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Kate Sauer

St. John Fisher University

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The Impact of Student Interest and Instructor Effectiveness on Student Performance

Abstract

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The Impact of Student Interest and Instructor Effectiveness on Student Performance

By

Kate Sauer

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Dr. Joellen Maples

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St. John Fisher College

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Abstract

This research project began by asking if and how student interest and instructor effectiveness impacted student performance. Research was conducted with two middle school students. The data was gathered by administering questionnaires, collecting student work, and recording observations. Findings revealed that students' interest and their relationship with the instructor were contributing factors in successful academic performance. Therefore, the data implied that teachers need consider student interest and develop a relationship with them in order to foster student growth and success.

The Effects of Text Genre and Instructor Effectiveness on Student Performance

Reading is an activity that school-age children engage in daily. For some it is a joy, while for others, a struggle. Teachers must find ways to address the wide range of reading abilities and differentiate their lessons to accommodate all skill levels. In addition to these varying skill levels, students have different backgrounds, motivation levels, and interests. With the introduction of the Common Core standards into English Language Arts classrooms across the nation, both teachers and students are faced with additional challenges.

One such challenge is determining which texts to choose and how to use them effectively in the classroom. With the relatively recent introduction of Common Core, there is a drive to not only include, but to focus on, non-fiction texts, which can be challenging for students who resist reading even when given texts that are of high interest. The research in this study is intended to show the link between student comprehension and writing ability, and the genre (fiction or non-fiction) of the guiding text, as well as the impact of the instructor's effectiveness. Without a clear understanding of how particular texts affect student motivation, it is difficult for teachers to plan lessons and units that their students will respond to. There may be a significant amount of guesswork and ineffective use of time, which is not an efficient way of reaching all students, nor is it ideal for teachers who want to plan relevant and valuable lessons. Sometimes teachers are limited by directives from the school or curriculum in terms of what types of texts they may choose; as such, it is to their benefit to be aware of how a genre affects student performance so that they may tailor their lessons to maximize student learning.

When students are not invested in their learning, they are not as likely to be engaged (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Lack of student engagement impacts not only their learning, but the learning of others in the classroom. As a teacher with over 10 years of

experience, few things are more frustrating than planning a lesson that simply fails to engage students. While it is inevitable that such lessons happen on occasion - and those lessons can even provide valuable opportunities for reflection – teachers could make better use of their time by knowing the interests of their students beforehand. They can learn about their students’ interests in a variety of ways – through the use of student questionnaires, rating scales, or interviews.

In addition to being aware of the needs and interests of their students, teachers should not overlook the importance of their relationship with their students-which does not necessarily mean it has to be defined by students “liking” their teachers. It simply means that for optimal learning to occur, there should be mutual respect. Based on personal experience, it is easier to reach struggling students when a trusting relationship has been established.

The main question that drives this research project is how student engagement and relationship with the evaluator impact student performance. The research was collected while working with two middle school students during guided reading sessions. To help me answer my research question, I presented the students with a series of reading passages in order to collect student work samples and make observations-two that would be considered high interest, and two that would be considered low-interest. I also created and collected two questionnaires from the students, one pertaining to their interests, the other to their feelings about me as an instructor. My findings showed a measurable gain in student scores on written responses to high interest passages as compared to low-interest passages. The work the students completed for the high – interest passages was thorough and much more developed than their work that they completed for low-interest passages. In addition, there was a clear increase in focus and motivation while working on high-interest passages. These findings call for teachers to take student interest into

account when planning for instruction. Student motivation and the success they find when fully engaged is crucial to making learning meaningful, relevant, and lifelong.

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of this study is based on the word “literacy,” which can mean different things to different people. My definition of literacy is the ability to read, comprehend, communicate, and make meaningful connections from text and language. Literacy is verbal and non-verbal, oral and written, social and cultural. Its definition is constantly changing and evolving. Gee defines literacy as “fluent control of the secondary discourse” (Gee, 1989, p. 23). According to Gee, literacy is the use of language, thinking, and acting that helps people identify with a particular group. This definition can be extended into the classroom, when students are expected to use language in a particular way that identifies them as part of a group of their peers.

When examining literacy and how it relates to student learning, it is necessary to be familiar with the theories surrounding the subject. The sociocultural theory defines the student as an active member of a continuously changing community of learners in which knowledge constructs and is constructed by larger cultural systems (Larson & Marsh, 2005). In terms of its significance for teachers, their classroom becomes that community when the students are in school. Children want to be able to relate and connect to what they are learning, as well as to one another and to the larger world, which is especially important for teachers to consider when choosing appropriate and relevant texts for their students. They want to be able to make connections to what they read. They may need guidance in doing this, particularly struggling readers. The sociocultural theory shifts the focus in the classroom from being teacher-centered to being student-centered. When teachers select texts with little to no student input or consideration, they are already starting off at a disadvantage. When they do not consider the needs of their

students as individuals and as a community, they are putting their students at a disadvantage, and not mining their full potential. By gaining insight into the factors that motivate students, teachers can use that knowledge to guide, foster, and encourage a community of focused and successful learners.

Evidence suggests that children acquire language in culturally specific ways, which is supported by the socio-cultural theory of literacy acquisition (Meier, 2003). Each student will acquire language at home in a different manner. It is important that teachers consider this factor, since some children will acquire language through the reading of numerous books and others will learn through oral language alone (Meier, 2003). Students' manner of acquiring literacy will impact their interests as well as their abilities.

Another theory that can provide further support for this study is the social constructionism theory, which states that a child's identity in literacy-based events is impacted by his or her environment (Triplett, 2004). The identity of the reader is directly related to the experiences the child has with literacy. Therefore, the feelings of the child and the teacher about the child will impact the literacy experience. This is where the effectiveness of the instructor becomes a factor in student performance. When a teacher engages and motivates students, they are more likely to want to participate in activities and demonstrate their abilities. Instructor effectiveness and the role of the teacher are crucial in determining student success. Evaluation and assessment of this component of learning will help me to go forward in my teaching career. Student success has so many factors, but this is one that we, as educators, have control over.

Research Question

Given that literacy is a social practice and learning occurs during social interaction, this action research project asks, how does student interest in the text and instructor effectiveness impact his or her performance in tasks related to the text?

The following action research study will explore the role of student interest and motivation on performance in school. Student school performance is an area widely researched and documented. It spans age, grade level, ability, and geography. Countless research has been done to determine factors that influence student success; much has also been done to establish why students fail and what can be done to remedy the situation. This review will explore the studies and theories that have come before and which form its foundation. The socio-cultural theory, in particular, plays a vital role in the studies and conclusions in this area. In addition, as exploration into this topic progressed, three trends emerged. Ages of students in the studies ranged from pre-kindergarten to the undergraduate level, but the trends transcended age, gender, race, and socio-economic status. The first, and most significant to this study, is that student interest impacts motivation and achievement. The second is that a student's relationship with his or her teacher is a factor in student success. Finally, goal setting was revealed to be influential in student motivation and academic behaviors.

The Effect of Student Interest on Motivation and Performance

A number of studies have been done that positively correlate student interest with academic performance. Several of the examples that support this idea are based specifically on interest in literature, although some studies can be generalized across content areas. In a two-year study of middle school students, researchers Barbara Moss and Judith Hendershot (2002) found that self-selected texts increased the readers' positive feelings about reading and improved

achievement scores. The teachers provided students with time to read, choice in book selection, and opportunities for reader response. This study was specific to non-fiction texts, which is significant, given the Common Core Standards push for integrating more expository texts into the classroom. Understanding why students chose the books they did will help educators motivate students. The study found that self-selection was important when attempting to motivate students to read and that non-fiction could be just as motivating as fiction (Moss & Hendershot). The importance of student interest was a key takeaway from that study, and this is an important factor for teachers to remember, although not just with middle school students. In Hargrove's (2005) study of younger students, the same trend could be seen. The study was motivated by one teacher's frustration when faced with high potential but underachieving students. The two male second-graders who participated in the study were given two different assignments: one teacher-led, the other student directed. Hargrove examined the results of this teacher's study and determined that the student-directed assignment was successful, resulting in increased energy and output. The teacher-led assignment showed the same results that led to the teacher's initial frustration and motivation to begin the study in the first place. The teacher viewed students as individuals and took their interests and personalities into consideration when creating the assignment (Hargrove, 2005). It can be concluded, then, that both studies reaffirm the fact that student interest is a factor in motivation and success.

Student interest spans age ranges, but also geography. The two studies above were conducted in urban settings. However, the value and importance of student interest is not limited to specific regions. Hardr, Sullivan, and Crowson (2009), conducted a study of 414 students, grades 9-12 in a rural high school. Students were given questionnaires that examined student self-perceptions, goal orientations, interest (as it pertained to achievement), and achievement (as

it related to high school completion). The researchers found that when students saw value and relevance in what they were learning and how it could help achieve their goals, they were more likely to have increased interest, put forth effort, and graduate—going on to post-secondary opportunities (Hardr, Sullivan & Crowson). In addition, the more competent they felt about their abilities, the more likely they were to commit to continued study and education. Therefore, the interest these students felt in their learning had a significant impact on their feelings of success, and, ultimately, their performance. It is important that students view their learning experiences as authentic and meaningful. Students are far more likely to put forth effort when they understand why they are doing a task. The impact and effect of students' intrinsic motivation is important for teachers to remember when presenting information in their classrooms. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff (2003) would agree with that statement. Their study found that student engagement increases when students find the task challenging, balanced, relevant, and under their control. They determined this by asking 526 students to track their academic activities throughout the course of the school day and record how they felt during those activities. Students felt most engaged when participating in a group activity or discussion as opposed to listening to a lecture (Shernoff et al). They concluded that, based on Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) flow theory, concentration, interest, and enjoyment in an activity must all be present. All of the studies above support the argument that student interest plays a key role in student success. Interest is necessary for continuing motivation and learning. Like Hardr, Sullivan, and Crowson, Shernoff et al. found that challenge and satisfaction in task completion will motivate students and engage their interest. Therefore, teachers should develop activities that are challenging and relevant, and also give students some control of their learning.

A tool that teachers can use to assist them with developing such activities is a student survey, such as the one employed by Diaz-Rubin (1996). Since teachers must first be aware of student interests in order to provide them with appropriate and effective materials, a survey or questionnaire is one way to gather that information. Such awareness on the part of the teacher will help students develop into independent readers and make connections to real world. To that end, Diaz-Rubin created a survey for which the sole purpose was to determine reading topic preferences of high school students. Students reported wanting to read topics that allowed them to “escape”—i.e., humor and fantasy. They also expressed an interest in gangs/crime, which may be related to the media’s portrayal of it and students’ exposure to the romanticism of that lifestyle (Diaz-Rubin). Teachers can motivate students with interesting materials and a survey like this helps them to determine what those interests are. According to Diaz-Rubin, when students are allowed to make a reading selection based on their interests, it is more likely that a higher level of comprehension will occur. Like Hargrove (2005), Diaz-Rubin agrees that choice-motivated by student interest-is a successful way to engage students. By tuning into student interest, teachers can promote literacy. Without motivation, students are clearly less engaged and less likely to be successful. It is the responsibility of teachers to be aware of their students’ interests and to capitalize on them whenever possible. They can determine interest through student interest surveys, interviews, verbal feedback, and observation.

Student interest and engagement is not always an easy thing to predict, nor is it static. Because students are constantly changing and growing, educators must be aware of how those changes impact the students. Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, and Kindermann (2008) explored the emotions and behaviors that correlate with engagement and disaffection in the classroom. Students in 4th – 7th grade and their teachers completed self-report questionnaires. The study

found that students were relatively engaged early on, but engagement declined in the transition to middle school. Rates of disengagement were proportional to initial levels of engagement.

Students and teachers found that boredom was a significant factor in disengagement. Teacher support played a large role in the dynamics of engagement. Teacher access to the results of the study may help teachers figure out which motivational supports they could put in place to best benefit their students. Skinner et al. found that student engagement declined as they get older.

Therefore, educators must be either be prepared to reach students at all grade levels or must take preventative measures. Students often indicate their engagement through certain behaviors, and when teachers recognize these behaviors and the emotions behind them, they can best address the issue. As a teacher, it is important to recognize these signs (both positive and negative) and either reinforce or remedy the situation. Marks (2010) purported that three factors influence student engagement and learning: personal background and orientation toward school, school initiatives, and subject matter. She looked at 24 schools undergoing restructuring, specifically grades 5, 8, and 10. Students completed surveys about their attitudes, behaviors, and experiences, their general school experience, and their personal/family background. She was able to draw several conclusions from her study. First, like Skinner et al., student engagement decreased as grade level increased; high school students reported the least positive orientation toward schools. By contrast, feelings of being supported in the classroom were highest among elementary school students. Subject matter did have an effect on reports of authentic work (that is, student feeling that the work is challenging and relevant). Successful students were more engaged, but students who reported feeling alienated were less so (Marks). These findings tie into the research done by Zepke and Leach (2010), whose conclusions challenged teachers to present their students with

real-world experiences and authentic learning opportunities. Zepke and Leach also noted, like Marks, that fun and challenging activities are more likely to encourage student engagement.

When students have some semblance of control over their learning, they are more likely to be engaged and achieve academic success. Tella, Adeniyi and Olufemi (2009) support this claim with the conclusions of their study. They found that locus of control, interest in schooling, and self-efficacy are all factors in predicting academic achievement. Locus of control refers to an individual's belief of what causes success. It can be internal, where the student believes success is due to personal effort and ability and is more likely to work hard. Students who believe in an external locus of control will attribute their success to luck or fate, and may not put forth as much effort. More significant to this review are the results that analyzed student interest in schooling. Much like the Diaz-Rubin's (1996) study, the researchers found learning becomes an intrinsic reward when interest is a factor. When teachers recognize signs of either engagement or disaffection, they can make note of what students are doing during that time and then use that information when reflecting upon the lesson. Certainly student engagement is not the only factor that will impact student performance and behavior—there are many factors over which teachers have little or no control. However, through awareness and observation, teachers can note emerging trends and patterns, which will assist them when planning lessons and choosing materials. Based on the studies outlined above, it is reasonable to conclude that student interest is an important factor in student achievement.

As large a role as student interest plays, however, we cannot overlook the importance of other factors that also contribute to student success and how they are all entwined. Student interest can be linked to their investment in what is happening in the classroom. Here we look at the importance of teachers' instructional methods and their impact on student success. Several

studies support the link between the actual types of tasks students are asked to perform and their ability to successfully complete those tasks. Dai and Wand (2006) gave college undergraduates rating scales, narrative and expository texts, and corresponding multiple-choice questions.

Subjects completed the tasks and then rated their interest level for each piece. The results of the study showed that students performed better on tasks that piqued their interests, which supports the idea that what the reader brings to the reading experience will influence both the processes and outcomes (goals/strategies used and comprehension/interest). The study reaffirms the fact that educators must take into account many factors that influence student motivation,

comprehension, and performance. Similarly, Connor (2009) completed a case study in which data was collected from self-reports of students writing extended essays. Students were allowed to choose their own topics, the thought being that this would increase their engagement. The results found that a higher percentage of students reported being engaged (Connor, 2009).

Teachers looking at this data can conclude that student choice does increase motivation and engagement. In an attempt to outline more specifically what teachers can do to increase student investment, Zepke and Leach (2010) conducted a study that sifted through prior research and then proposed ten action steps for increasing student engagement. Zepke and Leach define student engagement as “students’ cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning” (p. 168). They searched databases to synthesize research that explores student engagement and success and drew their own conclusions. Zepke and Leach then synthesized those conclusions into action steps for educators. Essentially they advised teachers to encourage students, give them a chance to work autonomously as well as with peers, and be approachable, prepared, and sensitive to student needs. In addition, they should create fun and challenging educational experiences, while also encouraging diversity and providing support

services (orientation, mentoring). Teachers should help students cultivate social and cultural capital so they can develop a sense of belonging and form relationships with others. Teachers can adapt, modify, individualize, and expand upon these action steps in their own classroom to increase student engagement. Dai and Wand (2006) would agree that such steps will lead to increased student motivation, performance, and success. The key here is recognizing the role that educators play in determining student outcomes. While they cannot be expected to control what happens outside of the classroom, it remains their responsibility to take the necessary steps to recognize and address the needs of their students within the classroom. Without that awareness, opportunities for student success and engagement can be minimized or overlooked entirely.

As mentioned earlier, these findings are often interrelated, with certain studies focusing on one main idea, while also addressing other issues. Education is a field that requires its experts to explore and become familiar with a multitude of factors in order to best serve their students, which brings us to the next trend that emerged: the effect of teacher-student relationships on student success.

The Relationship between Students and Teachers is a Key Factor in Student Success

Teachers, particularly in the elementary grades, spend a significant portion of a given day with their students. It stands to reason that they have an impact on student success and failure, including, but not limited to, grades and assessments. Studies have found that student relationships with their teachers can be a predictor for the level of success that students experience (Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant).

The teacher is primarily responsible for creating the classroom environment. Nichols (2006) concluded that a classroom environment based on positive social relationships that also encourages the individual empowerment of its students will foster increased motivation and

learning. A 40-item questionnaire was given to 200 pre-service, secondary, or elementary teachers. Their responses yielded the following suppositions: teacher attitude (whether positive or defeatist) will impact his or her classroom environment. Administration can help foster positive classroom environment, but it is more difficult with the constraints of accountability and test scores that have become such a focus in recent years. Pre-service teachers would benefit from specific training in how to create this type of environment (Nichols). If the goal is student success, then the creation of an environment where students feel safe and inspired will have a positive effect on their performance. Teachers are responsible for doing this, but with the emphasis on test scores and student performance created by APPR and other state and national mandates, they may feel pressured to focus on other areas-those actually being assessed. Ultimately, the creation of a positive learning environment may have short and long-term benefits that would also meet the demands of administration and state requirements. Nichols (2007) study also supports the idea that student-teacher relationships are a key factor in student engagement and ultimate success. Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) agree that teachers influence the classroom environment and its impact on students. Their study found that there is a correlation between teachers' rating of conflict and closeness with students' academic skills. Based on surveys and observations, they determined that students who had negative relationships in preschool liked school less by first grade, based on the patterns that were established from data analysis. Negative feelings led to less engagement in the classroom. Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) found- and Nichols (2006) and Martin (2007) would agree-that teachers need to be aware that their thoughts, feelings, and interaction with students are all factors in students' engagement, and, ultimately, student success. Additionally, closer monitoring and observation of teacher-student relationships could afford more opportunities for student success (Pianta and Stuhlman).

Like Nichols's study, Pianta and Stuhlman's conclusions show that the environment that teachers create is vitally important to student success. Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, and Salovey (2012) would agree with both Nichols (2008) and Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) that students' success in school is impacted by the emotional climate of their classrooms. They surveyed 63 teachers and 2,000 students in 90 5th and 6th grade ELA classrooms, collecting data via classroom observations, report cards, and student reports. The classrooms were assessed for emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. They found that characteristics of classrooms with a highly positive emotional climate included: sense of connectedness and belonging, enjoyment, enthusiasm, and respect for self and others. Students in these classrooms engage in more learning (p. 707) and have fewer behavioral issues. Teachers in these classrooms are responsive to the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students, and also help them problem-solve. All of these characteristics led to greater academic success. The take-away for teachers is that students who feel a connection to their teacher engage more and have increased academic success. When this learning climate disappears, so does the student engagement. Teachers are responsible for creating and sustaining a classroom environment that engages students and creates a positive emotional climate. Reyes et al. (2012), like Nichols (2008) and Pianta and Stuhlman (2004), found that meaningful and authentic instruction takes place more effectively in a classroom that emotionally engages the students.

When students have positive relationships with their teachers early on, it can be an indicator of later student success. Swanson, Valiente, and Lemery-Chalfant (2012) found this to be true based on a survey of 266 students, parents, and teachers. They also administered the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale and looked at student report cards. They concluded that when parents and teachers are aware of how they influence students, the result may be positive

interventions and, ultimately, student success. Students who engage in effortful are more likely to engage teachers positively and accomplish academic tasks. As a teacher, it is important to note that when there are so many other factors that influence a child's performance in school, it is essential to build a positive relationship between student and teacher. There are factors that are outside of the school's control, but a teacher can control certain aspects of what a child is exposed to within the walls of the classroom. Those choices can have a lasting effect on the student's school performance (Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant). Similarly, Hamre and Pianta (2001) followed a group of students from kindergarten to 8th grade. Students and teachers were given screening measures and questionnaires. Several trends were observed: in elementary years, teachers reported fewer conflicts with girls than boys; girls received more "positive habits" remarks than boys overall. Generally, early teacher-student relationships were reliable predictors of student academic and behavior patterns through 8th grade. The results of the study support Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant's (2012) claim that the teacher-student relationship is important in predicting student outcomes. Low negativity ratings in kindergarten led to fewer behavioral issues in later years. However, students who had early behavioral problems but were able to develop relationships with teachers were less likely to have continuing behavior problems (Hamre & Pianta). Teachers can conclude that their relationship with a student is an important component in that child's success in school, even if it is not necessarily academic. When students have a positive relationship with a teacher, they may be more invested in school, leading to increased motivation and effort. When looking at the big picture of student motivation and performance, this relationship cannot be ignored.

Another factor in the teacher-child relationship is the parent. Since it has been established that the relationship between the teacher and student is essential for success, the role of the

parent in this equation should also be considered. Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant (2012) included parent feedback in making their determinations. Hughes and Kwok (2007) also conducted a study that showed how relationships among teachers, parents, and students factor into student achievement and feelings of school-relatedness. A sample of 1st grade students was given the Woodcock-Johnson III Achievement tests. In addition, Hughes and Kwok analyzed teacher reports, administered a Teacher Relationship Inventory, distributed a questionnaire of teacher-parent relationships, and conducted student interviews. They found that student achievement increased when students and parents feel supported by teachers. They also reasoned that “social relatedness is critical to children’s engagement and academic success” (p. 46). The study emphasized the importance of developing positive home-school relationships. We must remember that students’ perceptions of their teachers can affect their performance, and teacher perceptions of their students can affect their view of the students’ performance. Generally, student engagement and motivation may increase when they and their parents feel supported by the teacher.

Student perception can go beyond their views of the teacher; it can extend to other activities within the classroom. A study conducted by Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens (2008) demonstrated that students’ likes and dislikes in terms of teaching that they have experienced will influence their perceptions of the learning environment, learning, and performance. The study was done with older students, ranging in age from 18 to 20. Questionnaires and standardized tests were used to obtain information. According to the results of the study, many factors influenced students’ likes and dislikes with regard to instruction. In this study, there were five instructional groups, all being taught the same course but with different methods: one was lecture-based, the other four were student-activated. They were assessed in four different ways

(multiple choice assessments, portfolio case studies, and peer assessments. Their perceptions of the course were collected through completion of a questionnaire (using a 5-point scale). Students' perception of learning was equal between lecture-based and student-activated. Feedback about the lecture-based was primarily positive, while the four student-activated methods were more ambiguous and diverse. The goal for teachers is "matching students' instructional preference and teaching" in order to provide an "educational setting that is conducive to learning." (p. 309). This group of students simply preferred a lecture-based teaching style. The responsibility of the classroom teacher, no matter what the age of the students, is to assess students' learning styles and plan delivery of instruction accordingly. The information gathered in this study is also supported by the research done by Zepke and Leach (2010) because they both put the onus on the teacher to evaluate the needs of the students in the classroom and then provide instruction that is engaging and relevant.

There will be times when this is a daunting task for teachers. There are many contributing factors to the events that occur over the course of a day. This concept was examined in a study done by Jackson and Lunenburg (2010), who surveyed a group of middle school teachers. The teachers rated themselves and their schools with regard to academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity and organizational structures. According to the results of the measures, there was variability in teacher behaviors, principles, and methods, learning environments, services available, instructional strategies used, resources available (Jackson and Lunenburg). The takeaway from this study is that schools themselves may vary in what they can offer students. However, as Hamre and Pianta (2001) found, the teacher is the constant, and therefore in a position to create that positive environment for students. There may be times when teachers are limited by funds, resources, and demands; the challenge is to find ways to create a

classroom environment that is still authentic, and challenging. Teachers can do this by setting objectives, implementing instructional strategies (note-taking, questioning, graphic organizers), and seeking support from administration where necessary and appropriate. The act of building a relationship between student and teacher is multi-faceted, complex, and incredibly important to student success, achievement, and perceptions. These studies continue to support the claim that the relationship between the student and teacher is a vital one, despite differences in age, grade, gender, and subject matter.

Goal Setting is a Key Component in Student Success

The final trend that emerged after reading the articles was the necessity of student goals to academic success. Creating and meeting targets is expected in the post-school world. It makes sense that students would find goal creation to be helpful and goal completion to be gratifying. Luyten, Peschar, and Coe (2008) addressed the effects of age versus schooling on reading engagement and reading activities. Their study was comprised of data collected from high school students. They utilized self-reports to collect data on student motivation and goals as they pertained specifically to reading. They also collected self-reports from teachers with regard to the school's stated goals for its students. Their study found that there is a positive effect of schooling on student performance goals. In data collected from the teachers, however, there was a disconnect between school-stated goals (personal development, social skills, cognitive, and knowledge acquisition), and the student-stated goals, most of which were cognitive in nature. Since many schools do not currently acknowledge or reward achievement of goals that are non-cognitive, students may not see them as important and may decrease their effort in those areas (Luyten, Peschar, and Coe). Educators should be aware that it is important that goals be consistent in their creation, implementation, and assessment. Lack of follow-through can result

in students being less invested in goals—particularly when they do not see any consequence or effect. When students are able to take ownership of their work and see their progress, they are more likely to invest in the work. Martin (2007) found that knowing students strengths and needs and then helping them create targeted goals will help them effectively achieve those goals. This investment will manifest itself in student motivation and success. Cao and Nietfield (2007) also posit that there is relationship between students' learning goals, performance goals, study strategies, and performance. Their research sought to prove this through a study of 60 undergraduate students; students set goals at the beginning of a 14-week course and then were given reflection time and materials after each test, during which they could choose to modify their goals. Researchers and students assessed the effectiveness of certain types of learning strategies. After students created learning and performance goals and assessed them at the conclusion of the course, they were asked to describe study strategies they used. Some students had changed them over the 14-week course in order to better meet their performance and learning goals, which showed that students were cognizant of their progress and willing to change aspects of their behaviors. Examples of study strategies were flashcards, seeking help, organization, and reviewing class notes. Elements of this study can be adapted to help students set goals in any classroom and any content area. Allowing students reflection after test feedback may be helpful for students to assess their success and make any changes needed. Feedback is important, and fostering a relationship with a student that allows for dialogue and reflection may be a factor in student success. Motivation and expectations of self play an important role in the use of study strategies and academic performance. Like the study done by Luyten, Peschar, and Coe (2008), this study shows us that there are reasons students may not reach their goals and that student needs should be closely monitored. Feedback and reflection are key components in

helping students realize success, especially as it pertains to goal-setting. Abd-El-Fattah and Patrick (2011) also support the idea that student self-expectation is important to goal completion. Their hypothesis was that the relationship between individual-oriented achievement motivation has a positive correlation with social-oriented achievement motivation. The two are not mutually exclusive and students will strive to meet their own goals as well as the goals of others. To test this, they gave a questionnaire to 503 high school students. Based on their answers, the students were not only concerned with their own personal goals, they wanted to gain social approval by meeting the goals of others, including teachers. This study can provide teachers with insight about how to help students set their goals; a more positive approach may yield better results (instead of goals beginning “I will not”, set goals that begin with “I will” (p.107). The study reinforces literacy is social, as asserted by the socio-cultural theory. Students want to achieve success not just for their own benefit, but for the sake of others. Classroom teachers can help them set those goals, which may increase their chances for success. This study also supports the idea that building that relationship between the student and the teacher will foster success (Hamre and Pianta 2001; Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2012).

One cannot escape the reality of student assessments and the role they play in a student's daily life. Student perceptions can be responsible for their reactions to school. Brookhart and Durkin (2003) support this idea and felt that it was crucial to understand individual perceptions of classroom assessments because they are the ones that students encounter most frequently. They performed a case study where they asked students in three high school social studies class to rate twelve assessments. Brookhart and Durkin based their study on the framework that “each student's perception of the importance and value of the assigned task and each student's perception of his or her ability to accomplish this particular task affect effort” (p. 29). This study

ties in with the work of Diaz-Rubin (1996) and Hargrove (2005) in terms of the importance of interest on motivation. For this study, surveys were given before and after each of the twelve assessments. Pre-surveys assessed their perceived ability to complete the task, while post-surveys measured perceived effort based on five scales. Brookhart and Durkin found that different assessments yielded different levels of student effort. Based on feedback, one of their conclusions was that group performance assessments may increase student effort as compared to individual assessments (Brookhart & Durkin). Teachers should bear in mind, then, that students may work harder when they must be accountable to someone else. McClure, Meyer, Garish, Fischer, Weir, and Walkey (2010) also believed that there is a relationship between social influences and student achievement (specifically grades). To determine the validity of that statement, secondary students were given a survey that asked them to think back to when they got their best or worst marks and then rate the following for its influence on those grades: ability, effort, task difficulty, luck, family, teacher, and friends. A rating of 1 indicated “no influence” while a rating of 4 denoted a “big influence.” Students attributed their high marks to their own effort and ability and their low marks to task difficulty. They attributed luck more often to high marks than low marks. Most importantly to the connection with Brookhart and Durkins’s (2003) study, the researchers found that students had a positive view of social influence: students also attributed their good marks to friends, teachers, and family.

These discoveries lead us to the fact that student perception can be a powerful influence on success and failure as well. Students place meaning and importance on factors like teachers and peers, as well as their own ability and effort. There are factors outside of an educator’s control, but this study shows that there are some that are within it (motivating students, task difficulty) that students see as influential in their success.

When drawing conclusions about student motivation, teachers must recognize that there are many factors that influence student behavior and performance. The two that they have control over are the materials they select and the way they present those materials to the students. In doing so, they are influencing other factors such as their relationship with the students and the students' development of academic goals. However, the primary job of the teacher should be to select texts that motivate students to engage in learning. When this is not possible – perhaps due to reasons beyond the control of the individual teacher-the effectiveness of the teaching style should strive to compensate for the limitations of the materials being taught.

Methods

The two students participating in this study are part of the tutoring program at a private four-year college. The tutoring program includes students from schools in the greater Rochester area, and is available for students ranging in grade from kindergarten to high school. Students come from a variety of backgrounds and have a array of learning needs. We meet weekly to practice reading, writing, and word work, and to help them develop strategies. Permission was granted by both the students and the parents.

Context

Research will take place at Union Hills College (a pseudonym), a private four-year institution. The college is a liberal arts institution set on 154 acres. It offers undergraduate and graduate programs in humanities, social sciences, sciences, business, and nursing. As part of the literacy program, the college offers a tutoring program. As part of the program, there will be specific monitoring of student growth in the areas of reading, writing and word study. Tutors will administer pre- and post-testing, and analyze that data for results. Methods for collecting data during the evaluation include surveys and interviews, as well as quantitative data collection and

analysis/interpretation of scores. Both participants in the study are taking part in that program. We meet weekly for approximately an hour and a half. The classroom is shared with other tutors and students, although we have a barrier that helps to block noise and distraction. At any given point, there are seven to ten other people in the room, all of mixed grades and skill levels.

Participants

The two students are both in middle school, one in 7th grade, the other in 8th. Elephantina (a pseudonym), a 7th grader at Ledbetter Academy, loves to read and has a variety of interests, both in and out of school. She reads at grade level, and often reads and writes for pleasure. When assessed with the QRI-5, Elephantina's instructional level was at the Upper Middle level. Elephantina's spelling skills are a strength. Her writing skills are developing; she struggles with organization and sentence fluency. Elephantina is a bright, inquisitive young lady who aspires to be a doctor one day. She comes to tutoring sessions each week eager and ready to participate.

Zoey (a pseudonym) is an 8th grader at Mt. Morgan Middle School. She struggles with reading and spelling but enjoys writing. Her reading skills, when given the QRI-5, were at a 3rd grade instructional level. Zoey writes creatively, but also struggles when given a task that requires her to organize her thoughts and ideas. She prefers to use a word processor for writing so that she can use the spellcheck feature to assist with her spelling weakness. Zoey is soft-spoken and presents as a shy young lady. However, once she has established trust and feels comfortable with an adult, she opens up and is willing to share her thoughts and ideas.

Researcher Stance

I am a high school special education teacher who has been working at August Creek (a pseudonym) since 2002. Typically, I co-teach English classes, but I have also taught Global Studies, Earth Science, and Integrated Algebra during my time at August Creek. In 2001, I

completed my undergraduate work with dual certification in Elementary Education and Special Education. Five years later, I earned my degree in English Education 7-12, and now I am completing my Master's degree in Literacy 5-12.

In this study, I acted in a tutorial role. I created and designed all materials used in the study and administered them to the participants. All questions, writing, and assessments were evaluated by me. In addition, I observed student behavior and took notes throughout the course of the study.

Quality and Credibility of Research

In completing an action research project, it is necessary that the study be evaluated for quality and credibility. Mills (2011) has cited the work of Guba (1981), identifying credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as essential components of a qualitative research study's trustworthiness. All four of these components have been investigated and examined before beginning research. They were put into place within the study to ensure that it is trustworthy.

Credibility, as defined by Mills (2011), is a "researcher's ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained" (p. 104). To ensure credibility in this study, I performed triangulation. Triangulation, according to Mills (2011), is when a researcher uses a "variety of data sources and different methods with one another in order to cross check data" (p. 104). I used a several data sources and methods this study, including experiential, enquiry, and examination data. I observed students as they read and write, collected descriptive field notes, evaluated pre- and post- assessment data, and used two different questionnaires to obtain information for the study.

In addition to credibility, I also ensured transferability, the “researchers’ beliefs that everything they study is context bound” (Mills, 2011, p. 104). To ensure transferability in this study, I collected detailed descriptive data which allowed for comparisons of this study to others. By providing descriptive data specific to the context of my study, others may use it to compare it to their own or others’.

The third component in determining a valid and trustworthy study is dependability, which refers to the stability of the data collected throughout the research (Mills, 2011). In order to ensure dependability in my study, I overlapped the data collection methods through the use of triangulation (observation, field notes, collection of student assessment data, and questionnaires). By using four methods of data collection, the potential weakness of one is likely to be compensated for by the strengths of another, further strengthening the data’s stability (Mills, 2011).

Finally, I ensured confirmability throughout the course of my study. According to Mills’ (2011) definition, confirmability is the “neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected” (p. 105). The triangulation process once more helped secure the component of confirmability. By meeting the criteria outlined above, I believe that the data collected throughout this qualitative study is trustworthy, and as a result offers valid and reliable insight into the question of how student interest in materials and instructor effectiveness impacts student performance.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Right of the Participants

Before research could officially begin, I needed to get informed consent from both the parents and the students who would be involved in the study. I provided each set of parents with a consent form that explained the purpose and methodology of the study and asked for their

permission and signature. Additionally, I needed to receive written consent from both students following the receipt of parental consent. I explained to each student the purpose of the study and what their roles would be. Parents and students were notified that the names and schools of participants would be changed to pseudonyms and that any identifying words would be removed from student work in order to ensure complete confidentiality.

Data Collection

To begin this study, the students completed a questionnaire (see appendix A) that established their preferred reading materials – detailing genre and subject. This way I had a starting point from which to choose the materials for the study. The questionnaire asked students to choose whether they prefer to read fiction or non-fiction. From there, they were asked to rate, on a scale of one to five, their interest in five genres, with room for them to write in a choice of their own. The final part of the questionnaire was a set of open-ended questions designed to further elicit student response about their preferred reading materials.

Once the responses were collected, I selected materials for the following weeks' tutoring sessions. Over the next several weeks, I planned four lessons with identical formats. Students read a selection, answered comprehension questions, and responded to a reading prompt. The passages were all two pages in length, followed by five comprehension questions, and a higher level, thinking-based writing prompt. This is the design that was used for all four lessons. Two of the lessons were based around a reading passage that the students indicated would be high interest (was different for each student). The other two were what were considered by the students to be low-interest. Based on their responses, I formulated an answer to the first part of my research question: does student interest in the material impact their performance? My answer was derived from notes taken while listening to the students read, the number of correct

responses to comprehension questions, and the quality of the writing prompt-as assessed by the same 6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric (see Appendix B) on all four occasions. I collected and included the samples of student writing produced specifically as part of this study.

The second component was based on student response to an instructor feedback form (see Appendix C). This form was based on those used by undergraduate and graduate students to evaluate their professors. It was anonymous in order to encourage student honesty. Students were asked to rate the instructor (me) on qualities such as clarity of instruction, communication of expectations, preparation, quality of materials, approachability, enthusiasm, and professionalism. They were given an opportunity to add comments after each rating. Their responses provided me with data for answering the second part of my research question: How does the effectiveness of the instructor impact student performance?

Data Analysis

The data collected from this action research included two student questionnaires, observations, *6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubrics*, and student work samples. Student writing samples were scored using the *6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubric*. While students read, answered comprehension questions, and completed writing prompts, observations were recorded using pen and paper on forms created specifically for that purpose. All observations, student work, and questionnaires were read and coded. While reading through the data, codes were assigned and placed on the data for easier reference. Coding was done twice and then compared in order to identify three emerging themes. Next, findings were compared to established research and theoretical frameworks. Tables were organized using the *6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubrics* as well as teacher writing methods as disclosed in teacher interviews. Finally, student work samples were scanned and included to provide additional insight and reference points.

Findings and Discussion

Through the analysis of the data, I was able to determine trends that surfaced from the data through experiencing, enquiring, and examination. Three themes emerged from the data. The first is that student interest varies and can be difficult to predict. Second, student interest positively impacts performance. Last, student/instructor rapport positively impacts student performance.

Student Interest Varies and can be Difficult to Predict

Finding materials that interest students can be a difficult task for teachers, since student interests can vary from day to day. When choosing low- and high-interest selections for my students to read, I consulted the Student Interest Questionnaire they initially completed, which asked students to rank their genre preferences in reading on a scale of one to five, “1” being the least interested and “5” being the most. The results are summarized in the table below.

Table 1

Student Interest Survey

	1-Least Interested	5-Most Interested
Categories	Elephantina	Zoey
Adventure	5	3
Mystery	4	4
Fantasy	4	2
Sports	3	3
Humor	5	4
Other	Crime-5	None

Both students gravitated toward the Humor and Mystery genres. Neither one was particularly interested in Sports, although Zoey’s least preferred genre was Fantasy. Overall,

Elephantina ranked her preferences more highly than Zoey; Adventure and Crime were her most preferred topics. This information is helpful in part because it challenges the expectations teachers may have of their female students' reading preferences. They may expect that a female student would be interested in more stereotypically female genres, such as Humor or Fantasy. Zoey's choice not to respond to "Other" and her ratings were collectively lower than Elephantina's. When questioned about this, Zoey responded, "reading is not my favorite thing to do" (Observations, 2012). This shows that a questionnaire of this type is not only helpful for ascertaining initial student preferences, it can be helpful in obtaining follow-up information as well. In addition to the rating questions, students were asked to respond to open-ended questions about their reading preferences. Their answers can be seen in the table below.

Table 2

Student Responses to Open-ended Questions

Question	Elephantina	Zoey
I prefer to read: FICTION NON-FICTION	Fiction	Non-Fiction
What is your MOST favorite topic/subject to read about?	I like to read about crime.	WWII
What is your LEAST favorite topic/subject to read about?	Silly stories. I don't like to read stories that have lots of cartoons and talking animals and things that wouldn't really happen.	History and News

In addition to the above data, Zoey indicated that she preferred non-fiction, while Elephantina expressed a preference for fiction. On first glance, Zoey's most and least favorite

topics appear to be the same, which provides confusing and conflicting data. When asked to explain her choices, she clarified, “I like reading stories about people from World War II. We are reading about it in school and for some reason I really like it. But I don’t like reading about really old history, like especially in other countries. It’s boring. And I wrote news because I don’t like reading about current events” (Student Interest Questionnaire, October 23, 2012). Her responses are consistent with her preference for non-fiction. Elephantina’s preference for fiction was also consistent with her responses about her most and least favorite topics. When asked to elaborate on what types of crime novels she liked to read, she answered that she enjoyed series about kids her age who “solve mysteries and catch bad guys” (Observations, 2012).

The student responses in Tables 1 and 2 were the basis for the selections I chose in the study. After students had completed each teacher-selected reading passage, I asked them to choose the one they would label “high interest” and the one they would label “low interest.” The results are listed in the tables below.

The selections are all taken from the website *Reading A-Z*. All of the stories are 12-15 pages long and fall within each student’s determined reading ability. The summaries of Elephantina’s stories are as follows: *Can I Vote?* is the narrative story of a young man learning about the election process and his role in it, both present and future. *Sparky’s Mystery Fortune* tells the story of a missing dog and how his family finds him based on following a trail of clues. *Anansi and the Talking Watermelon* is the fable of trickery and mischief by the crafty spider Anansi. Finally, *A Late Night Chat With a Parakeet* describes the frustration of a teenage girl whose friends and family refuse to believe the mysterious behavior of her pet. She communicates with the reader through a series of diary entries. Zoey’s reading passages are summarized as well: *Ancient Egypt* is an informational text about the customs and traditions of the Egyptians.

Vampire Dentist tells the tale of a vampire with an embarrassing fear of getting his teeth cleaned. *George Washington Carver* is the story of the inventor's life, inventions, and contributions to society. The final selection, *Goldilocks and the Other Three Bears*, is a humorous twist on the familiar children's fairytale. Based on the results of each subject's Student Interest Questionnaire, I labeled the selections as High or Low Interest, as shown below in the middle column. After looking at the covers and reading the selections, I asked the students to label each High or Low Interest. Their responses are shown in the column to the right. As you can see, my predictions did not always match the students' feelings about the passages.

Table 3

Student Reading Passages

Elephantina

Literature Selection	Teacher Label	Student Label
<i>Can I Vote?</i>	Low	Low
<i>Sparky's Mystery Fortune</i>	High	High
<i>Anansi and the Talking Watermelon</i>	Low	High
<i>A Late Night Chat with a Parakeet</i>	High	Low

Zoey

Literature Selection	Teacher Label	Student Label
<i>Ancient Egypt</i>	Low	Low
<i>Vampire Dentist</i>	High	High
<i>George Washington Carver</i>	Low	High
<i>Goldilocks and the <u>Other</u> Three Bears</i>	High	Low

This data shows that some of the reading selections that I thought would be high interest to the students were, in fact, found to be low interest. As Moss and Hendershot (2012) found, when students can self-select texts, they are more likely to have positive feelings about reading, and therefore, will perform better on tasks relating to the text. Such was the case in this action study. The students consistently performed better on tasks when they perceived the text to be high interest. Tables outlining specific student scores and analysis of student work will be presented in the next section as data that supports the second theme. O'Connor (2009) also found that when students were given a choice, they were more likely to follow through with tasks and were fully engaged because they saw value in what they were doing. It is clear, based on this data, that teachers may try to select texts that are high interest to students but they may not be successful. Student interests and motivations may change daily; if students are allowed as much choice and flexibility as possible, it may increase their engagement and positive feelings toward reading.

Student Interest Positively Impacts Performance

Student interest was a recurring theme noted when analyzing and interpreting the data collected. Based on research done in the literature review, I expected to find that student interest would impact performance on tasks related to the reading. In conducting this study, I observed that this was true. In Tables 4-6 below, I have outlined the scores earned on student responses to comprehension questions and to the writing prompts. In Table 4, all questions scored were in the form of explicit reading comprehension questions based on the reading passage. There were five questions per selection, each worth two points. Criteria for scoring were that student response was accurate and that it fully answered the question. Partial credit could be earned. Students recorded all answers using paper and pen. All directions were given in written form on the

worksheet I created. Directions and format were identical for all eight of the worksheets given over the course of the study. The scores were converted to percentages to make them easier to compare side by side.

Table 4

Student Response to Explicit Reading Comprehension Questions

Low Interest Selections			
<i>Can I Vote?</i>	80%	<i>Ancient Egypt</i>	40%
<i>A Late Night Chat with a Parakeet</i>	20%	<i>Goldilocks and the <u>Other</u> Three Bears</i>	40%
High Interest Selections			
<i>Sparky's Mystery Fortune</i>	100%	<i>Vampire Dentist</i>	80%
<i>Anansi and the Talking Watermelon</i>	100%	<i>George Washington Carver</i>	90%

The table above clearly shows that the scores were higher for the passages designated “High Interest” and lower for those designated “Low Interest.” When students were reading selections deemed “high interest,” their responses to comprehension questions were more thorough and accurate. They provided detail, recalled more information, and communicated that clearly in their responses. For example, when answering questions from *Can I Vote?* Elephantina’s responses were in the form of incomplete sentences and 1-2 word answers. She could not recall enough information to answer 4 of the 5 questions following *A Late Night Chat With a Parakeet*, which explains her score of 20% on that task. By contrast, when responding to a high interest selection, such as *Sparky's Mystery Fortune* or *Anansi and the Talking Watermelon*, Elephantina responded with complete and multiple-sentences answers. Zoey

demonstrated similar types of responses. When responding to *Vampire Dentist* and *George Washington Carver*, she not only answered the questions thoroughly, she made personal connections in her responses. Comparatively, she answered briefly and often inaccurately when responding to the low-interest selections.

For the writing prompts, the 6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric was used, with the maximum score for each category being a 6. Scores for the category labeled Presentation were not given; therefore, the maximum score for each written response was 36 points. Writing prompts were similar for all reading passages in that students were asked, upon completing the reading and comprehension questions, to respond to a prompt by writing one paragraph. Their one paragraph response was handwritten and asked the students to make a connection to what they had read. The scores for High- and Low-Interest paragraphs were scored using the student version of the 6+1 Writing Traits (see Appendix B).

Table 5

Score on Each Section of the 6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubric-Low Interest

	Can I Vote?	A Late Night Chat With a Parakeet	Ancient Egypt	Goldilocks and the <u>Other</u> Three Bears
Ideas	3	3	2	3
Organization	2	3	2	3
Voice	3	3.5	2.5	2.5
Word Choice	3	3.5	2.5	2.5
Sentence Fluency	3	4	2	3
Conventions	4	4	2	2
Total	18	21	13	16

Across the board, scores for all categories fell in 2-4 point range. Both students struggled to organize and express their ideas, and neither student's voice could be detected clearly in the samples they provided. Zoey's writing samples showed a lack of fluency, due to the disorganization of her ideas as well as multiple spelling and grammatical errors. Elephantina's writing samples in this section were relatively error-free. However, she used simple sentence structure throughout and her word choice was basic. The table below is a summary of the writing scores from the high-interest reading passages. Again, writing prompts were similar for both low- and high-interest, in that they asked the students to write a one-paragraph response and were assessed using the same criteria-the student version of the 6+1 Writing Traits rubric.

Table 6

Score on Each Section of the 6 + 1 Writing Traits Rubric- High Interest

	Sparky's Mystery Fortune	Anansi and the Talking Watermelon	Vampire Dentist	George Washington Carver
Ideas	4	5	4	4
Organization	4	5	4	4
Voice	4	4.5	3.5	4.5
Word Choice	4	4	4	4
Sentence Fluency	4.5	4.5	5	5
Conventions	4.5	5	4.5	5
Total	25	28	24	26.5

As illustrated by the Tables 5 and 6, scores for the students' writing samples were higher when responding to the high-interest reading selections. They both made significant improvements in Ideas, Organization, and Word Choice. They were also both more precise with their conventions, showing a greater attention to punctuation. The high-interest writing samples were consistently longer and more detailed (Student Work Samples, 2012). Type sample from or provide photograph of paragraph.

During "high-interest" activities, student behavior was markedly different than during tasks categorized as "low interest." The table below outlines the behaviors I observed during the sessions. This data was gathered over two 90 minute sessions during which the students each read and responded to four reading passages. Each number represents the occurrence of the behavior over the two sessions during both high- and low-interest activities.

Table 7

Observations of Student Behavior During Reading and Writing Tasks

	Low Interest	High Interest
Used reading strategies	3	10
Eyes wandered	14	4
Asked on-topic questions	1	4
Asked off-topic question	1	0
Made on-task comments	1	5
Made off-task comments	6	1

Students showed signs of less engagement, such as looking around the room, staring blankly into space, sighing, and drawing in the margins of their papers (Observation and Student Work Samples, 2012). During tasks designated as "high interest," students used practiced

reading strategies (tracking with a marker, whisper reading). They also asked more questions and made comments about what they were reading during the process (Observation, 2012). Such behavior showed me that they were making connections to what they read and were interested enough to share those connections. Based on the findings of Moss & Hendershot (2012), self-selected texts increase the readers' positive feelings about reading. This was evident in my observation of these two students; although they had not chosen the specific text, they had input into the genre and topic of the selection. Diaz-Rubin's (1996) study also supports my observations in that he found that teachers must be aware of student interests in order to provide them with appropriate and effective materials. Overall, when students have input and interest in their reading selections, they show increased on-task behaviors and higher scores, thus improving their performance.

Student/Instructor Rapport Positively Impacts Student Performance.

The final theme that emerged from the literature and the data collected was that a positive relationship between the teacher and the student is an essential component in student success. To determine how students felt about me as their instructor, I developed an Instructor Feedback Form (see Appendix C). Students were asked to rate their feelings about me as an instructor, including my responsiveness to student needs, preparation, clarity, availability, and interest/enthusiasm. They were also given an opportunity to write additional comments. The following tables present the results of those questionnaires, the first of which shows Elephantina's answers.

Table 8

Instructor Feedback Questionnaire, Rating – Elephantina

Instructor Responsibilities	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The instructor was prepared for class					x
The instructor gave clear directions					x
The instruction made learning interesting				x	
The instructor demonstrated enthusiasm					x
Instructor Responsiveness to Student Needs	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The instructor was available and helpful					x
The instructor provided feedback on student work					x
The instructor respected students' ideas					x
The instructor showed concern for student learning					x

Elephantina's responses show that she felt that I was both responsible in carrying out my duties as an instructor and responsive to her needs as a student. She gave me the highest rating (Strongly Agree) in all categories except "Made Learning Interesting" (Agree). These responses show her level of comfort with me as an instructor and her belief that I was respectful of her and concerned for her learning. Table 9 shows Zoey's responses to the same questionnaire.

Table 9

Instructor Feedback Questionnaire, Rating – Zoey

Instructor Responsibilities	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The instructor was prepared for class					x
The instructor gave clear directions					x
The instruction made learning interesting					x
The instructor demonstrated enthusiasm					x
Instructor Responsiveness to Student Needs	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The instructor was available and helpful					x
The instructor provided feedback on student work					x
The instructor respected students' ideas					x
The instructor showed concern for student learning					x

Zoey's responses closely mirror Elephantina's and show that they both felt that I was responsive to their needs and available to help them. They both felt that I was respectful of their ideas and cared about their learning. The results of this portion of the questionnaire show that rapport has been established. In addition to the rating portion, there were statements to which the students were asked to respond Yes/No/I Don't Know and True/False. The two students answered identically and their responses are indicated in the table below.

Table 10

Instructor Feedback form – Yes/No and True/False

I felt like the instructor was interested in me as a person.	Yes
I was comfortable asking the instructor questions.	Yes
I would recommend this instructor to other students.	Yes
The instructor listened when I spoke.	Yes

I feel like I work harder when I like my teacher	True
My grades are better when I work with a teacher I like	True
I find it easier to ask for help when I trust my teacher	True
It is important to me to show my teacher what I can do	True

Based on the student responses above, there is a connection between the feelings a student has for the teacher and the effort the student expends. The student feels motivation to do well and finds it easier to ask for assistance when needed. There were an overwhelming number of articles that emphasized the importance of the teacher/student relationship when examining students' academic success. Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant (2012) found that among other factors, student-teacher relationships can be a predictor for student success. When there are so many other factors that influence a child's performance in school, it is important to build a positive relationship between student and teacher. Even though my study was not conducted in a school setting, there were academic expectations of the students. The data collected in this study has implications for students and educators. These implications will be further discussed in the next section of the paper.

Implications and Conclusions

By examining the results shown in this table and analyzing the work samples (Student Work Samples, 2012), it is clear that student interest in the work they are doing has a positive effect on their performance of the task. Not only were their scores higher across the board, but their behaviors reflected those of engaged learners (Observations, 2012). The students improved scores on reading comprehension questions and writing samples, and demonstrated a more focused work ethic during their sessions. By contrast, when reading designated low-interest passages, students' scores dropped, their writing became less detailed and accurate, and they demonstrated behaviors associated with boredom and lack of focus. Therefore, if teachers want to engage students and improve their performance, they must consider student interest when selecting materials. In addition, the implication here is that students value having their voices heard and are more likely to take ownership for their work when their input is a consideration.

In reviewing the feedback form, it is evident that the relationship between the instructor and the students is vital to student performance and success. The students felt that the instructor was approachable, prepared, and genuinely cared about their success. This response mirrors the research outlined in the literature review above, including the work of Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey (2012) and Pianta & Stuhlman (2004), both of whom conducted studies highlighting the value of the teacher/student relationship.

Lastly, the variability of students' interests is crucial for teachers to consider when planning student lessons and building their classroom environments. As human beings, change is something encountered often and is simply part of life. Therefore, what interests a student at one time of the year-or even day-is not necessarily an accurate indication of what that child will find interesting at a later point. There are many factors that influence a child during the day, and

teachers have control over a limited number of those factors. However, assessing student interests as an ongoing and reflective practice is one way of attempting to gain access to their thoughts and feelings. Teachers will encounter situations in which they have little choice over the reading material they must present to students. This is where the student-teacher relationship may compensate for the student's lack of interest. When possible, however, it is ideal to find materials that will engage and motivate students; learning what those topics and genres are is a crucial part of the teacher's job.

This study left me wondering what a similar action research project would look like in an actual classroom. Here, there students did not face any academic consequences if they failed to answer a question correctly or gave up on a writing assignment. Would those behaviors have occurred in the classroom setting, where grades, GPAs, and report cards are a factor? If given the chance to repeat the study, I would be curious to compare the results with a larger sample of students as well. Although the data was qualitative, both of the students in the study were well-behaved, motivated, and the same age, gender, and ability level. What would this study look like with academically- or emotionally-challenged students? Due to unforeseen circumstances, there were time constraints placed on this study that required the students to complete more work in one study session than I had originally planned. Would the timing have made a difference-would the students have performed differently had the selections been more spaced out? Conversely, since I met with the students once weekly, would their performance have changed had we met more often for a shorter time? Despite these questions, it is clear from the research shown here that student interest in the text and instructor effectiveness impacts student performance in tasks related to the text.

The research conducted for this study had several limitations. First, while students did show improvements in scores when reading high interest texts as compared to low-interest texts, the study spanned only three weeks. Each session lasted approximately 80 minutes. Given more time, the results could have been stronger and more conclusive. In addition, the study was done with two middle school students, both female. Therefore, the research explores only one age group and only one gender. A more effective study would encompass a broader range of ages and included both male and female participants. Finally, the setting of the study was in a room with many other adults and students. While the noise level was consistent from week to week, a more isolated and quiet setting would have eliminated distractions that may have impacted student performance. All of these limitations should be noted when looking at this study.

To conclude, this research examined the effect of student interest and instructor effectiveness on student performance. Student performance is a vital part of their school success, and teachers must consider how best to help students achieve that success. Determining what interests their students and therefore how to motivate them is a key component in any classroom if the end goal is student achievement and learning. Also, given that students interact with their teachers daily, the student/teacher relationship should not be undervalued or overlooked. Establishing rapport early on can lead to success and satisfaction for both the student and the teacher; it creates an environment in which student learning is relevant and meaningful.

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Appendix A

Student Interest Questionnaire

Student Interest Questionnaire

I prefer to read: FICTION NON-FICTION

Rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the *least interested*, 5 being the *most interested*.

~When I read fiction, I like to read stories about:



Adventure	1	2	3	4	5
Mystery	1	2	3	4	5
Fantasy	1	2	3	4	5
Sports	1	2	3	4	5
Humor	1	2	3	4	5
Other: _____	1	2	3	4	5

What is your MOST Favorite topic/subject to read about?

What is your LEAST favorite topic/subject to read about?

Appendix B

6+1 Writing Traits Rubric

MESA PUBLIC SCHOOLS						
Student Friendly Expository 6+1 Traits™ Writing Rubric						
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't have a main idea, purpose, or enough information about my topic. My supporting information is missing, unclear, or may not be correct. I didn't answer the questions the reader might have about my topic. My thoughts are all jumbled up together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think the reader can figure out the main idea or purpose. My supporting information is based on things I think I already know. I answer the obvious questions about my topic. I include a few supporting details that might be repeated or off topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I state the main idea or purpose. My supporting information is based on some research or personal experience. I answer some questions/arguments readers might have. I include some details using general information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I try to describe the main idea or purpose. My supporting information is based on research, reading, or personal experience and is beginning to be developed. I predict some important questions/arguments and try to answer them. I have some supporting details that are accurate and helpful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I clearly describe the main idea or purpose. My supporting information is based on research, reading, or personal experience and is fully developed. I predict almost all questions/arguments and answer them. Almost all my supporting details are accurate and helpful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I fully describe the main idea or purpose. My supporting information is based on research, reading, or personal experience and is fully expanded. I predict questions/arguments and answer them. My supporting details are accurate and helpful.
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have no introduction; my paper just starts. My ideas are not organized and seem jumbled. Transitions—what are those? I don't have a conclusion; my paper just stops. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My introduction is weak. My writing goes off in many directions. I have a couple of transitions but they don't connect ideas clearly. My conclusion is weak. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My introduction is there but may be common. (In this paper I will tell you about...) My writing has structure, but might not fit the purpose or format. I have some transitions and might connect ideas clearly. My conclusion is there but may be common. (Now you know all about...) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My introduction tries to grab the reader's interest. My writing has structure, and fits the purpose or format. I have transitions that help the reader see how ideas connect. My conclusion strengthens the main ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My introduction grabs the reader and gives clues of what is to come. My writing has structure that works well for the purpose or format. I have transitions that are well chosen and help the reader see how ideas connect. My conclusion effectively ends the essay/report and strengthens the main ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My introduction grabs the reader, sets a purpose, and gives clear clues of what is to come. My writing has structure that strengthens and showcases the purpose or format. Everything connects. All my ideas flow from beginning to end. My conclusion balances the introduction, strengthens the main ideas, and effectively ends the essay/report.
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm not confident about my topic and my writing doesn't have purpose. My writing is boring. I don't care if anyone understands my writing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have little confidence or enthusiasm about my topic. Most parts of my writing are boring. I'm not sure who my audience is and might not use the correct voice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have some confidence and enthusiasm about my topic. Some parts of my writing are boring. At times my voice is too formal or friendly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am becoming an authority and show enthusiasm about my topic. My writing is interesting and informative. I sometimes involve my audience by using an appropriate academic voice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am an authority and show enthusiasm about my topic throughout my paper. My writing is interesting, informative and keeps my reader's attention. My academic voice is appropriate and involves the audience in an interesting or lively way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am an authority and my enthusiasm for the topic is shown in a clear and purposeful way. My writing is interesting, informative, and powerful. My academic voice is appropriate and strongly involves the audience in an interesting and lively way.

Basic Skills/2007

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Word Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use words that do not seem to work. I use words I don't understand. I use the same words over and over. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use the first words that come to my mind. My words are sometimes confusing. My words do not paint a picture in the reader's mind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think a lot of my words are ordinary and everyone uses them. Some of my verbs are not strong or lively. I have too many unneeded words, so there is no clear picture in the reader's mind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use words that are clear and make sense. I have some strong verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. I still have some unneeded words or phrases to take out, but a picture is beginning to form in the reader's mind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use words that are clear, make sense, and are interesting. I have strong verbs, sensory words, and precise nouns. My words do paint a picture in the reader's mind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use powerful words that create a clear message. I have strong verbs, sensory words, and modifiers. My words paint a vivid picture in the reader's mind.
Sentence Fluency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is very hard to read aloud. I use mostly short, choppy sentences or long, rambling sentences. If I used dialogue, it does not make sense. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is a little hard to read aloud. I use some choppy sentences and run-on sentences. If I used dialogue, it doesn't sound like the way people talk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choppy sentences slow the reader down. I use some variety in sentence beginnings and lengths. If I used dialogue, it sounds like the way people talk some of the time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The writing is easy to read aloud. I use a variety of sentence beginnings and lengths. If I used dialogue, it sounds like the way people talk most of the time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The writing is easy to read aloud with expression. I use a variety of sentence beginnings and lengths, so the writing flows smoothly. If I used dialogue, it sounds like the way people talk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The writing has an easy flow and rhythm. I use a variety of sentence beginnings and lengths, so my writing flows smoothly and has bounce. If I used dialogue, it sounds like the way people talk and makes my writing stronger.
Conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have so many errors it's impossible to understand my writing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have so many errors it's difficult to understand my writing. I need to edit nearly every line. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have some errors, so it is difficult to understand my writing. Basics (e.g., periods, caps, simple spelling) are correct. I need to do a lot of editing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have a few errors, but they don't make my writing difficult to understand. I use a variety of conventions correctly (semicolons, ellipses, dashes, italics, etc.) I need to do some editing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use conventions correctly, so my writing is easy to understand. I use a variety of conventions to make an impression on the reader. I have a few errors to fix. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I use conventions effectively, so my writing is spectacular. I add style to my paper using a variety of conventions. I am ready to publish my writing.
Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I can't read my own handwriting. The font, size, and spacing make my paper impossible to read. I used visuals, they do not go with the ideas in my writing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is difficult to read my handwriting. The font, size, and spacing make my paper difficult to read. My visuals do not support my ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My letters slant in different ways. The font, size, and spacing make my paper difficult to read. Some of my visuals do not support my ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My handwriting has clearly formed letters and the spacing is just right. The font, size, and spacing I chose is OK. My visuals help the reader understand my ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most of my letters are formed correctly, with the same slant and spacing. The font, size, and spacing make my paper easy to read. Visuals are used throughout my writing and strengthen my ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All of my letters are formed correctly, with the same slant and spacing. The font, size, and spacing is eye-catching. Visuals are used throughout my writing and clearly strengthen my ideas.

Appendix C

Instructor Feedback Form

Name: _____

Date: _____

Instructor Evaluation

Instructor Responsibilities	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The instructor was prepared for class					
2. The instructor gave clear directions					
3. The instruction made learning interesting					
4. The instructor demonstrated enthusiasm					
Instructor Responsiveness to Student Needs	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
5. The instructor was available and helpful					
6. The instructor provided feedback on student work					
7. The instructor respected students' ideas					
8. The instructor showed concern for student learning					

Please circle "Y" for Yes, "N" for No, and "IDK" for I Don't Know.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|-----|
| 9. I felt like the instructor was interested in me as a person. | Y | N | IDK |
| 10. I was comfortable asking the instructor questions. | Y | N | IDK |
| 11. I would recommend this instructor to other students. | Y | N | IDK |
| 12. The instructor listened when I spoke. | Y | N | IDK |

Please circle either "True" or "False."

- | | | |
|--|------|-------|
| 13. I feel like I work harder when I like my teacher | True | False |
| 14. My grades are better when I work with a teacher I like | True | False |
| 15. I find it easier to ask for help when I trust my teacher | True | False |
| 16. It is important to me to show my teacher what I can do | True | False |