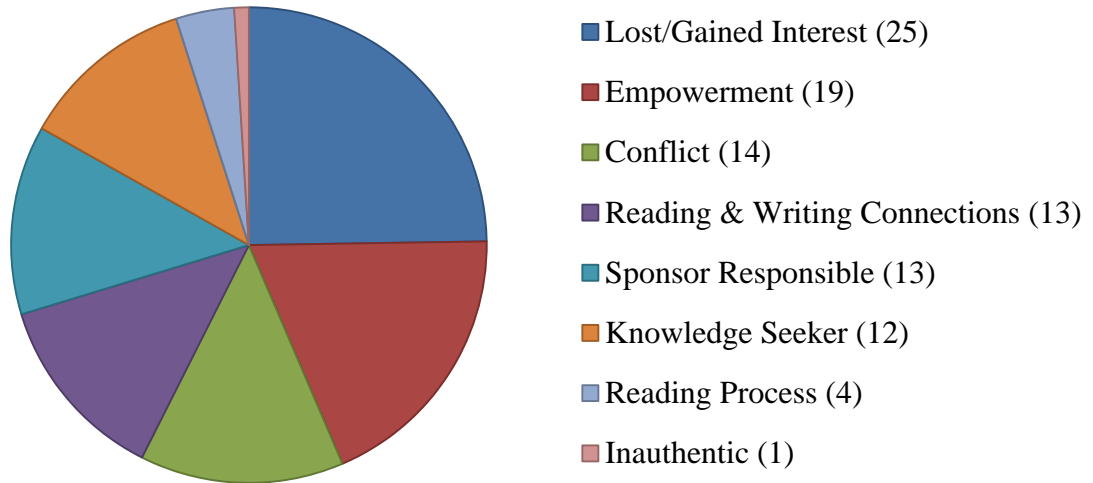


Table 2: Thematic Categories (101 narratives)

| Category                      | No. of Narratives |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Lost/Gained Interest          | 25                |
| Empowerment                   | 19                |
| Conflict                      | 14                |
| Reading & Writing Connections | 13                |
| Sponsor Responsible           | 13                |
| Knowledge Seeker              | 12                |
| Reading Process               | 4                 |
| Inauthentic                   | 1                 |

Creating thematic categories was helpful because it allowed the researcher to begin to understand how the participants perceived themselves as readers. The idea of each participant having a “reading identity” will be discussed further in the Discussion and Implications section. Below I will describe each category briefly and provide an example of the type of passage coders selected to place the narrative in a particular category. Note that these categories are not directly connected to interactions with sponsors, rather they reflect the participants’ expressed sense of themselves as readers as interpreted by the coders. Also note that any category applying to 25 or more narratives will be considered a meta-theme. For example, Lost/Gained Interest Category below pertained to 25 narratives, so it was placed in the meta theme category.

#### Lost/Gained Interest

No quote has been provided here because Lost/Gained interest will be discussed below in meta theme section.

#### Empowerment

Nineteen participants in this category express taking responsibility for their own learning and feeling empowered by reading activities. International students with less privilege frequently articulate the value of education. Positive reading experiences with a life-changing book often produce articulations of empowerment.

- *I went from a careless reader to a person who embraces and sees the power of reading.*



## Conflict

Fourteen narratives were placed in this category because they present negative experiences with reading, often creating anxiety. Much of the conflict occurs when students are young and first learning to read. Conflict is often reported as being related to learning English, dyslexia, or a classroom/socially traumatizing experience.

- *From an early age I knew that I was inferior because I could not keep pace with my peers. The constant embarrassment of inadequacy was terrible for my educational and social confidence. The inevitable fact that reading would become more and more a part of my education was unbearable at times.*

## Reading and Writing Connections

Thirteen participants articulated that they made connections between what they read and what they write, most for the purposes of development of style and their personal creative writing.

- *Reading makes you a better writer because it introduces one to style and wordplay, grammar and communication.*

## Sponsor Responsible

Thirteen narratives were placed in the Sponsor Responsible category, the student gives the sponsor credit for his or her success for development **or** lack of development.

- *He would make lessons engaging by encouraging everyone to read whatever text we happened to be reading. He was able to get the best*

*out of us. He understood what my true limits were. It worked and his class got the highest grades in the school.*

#### Knowledge Seeker/Finder:

In this category, twelve students articulate that they seek or find knowledge and/or truth and/or productivity through reading.

- *“Everybody reads for a different reason...My thirst for knowledge; my desire to know how the world works, and my want to understand people’s behaviors serve as my fuel for reading.”*

#### Reading Process

In Reading Process, four students write about their former or current reading processes.

- *“There is still so much I need to do to improve my reading and writing skills.”*

#### Inauthentic

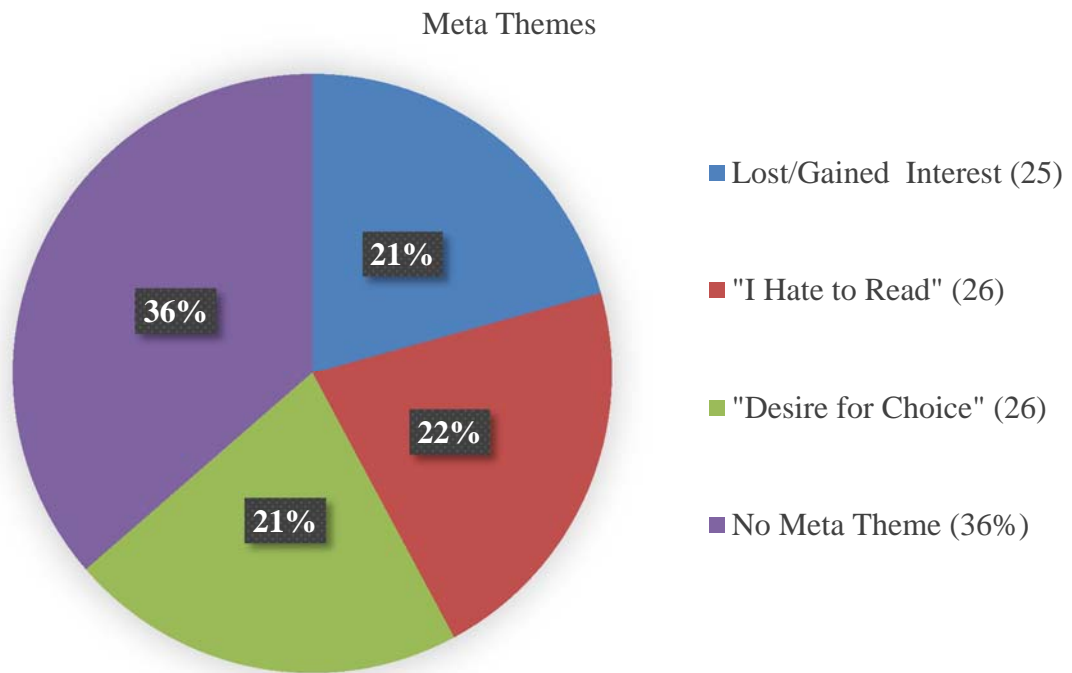
This category was created for one narrative that appears to be writing to the teacher to complete the literacy narrative assignment without an authentic voice. We only found one of these where the student identifies her negative attitude toward reading, and the student writes that she wants to learn to read a broader range of materials, but the reflection seems disingenuous to coders.

- *I have spent a few days thinking about my attitude toward reading and writing and I am slowly discovering ...without the skills of reading and writing I will not be as successful as I want to be in life.*

## Meta-Themes

In addition to the above categories, three overarching meta-themes were located in the narratives by the identification of the key root words “hate” and “choice” which surfaced repeatedly in the data set. The first meta theme concerns students who articulate that they “hate” reading in their narratives, and the second concerns the desire for more “choice” regarding school-based reading selections or assignment. I will address both below and then further in Chapter 4: Discussion.

Figure 6: Meta Themes (Out of 121 Narratives)



### Lost/Gained Interest

Participants in this data set frequently wrote about the inconsistency of their reading experiences by expressing how they lost and gained interest with reading. In total, 25 students reported that they lost and/or gained interest in reading at a certain age, usually over stretches of time such as a year or two, but sometimes for several years such as throughout high school. Often, this lack of interest is attributed to lack of choice in school-based reading. Many students report not reading the books required of them in high school, or they report that reading was “boring” and that they read because they were going to have to take a test. Example:

- *I grew up reading at a young age...reading let me forget about everything going on around me. Reading put me in a magical place where I got lost in pages upon pages. As I grew older, the thought of reading didn't spark the same excitement like it used to. Reading just became a bore to me.*

### Students Who Report They “Hate” Reading

Twenty-six of the 121 narratives, or 22%, were written by students who report that they either hate reading or hated reading at some point. Nine students claim that their dislike for reading started in high school, and twelve students reference early educational experiences as the start of their reading problems. The remaining five essays do not specify when their problems began. Some of the titles students used for their stories are: “Forced Enjoyment,” “The Things I’d Rather Do,” “Why I Hate Classical Literature,” and “My Struggle with Reading and Writing.” Students describe their reading experiences by using the following terms: inadequacy, torture, struggle,

chore, hopeless, embarrassed, shame, nervous, anxiety, humiliation, challenging, discouraged, painful, and distracted.

- *"I hated reading because I was not good at reading fluently or even understanding the reading."*

### Students Who Report They Want More Choice

Twenty-six out of 121 narratives, or 22%, of the total data pool offer participants' perspectives on the desire for choice in reading materials. These narratives can be broken down roughly into two subcategories: those who want to self-select reading materials that they find interesting and those who blame the curriculum for ruining their interest in reading.

#### Selecting Topics/Books of Interest

Many students articulated that they enjoyed reading much more when they were allowed to choose their own books.

- *"For two classes I was assigned a research paper assignment; it was on anything that I wanted. I was thinking anything I wanted? Wow, this might be fun. I wanted to write about something that I was interested in, something I wanted to learn more about, something that gets me thinking."*

#### Blaming the Curriculum

Students who reported that they wanted more choice often blame the curriculum for ruining their experiences in their English class.

- *“Most of my difficulties stem from being forced to interpret works in a certain way per the order of my teachers. Poetry means nothing to me when I can’t think about it for myself.”*

**Coding Reliability for Sponsors**

Coding for sponsors proved to be highly reliable. In most cases there was a direct match for sponsorship between coders. To better explain how I tested data for reliability, I have provided a few brief tables as examples. Table 3 below shows that for Narrative 57 both the Cycle One and Cycle Three Coders identified the same literacy sponsor: a book. Because the same literacy sponsor was identified by each coder, this was considered a match.

Table 3: Coder Reliability for Narrative 57

| Coder             | Narrative # | Sponsor | Match/No Match |
|-------------------|-------------|---------|----------------|
| Cycle One Coder   | 57          | Book    | Match          |
| Cycle Three Coder | 57          | Book    | Match          |

Although the Second Cycle Coders coded for more sponsors than the first and Third Cycle Coders, there was almost always some match between sponsors. For example, Table 4 below depicts a match in coding for sponsors between First and Second Cycle Coders for Narrative 26. Table 4 shows that Cycle One Coder determined that the sponsor for Narrative #26 was “Parents.” Cycle Two Coder designated Narrative #26 has having two sponsors: “Parents” and “Books.” Because there was an overlap in the coding for sponsors, this was considered a match.

Table 4: Coder Reliability for Narrative 26

| Coder           | Narrative # | Sponsor        | Match/No Match |
|-----------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| Cycle One Coder | 26          | Parents        | Match          |
| Cycle Two Coder | 26          | Parents, Books | Match          |

If no match was found the sponsors would be categorized as not being a match as was the case for Narrative 17 which was coded for different sponsors, as depicted below in Table 5.

Table 5: Coder Reliability for Narrative 17

| Coder             | Narrative # | Sponsor | Match/No Match |
|-------------------|-------------|---------|----------------|
| Cycle One Coder   | 17          | Parents | No Match       |
| Cycle Three Coder | 17          | Movies  | No Match       |

Second Cycle sponsorship coding proved to match First Cycle sponsorship coding 91.5% of the time, while Third Cycle Coding matched First Cycle Coding 87% of the time:

- Second Cycle Sponsor Reliability: 91.5% match of sponsors (47 Narratives)
- Third Cycle Sponsor Reliability: 87% match of sponsors (54 narratives)

Locating sponsors in the narratives proved to be a highly reliable because most narratives presented a predominant sponsor, even when more than one sponsor was present. Participants' interactions with sponsors and the formation of reading identities will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4: Discussion.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

When I invited student participants to write about their literacy experiences and contribute to my research, I did not fully realize the formative role that people, institutions, books, hobbies, and community resources (like libraries) played in the lives of my students. I did not have the frame of reading “sponsorship” in mind when I initially collected these data, nor was I familiar with Deborah Brandt’s work on literacy sponsorship. Because student participants had an open-ended prompt (see Appendix A), they could have written about anything at all related to literacy development, writing, or reading. As it worked out, 121 of the 230 narratives I collected were distinctly focused on reading development and reading experiences that were directly connected to people, places, hobbies and/or specific books—a connection that I now refer to as “reading sponsorship.” These connections make clear the highly social nature of reading development. In addition to revealing the social interactions that take place with sponsors, the student narratives also reveal insights about reading-related factors such as **access and choice, and affective concerns such as personal interest and motivation** and how these factors play a role in a person’s identity or self-concept as a reader (Gee, 2012; Willingham, 2017).

Whether articulating joy, apathy, or frustration, the students in this study have vivid recollections of their reading experiences, most from the time they are read to as young children right up until they enter college. Although many of these experiences are positive, others are alarming, particularly those about environments and events that either leave young readers feeling humiliated and/or dissuade them from wanting to read. Similar to Kelly Gallagher’s report in *Readicide* (2009), my data suggest that



many students stop reading or read reluctantly because of what and how they are being asked to read in school. This institutionalized “killing” of reading is the exact opposite of what educators should desire in our complex, knowledge-driven society, which requires us all to be well-informed critical thinkers and citizens if we are to succeed professionally and participate effectively in complex conversations.

In this Discussion section, a closer look at nearly a dozen narratives will reveal the highly social nature of reading and the important roles that sponsors play in an individual’s reading development. As cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham (2017) states in *The Reading Mind*, “What you read, how often you read, your interpretation of what you read, and your thoughts and beliefs about reading are all influenced by the people around you and your relationship to them” (9). And, as Brandt reminds us in “Sponsors of Literacy,” sponsors can provide access and incentive for literacy development, and they can also withhold it. This means that what students read, how they read, and how they feel about reading are largely dependent on those who sponsor their reading development. Interactions with reading sponsors from pre and early reading years right through adolescence and into adulthood (whether in school or outside of it) have profound effects on a person’s reading abilities, motivations to read (affective concerns), access (selection of reading materials such as genres), ability to engage in sustained reading, and development of reading identity or self-concept (Atwell & Atwell-Merkel, 2016; Gee, 2012, Willingham, 2017).

All 121 student narratives selected for this study provide important insights into how students remember and articulate their experiences with reading sponsors—many

participants can recall memories of being read to at two or three years of age by a parent or guardian. Most remember the books they loved as preschoolers, and many recall early experiences, both joys and frustrations, with learning to read. These memories leave strong lasting impressions (or imprints) that can be recalled through discussion and writing and then shared with others. Through their narratives, participants articulate both positive and negative experiences with school-based reading during their preschool, primary, and secondary school years—their stories offer tremendous insight into what does and doesn't work for them with regard to reading motivation and engagement. Their stories contribute to a greater understanding of how school-based reading curriculum both aids and impedes their reading practices. Many share how they continue to advance their reading practices both in and out of school when they are dissuaded from reading by sponsors and school-based practices.

Since the majority of the narratives are written chronologically, participants often start their stories with their earliest memories of being read to by others, whether parents, grandparents, early teachers, or other family and friends, and then continue on to share their experiences as readers with school-based sponsors in elementary and middle school and into their high school years. In many cases the narratives directly reveal the people, places, books, genres, authors, and events that they express as fundamental to their reading identities. They share how reading becomes a way to understand oneself and to build relationships with others—to learn about oneself, others, and the world. This discussion section begins with narratives about students' earliest memories of reading with family sponsors and continues on to address

sponsorship outside of family circles, in school, and in the community. After the narratives, I will discuss the important roles that motivation, access, choice, and interest play in reading development. Finally, the discussion culminates with insights on how students connect reading and writing activities.

### **Families as Literacy Sponsors: Moms, Dads, and Grandparents**

Mothers, fathers, and grandparents turn out to be the most important and influential of early family-based literacy sponsors in most of the narratives. Experts agree that early exposure to language helps children develop the skills necessary for academic and social success. In some cases, children from literacy-rich households are years more advanced in their literacy development than their peers who don't have parents or guardians reading to them regularly (Gee, 2012; Murnane et al, 2012; Wolf 2009). The stories below are shared by students who remember their mothers, fathers and grandparents reading to them at the age of two and three years old, before they could read to themselves.

#### Lisa (#71)

Lisa tells the story of how her mother and father shared stories with her from a very young age.

*One of the few vivid memories I have from when I was a toddler is having my parents read to me before bed. It made bedtime, a terrible injustice to a young child, one of my favorite parts of the day... My favorite book was always Corduroy because the little girl's name in the book was also Lisa. Bed time wasn't the only time my mother read to me. Every summer there was a reading contest at the library. The kids*

*who could read would read and record as many books as they could while the kids who couldn't read would get read to. My mom always helped me compete and win prizes by reading me stories such as Clifford the Big Red Dog and Madeline. I loved spending this time with her; she was such a good story teller, and she inspired me to want to read. I would sometimes pretend I could read, but upon realizing that this was no fun, I set my mind to learn to read for real.*

Lisa's strong early memories of engagement in early literacy development, prior to her ability to read, paved the way for early and strong success with reading in school, but the core of her story, entitled "Reading: A Bonding Experience," is that reading with her mom became what she refers to as a "lifelong bonding experience." As she got older, and started school, her mom continued to engage her in reading-related activities. As Lisa describes it, her mom encouraged her "to read, analyze, and truly enjoy books." She writes:

*During my elementary and middle school years, I also had positive experiences of reading with my mother. We were part of a mother-daughter book group, which read a different book each month and met at the library to discuss and analyze literature. This was where I first learned to analyze books and see them for more than just an enjoyable story. While we were a part of this group, I read my favorite book ever, Walk Two Moons. I can't remember the exact character names or settings, but it was the theme that actually got to me: don't judge somebody until you know what they have been through. Maybe it was*

*just because I was facing judgement, as all middle school girls are, but the moral of the story was phrased so beautifully, and it is one that I still carry with me: “Don’t judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins.”*

In Lisa’s case, strong early sponsorship from her mother resulted in reading becoming an essential part of both her personal identity (self-concept) and her relationship with her mother. Reading, for Lisa, was both personal and social, connecting her to both her mother and her community--a fundamental part of her early experiences and a way for her to help make sense of her life (problems in middle school). Lisa’s literacy narrative proceeds with how she and her mother continued to share reading experiences as she grew older, reinforcing her identity as a reader.

*Now, although we are no longer in a book group, my mother and I still bond over different books we read. It is not uncommon for our conversations to begin with one of us asking the other, “So what are you reading now?” We suggest books to one another and because we have such different reading preferences, I read a more rounded selection than I normally would read. She helps me to stray from stupid teenage girl books and I help her venture out from historical fiction.*

Other students shared equally compelling stories about the important roles mothers play in their reading development.

#### Anane (#25)

Anane, a student born in Ghana who immigrated to the United States when she was a teenager, describes the role her mother played in her early literacy development.

In her essay entitled “Reading Unveils the Obscure,” Anane explains how turning five-years-old meant that as part of what she calls “the family tradition,” she would learn to read.

*My mother like to show off to visitors and friends how good her children were doing in school, and my older siblings were the spotlight at that time. I knew at a point in time, the focus would be on my twin brother and me. At age five, it was time to start the family tradition of reading. My mom bought books about alphabets and forming words, short stories for children, reading meanings from pictures etc. We practiced every day after school, and she tracked my progress. I was doing great and that meant reading more complex materials. This exercise could be carried out anywhere including grocery shops, streets, church, and even hospitals. She expected me to read billboards, newspapers, prescriptions, canned goods and every other thing I came across in these places.*

Anane experienced her literacy development as a way to earn her mother’s respect and differentiate herself from her peers; her reading skills provided evidence that she was smart. As her reading progressed, she read both foreign and domestic novels. When her parents left her temporarily to prepare a home in the United States, she continued with her own literacy development in Ghana. “I still heard her voice echoing and reechoing about the need to be a holistic literate,” she wrote. “To achieve that, I had to keep reading.” (#25) Anane experiences reading as a form of empowerment—a way to

ensure that she would not be manipulated, as she explains her ancestors were through colonization.

*I have learned a lot about my continent because I read. Nothing was obscure to me about my African history and background and that was my mom's goal from day one. I also read books from foreign cultures and this has broadened my scope on what is happening on the other side of the world...I realized I wouldn't know all of these happenings in the world if I had usually joined my playmates every day to play: the vast knowledge of the world would have been hidden, and I would be in college and still be an illiterate. My immigration to the United States has helped me to experience other cultures which existed only in my books.*

For Anane, reading was central to her identity--to understanding herself, her culture, and her educational opportunities. Her mother's sponsorship built her confidence as a reader allowing her to see herself as different from others and opening her to educational opportunities that she feels might not have been available to her without her literacy. Literacy for Anane translates into knowledge, power, and a positive identity as a literate individual—and she attributes this identity to the sponsorship and attention provided by her mother. She closes her essay with the following: “I still think about all the children who were not encouraged to cultivate the habit of reading. It is sad knowing that some kids learn only in the classroom and come back home to ditch their books. I hope to encourage parents to help their kids read even when they can't tutor them.”

David (#35)

In his narrative “To Read, To Remember, To Comprehend,” David tells about the times he spent reading with his Dad before his Dad passed away. In preparation for a scary trip to the dentist, his dad read him *Arthur’s Tooth*, by Marc Brown for the third or fourth time.

*My father had a tendency, at least when he read to me, to drag his finger across the page as he passed a word. When I think back, I believe this was possibly for my benefit, as I had yet to master the challenge of the English language when I lived with him. As he read the words on the page I followed along, even though I knew I couldn’t really read what was being said. I do remember that we read the book several times together, and it was during one of these readings that the words started to make sense as my father read them. As he read over the story of Arthur losing his baby teeth, I could differentiate between one word and another like never before. It was a truly interesting experience to be able to, in my own small capacity at the time, be able to read with my father for the first time.*

Father and son would go on to read together the works of Stephen King, J.R.R. Tolkien, R.I. Stein, Jules Verne and books by many other authors that lined the bookcases of his dad’s home. For David, reading was not just about the content of a book, it was about the experience of being with his dad and about experiencing the ideas and imaginations of the authors he and his dad were reading.



*I didn't see my father much toward the end of his life, but I remember the time I got to spend with him well. I remember fishing, walking and driving around with him better than some of my early years of school. Most of all I remember the reading we did; it was important to us that we were able to spend time together, so being able to read together was doubly important. In reading together, we shared an appreciation for books and imagination which represented a special bond between us...Many of the best gifts I received from my father were books, movies and bookmarks. Indeed one of the most cherished gifts he ever gave me was a recording of him reading Arthur's Tooth, which I still have to this day."*

David's narrative about his father and their relationship built around reading reveals the enormous power that family sponsors wield. Because David's father valued reading, David valued reading. David writes, "Everything was knowledge and everything was a way to carry on as my father taught me, to read and learn as best I could."

Participants in this study also articulated the important role that grandparents played in their early literacy development. Many students shared poignant experiences about grandparents who read to them, taught them to read, provided access to meaningful literature, and supported them with literacy development.

#### Jonah (#67)

Jonah is one such student whose story, "The Great Escape," reveals how his grandmother shaped him as a reader and thinker. Because both of his parents worked,

Jonah was frequently cared for by his grandparents who lived down the street from him and kept a pleasure boat in Braintree Harbor. Jonah tells the story of how his grandfather piloted the boat while his grandmother read adventure stories to him.

*Then my grandmother would read to me as we watched the sun go down. The first book she ever read to me was The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe. Ironically, the book starts off in the seaport of Hull...as the book setting starts it sets the scene for my own adventure. Robinson Crusoe is now stranded on an island by himself after a large storm. Meanwhile as we pass through outer Boston Harbor, I can't help but stare at the islands, as if Crusoe might be stranded somewhere out there. My grandmother continues to read as we pass through Boston Harbor and out into open water. She reads as I listen the entire way to Salem Harbor.*

Jonah writes that the stories his grandmother read to him sparked his imagination. When she reads him *Mutiny on the HMS Bounty*, he imagines how Captain Bligh must have felt adrift in a small lifeboat and left to die. "While I look out over the open water I can see how this fate is a mark of death," Jonah writes. After a few years, Jonah is the one reading the books, while his grandmother listens. "It was the passing of the torch to spark a new era," he concludes. "An era of education, literacy and change, for soon I would be starting school and moving. Yet even with all the new changes, I always came back to read those stories out on my grandfather's boat, for it truly was Our Great Escape."

In this study, narratives about early literacy development that include family sponsors usually convey joyful and rewarding reading experiences, thus creating positive attitudes towards reading. Family sponsors can provide early access to shared reading opportunities—these opportunities can give children wide exposure to early learning experiences that will assist students in preparing for school. Reading is often a social experience for young children, and bonds formed with family members around reading last into adulthood and shape children’s reading identities (self-concepts as readers). Motivation to read and reading engagement is enhanced when children have strong family sponsors because family sponsors create positive reading experiences. When students do not have strong family-based reading sponsors, they are more dependent on schools to provide sponsorship, as the narratives in the next section will show.

#### Summary of Family-based Sponsors

- Children store memories of early reading experiences with family sponsors—reading is a bonding experience.
- Family sponsors model how they value reading.
- Parents, grandparents and other family-based sponsors play a crucial role in pre-school literacy, preparing children for school-based literacy activities.
- Literacy identities and self-concepts may be intimately tied to experiences reading with family sponsors.
- Family sponsors model reading behaviors, attitudes, and habits.

- Family sponsors provide access to books and literacy experiences/events.
- Children treasure reading time with family sponsors.
- Children's values are shaped by the books family sponsors select.

### **School-Based Sponsors**

Experiences with school-based sponsors differ widely from those with family-based sponsors. As children enter school, they must acclimate to new environments and develop new relationships with their school-based sponsors. This can be an unsettling time, particularly for those children who are less prepared for the task of developing their literacies in a classroom environment. Children from households where family-based sponsors may not have been widely available may find themselves developmentally behind their peers, a reality that can leave less prepared children feeling frustrated and isolated (Gee, 2012; Murnane et al., 2012; Wolf, 2008). In *The Reading Mind* (2017), Willingham describes how as young children enter school they begin to develop self-concepts that are shaped by how they compare to others. Willingham explains, "They see that other kids finish more books on the classroom reading wall, or that other kids don't trip over words when asked to read aloud" (146). Negative feedback from other children can impede a child's reading development. School-based sponsors play an increasingly important role when children are learning to read and, as the stories below will reveal, can cause young readers to either build confidence or develop psychological aversions to reading. Early school-based literacy experiences can be positive, or they can result in negative self-concept, low reading motivation, and poor reading attitudes.

Lee (#62)

Lee immigrated to the United States from Vietnam when he was a preschooler. He says he felt isolated from the other kids because he had to leave his homeroom class to go to a special ESL program with Mrs. Rose “when the whole class was learning with the homeroom teacher.” Lee shares how learning to read in English set him apart from others. Slowly, he writes, he started to hate reading and writing. In his essay, “The Past is the Past,” he writes:

*I felt like I was odd compared to the other students in my class. When everyone was reading thicker books I was barely reading picture books. I felt like the dumbest person in the class. When we had writing time, I would ask other kids how to spell. The faces the kids made when I asked them how to spell a word made me feel like I should not be in school. I tried, but it was just difficult. Even back then kids can be mean.*

*I remember it like it was yesterday, the day I started to hate reading to the point where I didn't want to pick up another book...The teacher asked who wanted to read a picture book out loud for the class and I raised my hand. I then sat on the rocking chair; I read the first page with no problems. I got nervous that I couldn't finish reading the book. The teacher took this book from me and told me to sit on the rug because I didn't want to finish reading. I was so ashamed and from that day on I hated reading.*

*For weeks I didn't want to go to school. I would just show up to school and count down the time on the clock so I could leave. For the rest of the first and second grade I just got by with school. I didn't care about school. I focused on football more...maybe I liked football because I could get my anger out.*

Lee's frustrations with reading and writing continued until he entered middle school and found a positive literacy sponsor, a homeroom teacher named Mrs. Mandeville, who would help him.

*Mrs. Mandeville would teach me to read better. She taught me how to sound out the word. I should not have been rushing just so I could finish the book like other kids, it wouldn't benefit me at all. She also didn't force me to read huge books like other teachers had in the past. She gave me easier books and when she thought I got better she would give me another book that was a little more difficult but not extremely difficult. She helped me get confidence back in my reading.*

Lee remembers that he had a caring and supportive teacher in Mrs. Mandeville—someone he could trust to understand his particular individual needs who would take the time to work with him one-on-one, monitor his reading progress, and select appropriate texts for him. Because of the sponsorship of Mrs. Mandeville, the academic deficit Lee had felt up until middle school is slowly replaced by a new sense of confidence, a new reading identity, and an awareness of his increasing abilities as a reader and writer. Lee also attributes his writing development to the sponsorship of Mrs. Mandeville.

*I am the writer I am now because of Mrs. Mandeville. She would always help me with editing my writing pieces. She taught me while she helped me go through my essays, for example with my grammar. Another important thing she taught me was how to write in cursive. My hand writing was terrible, so she helped me after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She was always helpful, she never judged me like I felt my other teachers had in the past. By the time I was done with her tutoring, no kids made fun of me anymore.*

Despite his slow and painful start, Lee is able to recover with the help of his sponsor and develop an identity as a reader and writer that will carry him into college. His positive experiences with his sponsor, Mrs. Mandeville, provide him with the fortitude he needs to endure being made fun of by his peers, his attitude towards reading shifts, and his identity as a reader and writer is dramatically strengthened. He concludes his essay by saying that many knowledgeable things can be learned from reading and that writing helps him explain his feelings and release his frustration when there is no one to talk to. In the last line of his essay he encourages his readers: “No matter what happened to you in the past that made you hate reading and writing you should learn that reading and writing is useful throughout your life.”

As scholars like Deborah Brandt (2001) and Jonathan Kozol (2012) tell us, literacy sponsorship in the United States is uneven, with children from poor households and school districts often left feeling disenfranchised. Kids who come from households with little or no access to books or where English is not spoken or

not spoken well, often find developing identities as readers much more difficult than others who have had early exposure to reading in the English language.

Henry (#111)

In his story “Writing and Reading as an Enemy,” Henry writes about struggling with reading and writing from an early age and feeling like sponsors from school failed to help him when he needed support. Growing up in the streets of Dorchester, and coming from a family where neither his parents nor grandparents were college educated, Henry says he entered elementary school underprepared. Ultimately, he believes that school-based sponsors failed him, and he eventually found a literacy sponsor outside of both his family and school system, through the local Boys and Girls Club who he says saved his life.

*Ever since I was little, reading and writing were not my strongest subjects. Typically, I would do well enough to get by, get a decent grade, and forget about it. I would never do drafts or prewrites, I always follow the rule “one and done” so I wouldn’t have to concentrate on an assignment for long nor would I read books assigned to me but just lie and say that I read it. When it comes to reading out loud in class I would never participate or volunteer in the readings because I was afraid that I would be made fun of since I couldn’t read or pronounce the words that everyone else could. People would probably not take me seriously when I say that second grade was the hardest year but it was because my second-grade teacher, Ms. Salve, was my greatest enemy in school. How can you say you are a teacher*



*when your job is to educate kids, but all you do is ignore me? At first I thought maybe she was busy, so I gave her the benefit of the doubt. But when this was going on for a while I was just like screw her. That is when I really struggled in school for the next few years. Because of her it took me a long time to trust teachers again. I would do nothing but ignore them... Obviously you go to school to learn, but when you are isolating yourself it is really hard to do so.*

Because he is doing so poorly in school and to keep him away from street violence and gangs, Henry's mom enrolls him in the local Boys and Girls Club. He accredits this move with "saving his life."

*Growing up in the streets was pretty tough because kids my age were dying constantly on the streets due to gang violence not only because they were targeted but also wrongfully killed by crossfire. The Boys and Girl Club was where I met my mentor who helped me a lot when it came to school and life...He was the reason why I began to trust teachers again and when I got that out of the way I started to succeed in school. Reading and writing was still difficult for me but I was able to keep pushing forward to try and do better.*

Henry continues on to explain how his sponsor from the Boys and Girls Club helped him to understand how books teach you "how the world works within and around you." In particular, books that deal with sociology, psychology, and anthropology interest him because he likes to try to understand the perspectives of people "that no one pays attention to in our society." He also explains how he loves to read with

music on because it keeps him in a “zone” where he can focus on reading and nothing else. Music, he says, helps him “get things done.”

Henry’s story is remarkable because he shares how children like him can learn to love to read and locate the value of reading despite growing up in non-reading environments and without strong early literacy sponsors from either home or school. In his case, a community-based program at the Boys and Girls Club fills his need for literacy sponsorship. As Brandt, Gallagher, and Kozol remind us, despite the ostensible promise of public education as a levelling agent, access to sponsors and literacy development is unevenly distributed, and formal sponsors, whether individuals or institutions, may actually impede access to literacy development. In this case, Henry was able to form a bond with a mentor from the Boys and Girls Club, to make reading relevant for him, motivate him to read, and build his reading identity.

More often than not, students report that their reading experiences with high school sponsors do NOT leave them feeling motivated and engaged as readers. This is true, in particular, for students in grades 9-10 when students report that their literacy sponsors are preparing them for standardized tests. Neuropsychologist Daniel Willingham (2015) believes that “reading motivation declines steadily as children age, reaching its lowest point by about grade 10” (165). Even students who seem to be the most prepared and confident readers often report a decrease in motivation to read that they attribute to negative experiences with high-school reading curriculum which results in a decline in reading engagement and practice. Frustration with lack of reading choices, assignments that require seemingly tedious analysis, and competing interests such as jobs and sports, also contribute to low reading interest during the high

school years. Students who are weak readers when they enter high school may find it even harder than strong readers to motivate themselves to read.

Michael (#49)

In his narrative “Reading Is Not That Bad, Right?,” Michael starts off by describing the shame he feels because he does not like to read. Up front in his essay, he clearly identifies three specific causes why he doesn’t read more: lack of motivation, fear of reading aloud, and preoccupations with television and social media. He writes that he loved to read in elementary and middle school, and he lists some books he liked: *The Magic Tree House Series*, *Judy Blume*, and *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. However, he says that when he got to high school his motivation to read changed.

*The books I read for school, I felt they became more of an assignment. Even though in high school we would have discussions about the books we read, I still had no interest in these books. The closer I got to my high school year, reading at school became less and less. I remember when I would try to do my readings at home; I would stare at the exact same sentences for hours, not being able to move on. It got to the point where I was saving my reading assignments for the morning. That was a problem because I began to not understand the readings. Because I did not understand the readings, I began to hate reading.*

For Michael, problems with reading became both attitudinal and developmental. Because he did not like what he was reading, he didn’t practice his reading, and because he didn’t practice his reading, he became less capable of doing the reading.

His inability to manage the reading lead to an increase in frustration and exacerbated his negative attitude. Ultimately, he blames his high school literacy sponsors for the problem. Although he does not point to one particular sponsor as the root of his problem, one gets the sense that he feels betrayed by a larger system that did not meet his needs.

*The problem with reading in high school was that it became a homework assignment that teachers just wanted students to complete so it can look good for them. What I mean is that a teacher's reputation was better when their students read more books. I felt like I was forced to read because I had to read x amount of pages by the next day because I was going to get quizzed on that material. The only way in high school that I was going to pick up a book was for a homework assignment.*

Michael continues his essay by lamenting the severe anxiety he experiences with reading aloud. He explains that when he must read either his own writing or a book aloud in class, his hands start to shake, and he can feel his heart pumping quickly. This physical reaction to reading aloud destroys his confidence resulting in him avoiding sharing his writing with others and with avoiding reading aloud in class. The only reading he does regularly is “read Facebook statuses,” which he recognizes is not improving his literacy. He closes his essay by explaining how upset he is about his unresolved problems with reading. Now that he is in college he wants to fix his issues with reading because he “would like to be more literate and informed about the things

that go on in this world.” It is clear here that Michael will need support as he enters college to overcome some of his obstacles with reading.

Michael’s story is important because it reminds us that unresolved residual problems with reading from previous experiences with literacy sponsors, whether developed in high school or before, may have adverse effects on students’ reading practices that may continue into their college years. If Michael is afraid to read aloud, fears sharing his work, and has not been reading regularly for several years, he will undoubtedly have some difficulty in his first year of college English and perhaps his other classes. Michael will need help improving his reading self-concept and improving his reading practices.

Sarah (#80)

Sarah describes how as a middle schooler she loved to read and write, and she could always be “caught” with a book in her hand, but she “hated” both the reading and writing assignments in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade high school English. In Sarah’s case, teachers don’t seem to be the primary problem, rather she blames the discipline of English itself. This negative reaction to stories and assignments in her first two years of high school results in Sarah developing lower motivation and less interest in reading than she had previously, and her confidence in her identity as a reader and writer declines.

*I remember in fifth grade we had pen pals. I always looked forward to writing to my pen pal because it did not matter what I wrote about, it could be whatever I wanted. I think I liked the fact that it was never on a set subject like assignments were... During my freshman and*

*sophomore years, I was not an English fan. I hated the stories we read, what we had to write about and the teachers did not help. I always loved my summer reading books, but when it came to English class, everything was different. Writing essays suddenly became a hard task for me and I could never get A's on them anymore. I did not look forward to English class because I always dreaded having to write another essay on a reading assignment such as the imagery a story gave or comparing and contrasting one book to another.*

Although she did not enjoy the experiences in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English, Sarah manages to land in an Honors English class her junior year with an instructor who became “her favorite teacher of all time.” She explains that her teacher, Ms. Ripley, did not teach the same way as other English teachers. Sarah was able to read two books that “she fell in love with.” Ms. Ripley understood what she needed to succeed, and she made English class fun by doing activities that allowed the students to put themselves into the actual stories. Sarah explains how, with the right sponsor, she was able to slowly transition back to her love for reading and writing. Sarah’s story is a good example of how resilient students with strong reading identities are when faced with curriculum they find uninteresting. Despite her bad experiences in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Sarah continues to engage with summer reading and is placed in or selects an honors-level English class in her junior year that reinvigorates her reading practices.

Dozens of participants in this study described how their enthusiasm and passion for reading was destroyed by mandated readings and assignments in high school. This nearly ubiquitous negative reaction to high school English curriculum, or institutional

sponsorship, leaves students with little motivation to read. Participants explain that the lack of available time to read and competing interests such as jobs, sports, social lives, digital technologies, and other class work cause them to make required reading for English a low priority. Many explain how they opted to use Spark Notes and other online sources to prepare for quizzes and tests and to write their essays for English because they “hated” the books they were required to read.

Kaitlyn (#15)

Kaitlyn explains how, despite being diagnosed with a mild form of dyslexia, she became an “expert” reader in elementary school with the help of a devoted first-grade literacy sponsor who suggested that she focus on her “favorite books” to master her problem with reading. As Kaitlyn’s confidence increased, she began to read book series on her own outside of school which inspired her to begin writing and sharing her own stories.

*My first series was Judy Moody, which I would get at the library every Saturday. At the age of six and seven, I looked forward to browsing the entire collection and reading summaries on the back. My favorite was Judy Moody Was in a Mood. Not a Good Mood. A Bad Mood. I would read one book per week, making sure I understood each chapter and pronouncing the words properly. Imagery is one thing I love, and these books always contained pictures that were unique and girly. It inspired me to start writing and illustrating my own books that I would print out at home and show to my family. Without any realization, creating these books helped improve my reading and writing ability.*

However, Kaitlyn’s enthusiasm for reading waned when she started high school, and she stopped reading for pleasure. Although, every once in a while, she would find a book on her own that she could relate to, she no longer spent Saturdays at the library. She writes:

*As I grew older, my appreciation for reading slowly declined... In high school the majority of the mandatory books made me second guess my ability to understand the context. Books such as Romeo and Juliet and the Old Man and the Sea contributed to my decrease in reading interest. The complex vocabulary and tiresome plotline of each book were just a few factors that caused my lack of reading. Not being able to understand certain passages disrupted the flow of my reading.*

At the end of her essay, Kaitlyn says that she has a “love/hate” relationship with reading. She is proud of herself for overcoming her disability, but looks forward to being able to return to reading books that “pull her in.” In Kaitlyn’s case, mandatory reading selections, whether chosen by her teachers or the school’s English Department, resulted in a decline in her reading motivation and involvement and a subsequent decrease in her confidence as a reader. Although she had already experienced a major victory with managing her dyslexia, she is dissuaded from reading when her interest in reading selections declines and the books she is asked to read become too complicated for her.

John (#14)

John was an avid early reader who found himself reading and reciting *The Hobbit* for his third-grade teacher. He says that once his third-grade teacher



discovered how advanced his reading level was for his grade, he was given different assignments from the “rest of his friends.” At this point, he writes that school-based reading and writing, “...became more work for me than fun.” Despite this, he says that he continued enjoying his recreational reading and was the kind of kid who stayed up all night reading with a flashlight so he could finish “the last *Harry Potter* in two days.” However, John’s motivation to read recreationally declined when he started high school and other interests became more important.

*When I started my freshman year, suddenly I had no time left in my life for reading. Whether I was staying after school, going to soccer practice, or hanging out with my friends, it seemed as if I had time to do everything but recreational reading. I lost my passion for reading. When I did have to read, it was for English class and it was a boring book that I hated every second of. Reading to me had become a chore more than an entertaining hobby.*

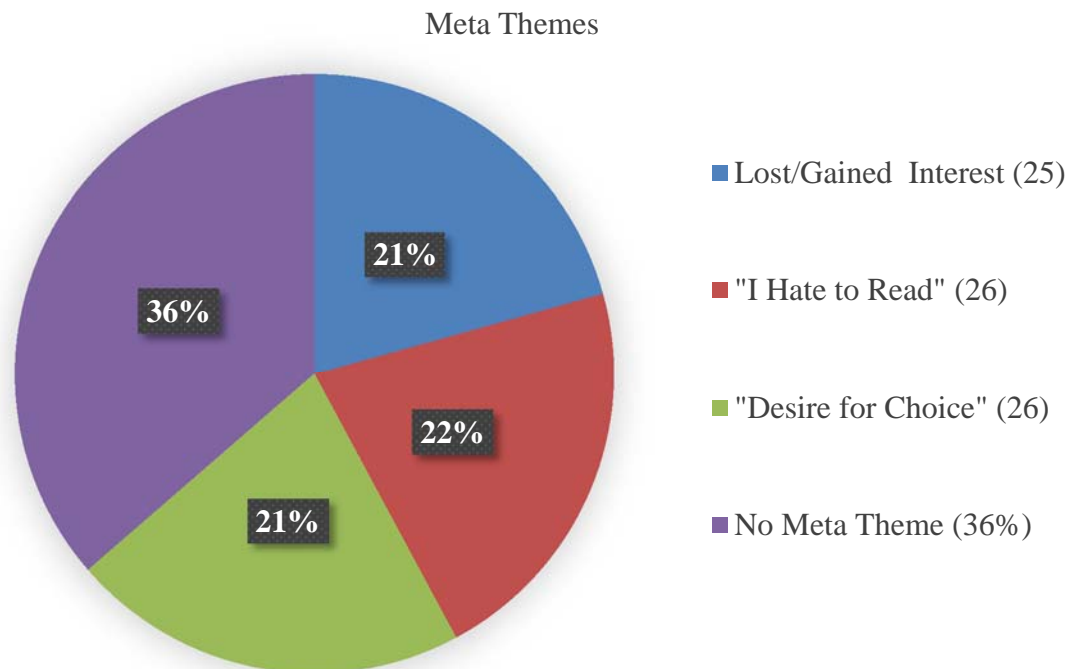
John’s school-based sponsorship resulted in several problems for him. From his perspective, he was singled out for being an advanced reader in third grade by being assigned more advanced projects than “his friends.” At this point he reports that writing was no longer fun for him. Like so many other students who loved to read and enjoyed recreational reading when they were young, Michael, Sarah, Kaitlyn and John all lost their passion and momentum with reading when they hit high school.

Although their reading ruts are not solely due to “boring” curricula and books, the fact that they were “forced” to read and analyze particular books that were not of their

choosing or of interest to them by their teachers certainly did not help motivate them to read.

In this study, students repeatedly complained that their interest in reading waned when they were forced to read books that they were not interested in by their literacy sponsors, particularly in high school. As shown in the findings section and depicted in Figure 7 on the next page, 25 students of the 121 narratives, or 21%, wrote about how they lost and gained interest in reading over the years. Twenty-six of the 121 narratives, or 22%, were written by students who explicitly claim that they either hate reading or hated reading at some point. Twenty-six out of 121 narratives, or another 22% of participants in the total data pool, explicitly articulate that they want more choice in school-related reading materials. Eleven of the narratives overlap the “I Hate Reading” and “I Want Choice” categories, with participants claiming that they both hate reading and want more freedom to choose their school-related reading materials. Dozens of the study’s participants claim that they would have been more motivated to read had they been able to select their own readings. These meta themes that are woven within the narratives suggest that large numbers of students in this data pool entered college as reluctant readers.

Figure 7: Meta Themes (Out of 121 Narratives)



Even strong and avid readers complain about lack of choice with regard to school-based sponsors and curricula. Let's return to Lisa's story entitled, "Reading: A Bonding Experience." Earlier in this chapter, we learned of Lisa, a "fluent" reader who has enjoyed sharing books and reading experiences with her Mom from a young age. Despite her positive experiences learning to read and developing as a reader, Lisa also shared in her narrative what she didn't like about her development as a reader.

*Once I was a fluent reader, I spent a lot of time reading. Sometimes it was because I wanted to read, but other times it was forced. I resented the idea of being forced to read something; I hated having to read [specific] books for school and how my mother made me read and*

*write every day for an hour, all summer vacation long. Reading should be something you enjoy and you are passionate about.*

Many students who were strong and avid readers when younger, like Lisa, reported that their dedication to reading declined once they were required to read texts that did not “spark” their interest.

#### Summary of School-Based Sponsors

- Early formative years with school sponsors, whether positive or negative, are recalled easily by first-year college students.
- Early ineffective school-based sponsorship can be reversed by positive sponsorship, and the benefits of strong early sponsorship can be degraded by poor subsequent sponsorship, particularly in terms of attitude and interest.
- Students praise school-based sponsors who offer choice in reading selection
- Students bemoan school-based curricula that “teaches to the test.”
- Students report that preparing for quizzes ruins the “flow” of their reading because they are focused on potential quiz questions rather than engaging with the text.
- During high school, negative experiences with school-based curricula often damage students’ interest in recreational reading as school-based reading becomes a chore and reading time is more limited because of competing interests.

- Teachers who make reading activities and reading selections relevant to students' interests are considered by students to be good teachers.
- Most high school students feel reading materials are selected for the purposes of testing, and they resent this infringement on their right to read what is of interest to them.
- Students like school-based sponsors who “make reading fun.”

### **Books as Sponsors**

In this study, books, genre, and authors were coded as sponsors when they played a central role in a participant's discussion about reading development and interest. Participants in the study often articulated interest in particular genres of books—genres that keep them engaged in recreational reading regardless of what was happening with school-based sponsorship. Narratives coded for books as sponsors frequently do not mention other sponsors, as students write primarily about their relationships with particular books.

#### Adanna (#29)

Adanna grew up in Mushin, Nigeria, a place that she says was filled with violence and chaos. In “How Learning to Read and Write Transformed My Life,” she tells of how, from an early age, she attended private schools, and she understood that her future success was dependent upon her ability to read and write in English. Adanna explains how she spends hours reading and writing on the weekends to improve her English skills—she has been a motivated and avid reader and writer from a young age. To develop her literacy skills, she says she prefers to select her own readings.

*I love reading and writing because it is one of the ways to pass time. I love reading only if I chose to read a book myself. I love reading fiction because it takes me outside of my world to somewhere else where I can see things in very different ways. I feel very relaxed while reading especially if I am going through any bad time. Once I pick up a book to read, I forget my sorrows and concentrate on my reading. I love reading fiction, like Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte, Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston, The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee and books by William Shakespeare like MacBeth, Romeo and Juliette and Hamlet. I also like online stories, magazines and sometimes newspapers if I see anything that fascinates me.*

In her essay, Adanna does not discuss the role her teachers may have played in her literacy development, rather she shares that her development as a reader and writer was driven by her inner desire to master English as a way to succeed in life. She shares that during her junior and senior year in high school she served as ambassador to freshman students to tutor them and encourage them to prioritize their schooling so they might receive a scholarship to college as she did—she wants to share her love of literature with others—in fact, she becomes a sponsor for others. Adanna’s relationship with the literature that she chooses herself has allowed her to develop a strong identity and self-concept as both a reader and writer and to see the world in different ways.

Deirdra (#121)

Deirdra remembers learning to read easily and being in an environment where books were readily available. Her parents read to her regularly and once she learned to read herself, developing her reading came easily to her. She explains that reading for school was never her “favorite,” but she did “what she had to do.” Deirdra had access to books outside of school that continued to motivate her to read, thus books and the bookstore became her sponsor.

*I did find much enjoyment in reading young adult novels on my own time at a young age. Going into middle school I had already read most of the books from the young adult section at Barnes and Noble. It was never a secret that I enjoyed reading, especially about teenagers that I couldn't quite relate to just yet. These stories made me feel more mature and opened up my eyes. I also remember reading books my mom had lying around the house which I probably shouldn't have read at my age, but I think it helped me grow as a reader today.*

The idea of a middle schooler combing through the bookshelves at Barnes and Noble is quite remarkable and suggests that Deirdra's access to any books that she was interested in reading played a vital role in her reading development and identity as a reader. Although she doesn't have as much time to read now as she did when she was younger, she still has go-to genres.

*When I do have time to read, I enjoy psychological books, true crime and non-fiction books more than anything. I like to read about true events that I am not only interested in but can teach me something.*

Despite a decline in recreational reading, Deirdra knows what she likes to read, and she has specific genres in mind for when she feels she has the time to read.

Kevin (#28)

In “Wednesday with *Naruto*,” Kevin explains that he was not much of a reader outside of school until he discovered an anime called *Naruto* at age 13 and became intrigued “by the premise of the story.” Anime lead him to read manga which lead to a broader interest in reading.

*Since Naruto manga was way ahead of the anime, it took me awhile to catch up to the manga but I did not mind it because I enjoyed the time I spent reading it. I would wake up early every Wednesday so I could read the new chapter of Naruto before I went to school. Wednesday became my favorite day of the week because I always looked forward to reading Naruto. I read Naruto for about four years. The manga ended in 2014. It was kind of sad because I had so many fun memories of reading Naruto.*

Much like Adanna and Deirdra, Kevin has located a genre that appeals to him so much that he seeks out the earliest opportunity to read (Wednesday morning before school) when the latest chapter is available. Reading *Naruto* leads him to seek out other manga at a time when other children (during adolescence) may be turning away from reading. Although he may have found an interest in reading later than others, his reading identity develops readily at age 13.

*Because I had so much fun reading Naruto, I wanted to find similar manga to read. I read a couple of similar manga, and then I started to*



*read different manga. I realized the reason I read all those manga was because I was invested in those stories. Some stories left me with joy, some left me depressed, some left me confused and wanting more, and some left me a message to take away from the story.*

For Kevin, anime led to *Naruto*, *Naruto* led to other manga, manga led to movies, and movies led to books. This all took place outside of school, because, as he explains it, he found school-based reading “boring and could not concentrate...I do enjoy reading but only if I am interested in the story otherwise I cannot concentrate.” Kevin explains reading’s importance to him at the close of his essay:

*I used to read only for school, but now I enjoy reading because of the unique stories that I experience every time I read. Reading brings up many emotions in me that I usually do not experience. I experience many unique stories and I have a better understanding of how the world works by reading. I am able to experience different places, people, history and culture.*

In Kevin’s case, his identity as a reader developed not because of school, but in spite of school. Despite a late start, his interest in the genre of anime and manga opens up a world of reading for him at the age of 13, shaping his identity and self-concept as a reader.

Sophia (#69)

In “Society Is Hell, Reading Is Salvation,” Sophia says that she has been an avid reader since her parents started reading to her as a young child when they gave her “an insatiable thirst for knowledge that could only be temporarily quenched through

reading.” She notes that her taste in reading genres have shifted over the years, but her drive to read has amplified since she was a beginning reader. Her essay discusses three particular books that have played a central role in her identity as a reader: *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry; *A People’s History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn; and *Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri. While she was introduced to all three books in various high-school classes, she does not attribute her love for them to her teachers, but to the books themselves. She writes that Lowry’s work taught her to question the inner workings of society, particularly “the unspoken actions of the government”; Zinn’s work taught her that there is always another side to every story, and “sometimes that side is where the real truth and substance resides”; and Alighieri’s work made her question whether or not there was an afterlife and, if so, “what are the consequences for those people living in a world full of vices and corruption.” She closes her essay by stating that:

*Everybody reads for a different reason; some read out of obligation, others for pleasure, and others out of sheer desire to become a better-rounded individual. My thirst for knowledge; my desire to know how the world works, and my want to understand people’s behaviors serve as my fuel for reading. Reading is one of the best forms of self-expression; through reading I have discovered who I am and who I want to become in the years to come.*

For Sophia, reading helps to shape her understanding of the world and her values. As she connects what she reads to the world around her, she builds a strong reading identity and self-concept.

### Summary of Books as Sponsors

- Choice and selection of reading materials is central to reading motivation.
- Adolescents and young adults feel passionate about their ability to access and “consume” books that have value for them.
- Students who have books as sponsors usually seek books, authors, and genres that they like and they get pleasure from reading.
- Passionate readers seek out genres and topics of interest to them.
- Teenagers with strong reading identities or self-concepts want a say in what they read.
- Students who have books as sponsors feel empowered by that relationship, they can articulate why they love the books they do, and they have strong identities as readers.

### **The Reading/Writing Connection**

Students frequently connect reading and writing activities in their narratives. Most participants in this study articulated that in elementary school reading and writing were fun activities and they engaged in writing their own stories using their imaginations, writing to pen pals, shaping their identities as writers by putting words, feelings and thoughts on paper, and experimenting with technology. Later in their literacy development, students reported that they used writing effectively to explore hobbies and activities that were of interest to them. Although most students in high school report not liking their school-based reading/writing projects, particularly in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, occasionally students were inspired to write and read about topics that

they found personally interesting, and those projects were the ones they found most meaningful.

Deidra (#123), the student who loved the young adult section at Barnes and Noble, writes that the books she read in middle school inspired her to write her own stories.

*These books [from the young adult section] inspired me to try and write my own stories. I always looked at writing as something easy; anyone could write a book, I thought. Anyone could write a story as long as they knew the right words, right? With my 1998 Windows desktop, I would open up a Microsoft Word document and write anything I could come up with. Some of the information I took from experience, from my peers at school, but mostly I would create some interesting story. It was usually about stuff that I wished would happen to me, fantasies I guess you would call them.*

In high school, writing for Diedra devolves into “just an academic exercise”; however, she believes that all reading builds a knowledge base for future writing. Diedra closes her essay by noting that:

*I believe that reading and writing do have a large connection to each other... what one reads previously is what will be stored in your brain for later writing. The books I read as a child not only inspired me to write but guided me. No writing is original, all thoughts and ideas are put together from previous knowledge we have once encountered. What you know is what you will project. I believe that both reading*

*and writing do not come easy and both tasks take practice to perfect, as with any sport or talent.*

Philip (#103)

Philip writes in his narrative that at age fourteen he was inspired to write his own short story after reading *Record of Lodoss War* by Japanese author Ryo Mizuno. For Philip, this project became a social activity as he shared his stories with friends and people on the internet.

*With a little effort, I wrote the first short story. A hero saved the fantasy world from a horrible demon from hell. Frankly, it quite resembled Record of Lodoss, although I liked the story and was happy with the result. I showed the story to my friends. I shared my story with a friend whose dream was to become a cartoonist. I talked to my friend to make a cartoon based on my short stories. I was so excited with the whole idea of writing. In addition, my dream for my future career became to be a writer. When I started to dream about becoming a writer, the internet had started to sprawl all over the world... So I wrote a more serious and original fantasy novel on the websites and showed it to my friends in school.*

At first, Philip models his story after a book he admires. Philip eventually takes a creative writing class and works with a professor to organize his inner thinking and develop a “description of scenes” before he starts to write. Though he has many trials as a creative writer, he concludes his essay by stating that he will always continue to write.

Jared (#98)

Jared was an avid reader when he was a “pre-teen.” He explains that as his reading development increased, “he opened his mind to different forms of expression” such as art and music, ultimately leading him to become a song writer and start a band in which he is the lead composer.

*I learned to read in grade school and enjoyed the simple stories and colorful pictures that these children’s books had to offer. I recall the ability to read coming quite easily to me, and I excelled at and enjoyed reading aloud in my classes. Fantasy stories were always a personal favorite of mine in my childhood and pre-teen years when I read series such as Eragon, Harry Potter, and A Series of Unfortunate Events. I spent many hours reading at this age: during car rides, at home, at school, and late into the night.*

In seventh grade, Jared started painting and won many awards in his town’s local art shows, and he considered his training as an artist to be both “fun and exciting.” While painting, he always listened to music and became particularly interested in the “many different styles of drumming” in jazz, rock, and African music. Jared now spends his free time writing music for his band and attributes much of his creativity to exposure to various genres, whether literary or musical.

*I feel as if there is a connection between reading and writing, and I think it’s as simple as this: The more you read, the better you will write...avid readers will discover new words more frequently, come across countless kinds of sentence structure, and by using their own*

*knowledge of words, be able to more easily develop their own style of writing. The more a person reads, the more expansive their mental dictionary will become, and the more words they will know how to define and use in their own ways. In my case, the more music I write and the more genres I expose myself to the broader range of audiences my songs can appeal to.*

While many participants articulate how their reading fosters and nurtures their creative writing or other creative interests like music, fewer students articulate how reading informs their expository and academic writing. When students do articulate how their reading connects with academic writing, it is usually in relation to the few writing projects or assignments about topics in which they are personally interested or invested.

Sean (#100)

Sean writes about how he “hated” to read and writing was never his “forte,” even though he came from a family of avid readers. This was his experience until things changed the spring semester of his senior year in high school.

*For two classes I was assigned a research paper assignment; it was on anything that I wanted. I was thinking anything I wanted? Wow, this might be fun! I wanted to write about something that I was interested in, something I wanted to learn more about, anything that gets me thinking. I chose my paper to be on Medical Marijuana. Now as you're reading this you're probably thinking typical high school kid writing about pot. It was more than just that to me; I wanted to know*

*the science behind how it affected the body, I wanted to look at experiments, I wanted to watch documentaries and read articles.*

Sean explains that being able to pick his own topic stimulated his desire to both read and write, providing motivation that he had not experienced as a regular part of his formal schooling.

*Learning about this particular subject gave me great insight to many things. For instance, according to research from reputable sources such as The New York Times it has been found that smoking marijuana doesn't impact your lungs negatively at all. Actually, avid users of weed scored higher in lung function tests than non-smokers. Or, did you know the old wives tale "weed kills brain cells" was a false conclusion to an experiment in the 1970s under the reign of Ronald Reagan who fed the American people false propaganda. This was the stuff I wanted to learn. For once, I finally liked to read and write. The point is that I found I can read and write as long as I like the subject.*

Sean explains how his research project on medical marijuana "flipped a switch" for him, inspiring him to embark on a journey of reading a wide variety of texts that he found interesting. He closes his essay with the following insights:

*Reading and writing can flat out suck if you hate what you're reading and writing. Find something that you are interested in, something you want to further your knowledge of whether it be cooking, horseback riding, weight training or cars: read something on it. For me, I like to*



*read things on marijuana and the universe. These subjects have made me want to further my knowledge, not just to read to take a test.*

Perceptions about how reading and writing interconnect with each other are largely dependent on an individual's experiences with both. In general, the first-year college students in this study had much happier and fruitful memories of their reading and writing experiences during their early formative years than they did during their high school experiences. High school experiences that were reported as being positive were usually connected to topics and readings of interest.

#### Summary of Reading/Writing Connections

- Reading inspires students to imagine and write about fictional characters.
- Reading inspires students to practice writing in a variety of genres and to experiment with digital technologies.
- Students connect reading genres they like to other genres of interest—often in different disciplines.
- Students want to read and write about topics that are of interest to them—in particular many like to choose their own topics.
- Reading helps to build vocabulary, use words in new ways, and develop varied sentence structure.
- A relatively small number of students articulated that reading provides a knowledge base that will be drawn from during future writing projects.

## Conclusion

Understanding students' literacy development from their perspectives may complicate the way that literacy sponsors consider students' development, identities or self-concepts as readers and writers. The anecdotes shared by so many professors around the copy machine or in the corridors of schools that students "just don't read any more," doesn't hold the same currency when we take a good hard look at how students' reading development involves emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural conditioning that takes place from the time that they are 2 or 3 years of age until they enter college.

Encouraging students to trace their literacy development can provide them with an opportunity to reflect on how their identities as readers and writers were shaped by various literacy sponsors, and sharing those stories with others can help to liberate them from injustices that they experienced, bond with and learn from others' experiences, and also understand themselves as learners. For many students, sharing their stories offers them the opportunity to re-envision and renew themselves as readers and writers. For literacy sponsors, students' literacy narratives can reveal the formative experiences of students' reading and writing that may inform curricula development and change the way we, as sponsors, think about, discuss, and shape our relationships with, and our curricula for, those we sponsor. As Brandt writes in *Literacy in American Lives* (2001):

Tracing the sponsors who develop and deliver curricular materials to their schools can heighten students' awareness of who is interested in their reading and writing skills and why. It also can bring attention to

the complicated, fast-moving, and far-ranging interrelationships that bear on contemporary reading and writing and may give students useful ways to understand the reasons that school literacy differs from the kinds they engage in elsewhere. (p. 44)

Many students in Brandt's study feel like the students in the exemplars or mini-case studies above—they feel that when they can't read books they are interested in, the joy of reading is stripped away from them, and their motivation to read declines—this is usually because of “forced” reading selections and curricula that disengages them from or diminishes their identities as readers and writers. Literacy sponsors can and should help students select books and other texts, support them with text interpretation, and engage students in analytical writing and reading tasks, but they should also be sensitive to students' attitudes and identities as readers--this requires an awareness on the part of the sponsor that being required to read a book that is of no interest makes reading feel forced, and that forced reading may create resentment and reduces reading engagement. Motivation to read, interest in reading, access to and knowledge about a wide range of genres, and time spent reading are all interconnected. According to the participants in this study, and many reading scholars and cognitive psychologists, these factors are central to a student's reading motivation, engagement and practice (Atwell & Atwell Merkel, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Smith & Wilhelm, 2000; Willingham, 2017).

There is much to learn about reading and motivation. Motivation and educational specialists Allen Wigfield and John Guthrie (2004) advise that the more students engage cognition, emotion, motivation, and volition during the reading

process, the more productive readers they will become. The researchers note that it is crucial for school environments and instructors to offer students opportunities to encourage and engage *all* of these functions in relation to reading; they espouse an integrated curriculum where reading is fundamental to all activities.

Clearly, sponsors play a key role in students' literacy development. The findings of this study should leave all parents, teachers, and educational policy makers working towards creating engaging and exciting learning environments and curricula. This means listening to students and considering very carefully what it means to be an *effective* sponsor of literacy. Literacy sponsors would be wise to heed Gloria Ladson-Billings warning in her 2012 Reading Conference plenary address, "Why We Can't Read Something Good? How Standards, Testing, and Scripted Curricula Impoverish Urban Students," (2012):

Every year millions of young people enter our schools and classrooms and find themselves subjected to a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of required texts that do little more than push them further away from our so-called goal – to educate all students so that they can, as the late Ted Sizer (1984) said, "use their minds well." My challenge in this talk is to attempt to reinvigorate leaders of the literacy community to stand against the derogation of the field and its role in developing thinking citizens, prepared to fully participate in a democratic and multicultural society." (p. 15-16)

My research indicates that almost all children love to read at some point in their lives. Positive sponsorship, whether from family, community, or school-based sponsors

offers choice, access, attention to individual interest, and ample opportunity to read and share reading experiences. As Ladson-Billings asserts, “Our students DO want to read! All the evidence points to

## Chapter 5: Implications

As explained earlier, for the purposes of this study reading sponsors are defined as entities that students report *helped or hindered* their reading literacy, including teachers, schools, parents, siblings, friends, authors/books, genres, places of worship, organizations, technologies, and hobbies, which is the definition for sponsorship borrowed and modified from Brandt's work on literacy sponsorship (2002). By definition, sponsorship implies interaction—interaction between a teacher and a student, a mother and a child, an adolescent and his books. This study was designed to determine whether literacy sponsors surfaced in the participants' narratives, how often they surfaced, and in what ways they surfaced. The study also sought to determine what patterns or common experiences could be discerned in participants' stories of their reading development. Additionally, I was seeking data that might be informative to teachers of first-year college writing classes, although it is now clear that the findings have implications far beyond the writing classroom.

*In Literacy and Learning* (2009), Deborah Brandt writes the following:

If we are going to understand better what literacy instruction represents to students in the future and how it sometimes, inexplicably, can go awry, it is especially important to know about the settings in which the knowledge of reading and writing have come to them and the significance implied in those settings. We must understand better what is compelling literacy as it is lived. (p. 113).

This study speaks to Brandt's call for a better understanding of literacy instruction as it offers a closer look into the lived experiences of students who are just

entering college—many as avid readers, some who reading as required for school, and others who are disengaged from reading practices in their personal and academic lives. Through analysis of the participants’ narratives, I have determined that reading development is a highly social act that benefits from positive interaction between reading sponsors and the developing reader; reading engagement is largely a result of positive or negative reading experiences, lack of access to good sponsorship, lack of choice, and curricula design; and literacy narratives are a highly effective vehicle for gathering insight into students’ reading identities.

This study definitively finds that the participants’ identities as readers are largely shaped by the people, places, and texts that contribute to their reading development. Out of the original 230 narratives collected from participants over a two-year period, 121 narratives are directly related to reading development and experiences, and only four of the 121 do *not* reference a specific sponsor, instead they focus on the participant’s reading processes. The remaining narratives collected, but not included in this study, focus on students’ development as writers, both creative and academic, and alternative forms of literacy development such as learning to dance, write music, play a sport, etc. (This suggests that students are also willing to share their experiences as developing writers, artists, and athletes—a testimony to the literacy narrative genre.) As evidenced from the excerpts provided from the study, it is clear that students have strong feelings about their own experiences as readers and about those who sponsor their reading development, whether positive or negative. The narratives provide insight into how young people value reading, reading experiences, and reading sponsors—in many cases students praise parents, teachers,

books, and projects that inspired them as readers; others articulate being so frustrated with books and curricula that they extricated themselves from reading activities.

Essentially, the study presents overwhelming evidence that an individual's interactions with reading sponsors shapes his or her identity and experiences as a reader.

### **Social Aspects of Reading Development**

This study finds that students' reading identities are largely determined by the sponsors who shape their experiences as developing readers, whether family members, teachers, books and authors, genres, friends, or institutions such as schools and libraries. Pre-school reading development is determined by those sponsors who guide young readers by selecting, sharing, and providing, or withholding access to texts—if parents, guardians, or siblings are unavailable to share the reading experience with a young reader or if access to a range of texts is scarce or positive interactions infrequent, a child may quickly fall behind peers who benefit from better sponsorship. Falling behind is often a painful experience as reported by participants—often resulting in separation from friends and classmates, teasing, and frustration with reading.

Many participants in this study readily shared the relationships they built around books with teachers, parents, grandparents, and other sponsors when they were learning to read. Participants conveyed how some of their favorite memories were of times spent reading a favorite book with parents and siblings, or how a teacher or librarian went out of their way to help them access interesting books to read. But participants also talked about early experiences at school involving reading that left them emotionally scarred, being made fun of because of mispronouncing words, and feeling humiliated because of having a stutter or being sent to a “special” reading



group. Reading, and our reading identities, are largely shaped by those around us and by the experiences we have with others related to reading.

During early school years, children are sensitive to criticism from peers and teachers with regard to reading. Even as new college students, they remember how they measured up to other children in kindergarten, first, and second grade and whether their reading practices and behaviors were pleasing or disappointing to their teachers. Early behavioral and cognitive issues may create serious setbacks that plague students right into college—in essence, early reading experiences, whether positive or negative, are often imprinted on the individual, becoming part of one’s reading identity.

Because some children have more successful interaction with reading sponsors than others, reading sponsorship is unequal. Children who come from richer literacy environments where conversations about literary texts, whether newspapers, magazine, books or films, are readily and regularly shared, tend to have stronger literacy skills and reading identities. Likewise, children from schools with more resources are more apt to have higher literacy skills. Because of the social nature of reading, unequal access to resources, and unevenness of effective sponsorship, not all children have the same opportunities for reading development. As James Paul Gee attests in *Social Linguistics and Literacies* (2012):

Reading is not just a cognitive skill. It is an identity (the identity of being a reader and making meaning of a certain sort) formed as part of one’s socialization in life and school. On the face of the matter, the real “literacy crisis” would seem to be a crisis of social justice rooted in

the fact that we supply less good schools and neighborhoods and less resourced homes to poorer and more disadvantaged people and better ones to more mainstream and advantaged people. (p. 32)

As Deborah Brandt explains in “Sponsors of Literacy,” sponsors are the “delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves—to and through—individual learners” (167). Although wealth does not necessarily determine the nature or success of a child’s reading development, children from less privileged households may experience a confluence of factors that result in lower reading levels: fewer at-home sponsors because parents are at work, less access to books and other tools of literacy, and underfunded schools, for example. Brandt concludes that “despite ostensible democracy in educational chances, stratification of opportunity continues to organize access and reward in literacy learning” (169). This suggests that not all students have access to the best reading sponsors.

In high school, students’ reading identities are shaped by reading that takes place both in and out of school. Reading sponsors, such as teachers, parents, friends, librarians, books, particular authors, and, perhaps, most importantly, curriculum, each play a role in either promoting reading or dissuading positive reading habits and engagement. In *Raising Kids Who Read* (2015), reading scholar Daniel T. Willingham notes that “reading motivation declines steadily as children age, reaching its lowest point by about grade 10” (165). My study corroborates Willingham’s assertion while providing evidence from the study’s participants, many who clearly articulate their aversion to reading in high school when they report being “forced” to read and analyze books of little interest to them. This aversion to the majority of texts offered in high

school is relatively ubiquitous—even students who are avid readers outside of school report not enjoying many of their in-school reading selections. To complicate matters, for many of the participants, high school is a time when little reading is accomplished as digital technologies, social demands, sports, jobs, and other school work takes precedence over reading for both leisure and school. Even strong and avid readers report that their interest declines during high school when they are “forced” to read books they do not select themselves.

The problem of the drop-off in reading during high school is exacerbated by curricula that leave even readers with strong reading identities frustrated. Participants complained that they resented being forced to read books that they weren’t interested in by teachers (reading sponsors) who themselves are reluctantly following a curriculum they don’t like. Participants complained about having to overanalyze stories and poems they didn’t choose as part of a curricula that left them bored and frustrated—assignments they dreaded that took the pleasure or joy out of reading. Thus, the classroom, a shared space that should encourage the social nature of reading, can become an environment that stultifies reading, resulting in students actually reading less, reading with less enjoyment, or not reading at all.

The participants in this study often report that the lack of choice inherent in pre-determined reading selections results in reading feeling like work, hence what was once a positive experience--the joy of reading a book for pleasure--becomes a struggle and a chore, perceived by students as offering little reward beyond a grade. Lack of reading choice may not be such a problem for some students who will complete required readings whether or not they are interested. But for many students, lack of

engagement results in reduced time spent reading, whether for school or personal reasons. Because high school students are immersed in a multitude of other activities, many state that they don't have time to read both for school and pleasure, and as a result their pleasure reading falls off. This compounds the problem as many students in high school actually read less than they did in middle school, resulting in some middle schoolers having stronger reading skills than those graduating from high school (Atwell & Atwell-Merkle 2015, Reardon et al., 2012).

For example, let's review the words the first-year college student-participants used in their narratives to express their feelings about high school reading.

Disengaged readers used the following words:

|                          |               |
|--------------------------|---------------|
| Can't Connect            | Torture       |
| Boring                   | Over Analysis |
| Difficulty Concentrating | Punishment    |
| Too Many Quizzes         | Discouraged   |
| Anxiety                  | Frustrated    |
| Insecure                 | Humiliation   |

Conversely, expressions of reading engagement are marked by the following words:

|             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| Choice      | Inspired   |
| Escape      | Stories    |
| Invested    | Magic      |
| Passion     | Trust      |
| Likes Topic | Understand |
| Fun         | Knowledge  |

In this study, 22% of the participants reported that they hate to read and 22% reported that they only like to read when they are interested in the reading topic. Reading specialist John T. Guthrie notes that engaged readers are typically higher achievers than less engaged readers. “Because engaged readers spend 500% more time reading than disengaged students, educators should attempt to increase engaged reading time by 200%-500%” (2004, p.1). Guthrie laments the lack of studies about classroom practices that promote engagement and suggests that re-engaging students in reading may require substantial reconfigurations of curriculum.

According to the participants in this study, there are several factors that encourage positive reading habits. The first three are: Choice! Choice! And Choice!-- students want to have a say in what they read. They want to have a say in the topics

that they write about. And they want some control over how much time is allotted to specific texts and assignments. Personal relevance increases engagement—students want to read about issues that are of concern to them. Assignments that students perceive as “meaningful” also help them engage in the reading process; students report that they resent reading logs, quizzes on irrelevant details, and assignments requiring deep analysis of texts they feel are irrelevant to their lives. Alternatively, readings and assignments that have meaning for students can promote interest in reading, research, and knowledge acquisition. As one participant said:

*The best writing piece that I had ever done was back in freshman year English class. We had to write about a certain topic that had to do with To Kill A Mockingbird that was assigned to us, and I just happened to get the KKK. I really like American history, so I was fascinated with this topic when I began to research it. I was amazed on how they started the clan and how they felt justified with the horrible things they did saying it was God’s will. Anyways, I remember this essay because I received a 97 on the paper, and it felt great. I worked really hard on it and I was proud to see it all pay off, but I knew the main reason was that I was motivated to work hard was because I liked the topic.*

Although the student above didn’t get to choose the topic, this is a perfect example of how the right topic can inspire and motivate both reading and writing engagement. Sadly, the student who wrote it was a first-year college student and had to reach back to his freshman year in high school to locate an assignment that really mattered to him.

Atwell and Atwell-Merkel (2016) address this problem with curricula in *The Reading Zone* when referencing their follow up interviews with high school students who left their school, The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), nationally recognized for its K-8 reading curriculum. Anne Atwell-Merkel writes:

When I talked in depth with CTL graduates, the reasons for their diminished identities as readers becomes clear. The biggest change in these once-voracious consumers of fiction and non-fiction is that they don't read very much, for school or at home. They cite the small number of books they're assigned to read by their English teachers and the time-consuming quizzes, discussions, written paragraphs, group assignments, projects, and essays they have to do in response. The activities replace actual reading. Sophomore Lydia noted that most of the assignments feel like assessments "done for the kids who don't read. And people in my high school really don't like reading." (p. 117)

Poorly designed curricula erode reading practices by contributing to the disintegration of one's identity as a reader, especially for the participants who are not strong and avid readers. The participants in my study wrote again and again about how reading "boring" high school books, that were "uninteresting," and the corresponding curriculum diminished their desire to read. The evidence is clear—it is time to rethink our curricular approaches to address reading engagement or we will increasingly become a nation of non-readers.

Brandt's work suggests that sponsorship is unevenly distributed--while one person may benefit immensely from any given sponsor, someone may have a widely

different outcome. Because not all American students have the same educational opportunities and outcomes, experts agree that a large number of American students are leaving high school, and perhaps college, underprepared for the types of advanced literacy necessary for professional and personal success and engaged citizenship (Murnane, Sawhill & Snow, 2012; Goldman, 2012; Horning & Kraemer 2013; Sullivan, Tinberg & Blau, 2017). My research also verifies the unevenness of sponsors by providing specific evidence from a range of individual participants.

Studies and common sense suggest that high school students who are not regular readers may have difficulty with college-level reading, especially if reading below proficiency levels (Atwell & Atwell Mirkle, 2016; Kuh, 2007; NAEP, 2015). The 2015 Nation's Report Card states, "In 2015, twelfth-grade students had an average score of 287 on the NAEP 0-500 reading scale. This was not significantly different from the average score in 2013, but was lower in comparison to the earliest assessment in 1992" (2015, p. 1). In particular:

In 2015, thirty-seven percent of twelfth-grade students performed at or above the *Proficient* achievement level in reading. When viewed by racial/ethnic group, the percentages of students performing at or above *Proficient* ranged from 17 percent for Black students to 49 percent for Asian students (p. 2).

Thirty-seven percent proficiency leaves 63 percent of all American high school seniors reading below proficiency levels--the proficiency levels for Blacks are even more alarming, with only 17 percent of twelfth grade students scoring at or above reading proficiency levels—that leaves 83 percent of Black high school seniors reading below



proficiency levels. Twenty-five percent of Hispanic student were reading at or above proficiency levels in 2015, leaving 75% percent below proficiency levels. These statistics are unacceptable.

In “Patterns of Literacy among U.S. Students,” (2012) Reardon, Valentino and Shores determines that “the literacy skills [reading levels] of roughly ten percent of seventeen-year-olds are at the level of the average nine-year-old” (p. 17). Clearly, we need to re-examine the way that literacy development instruction is addressed in high schools.

These low proficiency scores have global consequences. A recent article in the *Washington Post* (2017) reports that the United States’ ranking fell on the “Progress in International Reading Literacy Study,” an assessment given to fourth graders around the world every five years. “In 2016, however, the average score in the United States dropped to 549 out of 1,000, compared to 556 in 2011. The country’s ranking fell from fifth in the world in 2011 to 13<sup>th</sup>, with 12 education systems outscoring the United States by statistically significant margins” (1). The article states that experts are concerned with what is driving the trend, but fails to acknowledge that curriculum may actually be part of the problem.

## **The Power of the Literacy Narrative**

The literacy narrative is a valuable and flexible tool that can help instructors better understand students' development as readers and writers. In essence, the literacy narrative provides a window for others to share in the identity formation of the individual who wrote the narrative, offering those who are interested the opportunity to consider the factors that played a role in that individual's reading identity formation. Literacy narratives have been in use for the past 30 years to better understand the lived experiences of individuals and groups of people, but perhaps not implemented widely enough. As noted earlier in the dissertation, they may be in oral, written or ethnographic form. John Trimbur stated that he used narratives in the second semester of First-Year English at Emerson College on a pilot basis in Spring 2009 when they were "redesigning the course from a rhetorical term paper course to a genre-based research writing course." With regard to his initial use of the literacy narrative, he said:

My sense is that the literacy narratives entered composition sometime in the mid to late 1980s, inspired by what's now known as New Literacy Studies, especially Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* and notion of the literacy event (also Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice*). Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* was also influential. I can't remember when or how I got the idea but I know these sources played an influential role. At first I just assigned literacy narratives, where students basically told stories but didn't really analyze their experience. Then I tried to rewrite the assignments to focus on analyzing literacy events. (Trimbur, 2014)

In this study, the genre of literacy narrative proved a highly successful tool for gathering data about how students perceive their development as readers. The data provide insight into the social, affective, and cognitive aspects of each participant's reading identity—each narrative providing important information about that student's experiences as a reader and offering a springboard for further conversations about reading. Many of these narratives focus on elementary, middle, and/or high school reading experiences as well as their reading experiences with non-academic sponsors such as family members and friends, allowing the researcher to gain multiple and varied insights on each student's specific reading experiences.

The literacy narrative offers the opportunity for instructors and students to address reading-related issues early in the semester and is particularly effective as a first writing exercise and vehicle for class discussion and sharing reading experiences. Literacy narratives make very engaging early-semester class reading, and students readily take to stories by such authors as Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, and Sherman Alexie, which offer compelling discussion on how culture, society, family, teachers, books, and other entities shape our literacy development. Students may be wary at first of their ability to reach back into their memories to access early literacy experiences, but with guidance and gentle prodding from the instructor and time for personal reflection, most can recall learning to read or being read to as far back as three and four years old. The literacy narrative prompt aids students in rekindling relationships built around reading as students recall happy memories spent reading with loved ones. Students with difficult early reading experiences are offered the opportunity to share those experiences with others if they

wish, paving the way for future discussions about reading difficulties when they surface. Conversations about frustrations with reading and reading curriculum can benefit the class paving the way for the instructor to discuss and negotiate reading practices and expectations with students. The key point here is that discussions about reading need to be on the table up front as a way of, as Ellen Carillo (2015) says, making reading visible.

### **Conclusion and Additional Questions for Future Research**

This study finds that reading engagement, or lack of it, may be an issue for many college-level students, whether in literature or writing classes, or other classes requiring students to complete significant amounts of reading. Authentic reading engagement requires genuine exchange between sponsors and those they sponsor and an awareness that each learner has his or her own individual reading identity. After sorting data into categories, patterns were found that reveal large numbers of students resent reading, consistently lose interest in reading, and desire more choice with regard to reading selection. According to the students who participated in this study, good reading sponsors offer students access to *a wide range* of reading materials, and then allow their students the opportunity to select reading materials that appeal to them personally. Positive sponsorship provides a safe environment where students are not afraid to express their feelings related to reading. As is evidenced from my study, students bring a range of reading habits, attitudes, and practices to the college classroom—the social nature of reading development suggests that college classrooms should be a place where authentic conversations about reading can take place and/or continue.

As stated in the preface, one prevailing myth among teachers regarding students as readers is that students “just don’t read any more.” Rather than adopting simple explanations for complex issues, we should be asking, “Who are my students as readers, and what can I do to foster reading engagement?” If we do not begin to address this question, we may be contributing to the creation of a culture of non-readers. This study opens up opportunities for much further research. Questions for further study may include:

- What does engaging reading/writing curriculum look like and how can it best be implemented and assessed?
- What is the relationship between reading engagement and reading proficiency?
- How can we measure the relationship between reading sponsorship and a student’s reading identity?

First-year composition instructors are called upon by the discipline to be literacy sponsors; they do their students a great disservice if they assume their students have already mastered the complex set of skills and strategies--a full repertoire of reading tools—by the time they enter college. First-year composition is a good place to address the cognitive, affective, and social conditions that shape one’s reading identity, but instructors must first realize that when it comes to reading, one size does not fit all. Instructors can use the literacy narrative genre to gather information about each student’s reading identity and interests, creating banks of reading in various genres, and offering choice whenever possible with regard to texts and assignments. Approaches to build engagement can, with care and deliberation, be integrated into the

curriculum. Dr. Willingham (2015) notes that, “Teachers who motivate readers are skilled in setting classroom activities that students find engaging and require reading if they are to be completed...It takes an inventive teacher to create lesson plans that account for this interest, *and* are rigorous, *and* meet school or district requirements” (173). Additionally, engaging students in meaningful discussions about reading can offer students and instructors the opportunity to share and reflect upon affective issues related to reading. We can better understand the needs of our students with regard to their reading development by asking them to share their prior learning experiences, and we can learn a lot by listening. First-year writing instructors should be mindful of their important role as college-level reading sponsors

## APPENDIX

### Appendix A: Literacy Narrative Prompt

#### Assignment #1: Literacy Narrative

Professor Nancy Benson

At home: Please write a thoughtful and original essay that addresses a few of the questions below. You can respond to all of them or select the ones that make the most sense considering your experiences. Feel free to add other information if you feel it is appropriate. Use examples and description. Word process in 12 point Times double spaced. Paper length 2-3 pages. Name, section number, and course title on upper left-hand side of paper. Remember you should use examples from your own past!

Consider your audience. This paper could be written for me, other students, your parents, an influential person in your life, a former teacher, a librarian, etc. Please post audience and purpose at the top of the page.

Questions to Consider:

1. When did you learn to read? What was the experience like?
2. Did you read as a child? What did you read? Explain and describe.
3. Do you remember your first experiences writing?
4. Do you read now? How much time do you spend reading? What do you read?
5. How do you feel about writing/reading and what do you like/hate to read/write?

6. If you had a difficult experience with reading/writing in your past, please feel free to write about that.

7. Please make this essay personal; although it is an academic exercise it can also be a heart-felt story about yourself and others who influenced you.

Note: I encourage you to take your paper to The Writing and Reading Center. This is a great place to share your work and get feedback!



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