"What's the Catch?"

PROVIDING READING CHOICE IN A HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

Denise N. Morgan & Christopher W. Wagner

Providing choice to high school readers can invigorate their passion for reading.

As a teacher and a teacher educator, we believe vital discussions occur across the country in countless English departments and over the drone of copiers in teacher workrooms. How do educators compete in a world where texting, Facebook, and YouTube videos appear more enticing than a yellowed, battered copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, let alone anything that ol' Will from across the pond didn't write on Twitter? How do we help students see that for every technological distraction in the world, we grow closer to putting *Fahrenheit 451*'s book-burning firefighter, Guy Montag, on the unemployment list?

As a result, many students do not read to *enjoy* a story. They figure out exactly how many pages they can skim on the bus ride to school or the trustworthiness of the Wikipedia page for the day's required chapters. As a result, educators must find new ways to "catch" students at not reading. These come in the form of study guides, quizzes, and tests that stress the minute details of a story

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so that we can identify the readers and nonreaders alike. We focus less on the process and reward of reading and more on the three omens Julius Caesar mentions in Act II. What would it take to help bring students back to the reward of reading for reading's sake?

Chris, a high school teacher, implemented a three-week choice reading unit with his sophomores to address this problem. Prior to this implementation, Denise, a university researcher, worked with Chris's high school faculty to discuss choice reading. Denise collaborated with Chris, meeting and problem solving with him while he implemented this unit. Could a turn from Chris's more traditional way of teaching, one he described as "introduce a novel in an attention-grabbing way, distribute reading calendars, and assess students through a combination of group chats, quizzes, and handouts," address the lack of engagement he saw in his students?

We wanted to investigate how offering reading choice might better support students' reading and determine the instructional decisions that support teaching students who are reading multiple books rather than a core novel. The purpose of this article is to describe how one high school teacher implemented a choice reading unit, specifically to examine the instructional decisions and adjustments he made to teach in this manner.

The Benefits of Choice

The argument to offer student choice in their reading materials is not new. Many researchers have argued for reading choice for a variety of reasons, such as that it fosters motivation and engagement with reading (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001), supports readers who find reading difficult (Allington, 2012; Gallagher, 2009; Ivey & Johnston, 2011) and improves performance on standardized reading tests (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Ivey & Johnston, 2011).

In *Reading Next*, Biancarosa and Snow (2006) highlighted the link between reading choice and student motivation and engagement. They note, however:

> One of the easiest ways to build some choice into the students' school day is to incorporate independent reading time in which they can read whatever they choose. Yet this piece of the curriculum is often dropped after the primary grades. (p. 16)

Choice allows for student control (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and is an important factor in motivating engagement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). With choice come opportunities for students to be in the "flow" of their reading experiences, to be fully engaged in the task at hand when reading a text with the right skill and challenge level (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

For example, when examining middle grade students' voluntary magazine reading, Gabriel, Allington, and Billen (2012) found "that students will choose to conquer and enjoy texts that are challenging by any measure (sentence length, complexity, frequency of unfamiliar words, assumed background knowledge, etc.) when they have the background knowledge, vocabulary, and interest" (p. 54). Bomer (2011) noted that "motivation, efficacy, and energy for the task" increase when choice is offered (p. 80). Choice can be a positive, driving force for engagement with adolescent readers.

In a recent study, Ivey and Johnston (2011) found that a change in teacher instruction toward higher student engagement—that is, moving from whole-class assigned reading to students' self-selected readings—benefitted students in many ways. Specifically, offering student choice, time, and good books led to increased student engagement, a deeper sense of identity, a developed sense of agency, and higher state test scores. In addition, because students

explored and gravitated toward "edgy" young adult literature, they developed their social imagination, helping them develop empathy for characters, situations, and other people. Ivey and Johnston advocated that teachers and researchers continue to "forefront student engagement" (p. 16).

And yet, offering student choice of reading materials is not as widespread as would be expected for a teaching practice that offers both personal and instructional benefits. In middle school and beyond, students demonstrate a decrease in reading motivation that is due to instructional practices (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994) and kinds of reading materials available (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Students are often instructed in a whole-group setting with texts chosen *for* them rather than *by* them.

According to the National Endowment for the Arts (2007), "Less than one-third of 13-year-olds are daily readers" and "the percentage of 17-year-olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled over a 20-year period" (p. 7). Despite these findings, not all teachers, school districts, or school boards are ready to embrace definitive changes in instruction. The teachers in Ivey and Johnston's study implemented these changes within a middle school setting, with participation by all teachers in the particular school. Few studies explore the role of choice within a high school setting. One reason may be that the "traditional" high school mindset focuses on teaching particular books rather than particular ways to think about texts (Bomer, 2011; Gallagher, 2009).

Central to this traditional mindset is teachers' privileging of canonical texts, an instructional decision that drastically limits the choices students are offered as readers (Fisher & Ivey, 2007). To combat this, advocates promote free voluntary reading (FVR) or sustained silent reading (SSR), terms used interchangeably (Krashen, 2000). Krashen (2000) defined FVR as "reading what you want to read, with no book reports, no questions at the end of the chapter, and not having to finish the book if you don't want to" (p. vii).

High school teachers can turn to literature to help them consider how SSR can fit into their classroom instruction (e.g., Fisher, 2004; Lee, 2011; Pilgreen, 2000). The accounts, however, devoted a short period (10–15 minutes) in class for SSR. In this way, students may or may not finish their book of choice, for they are free to stop constantly and start new texts. Also, teachers often read themselves and thus are possibly less able to note fully students' engagement

with their reading. With little information available to guide how Chris could structure this unit, he set out to explore how this approach could work in his classroom.

School and Classroom Context

Chris's high school had 1,181 students across the following ethnic identities: 92.8% Caucasian; 2.1% African American; 2% Hispanic; less than 2% Asian/ Pacific Islander; and less than 2% multiracial. Sixteen percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. Chris's two classes of 57 sophomores were almost split evenly by gender (28 males, 29 females).

In Chris's class, 14 students had Individualized Education Plans (IEP) for English, with accommodations based on their reading abilities. Ten students were reading at least one grade below level. Accommodations ranged from extended time on assigned reading to test readers. Within this mix were eight students who took Honors English freshman year but decided not to remain on the honors track and several others who could have been on an honors track. The remaining students represented a range of abilities. To Chris, teaching this wide range of students was difficult. He described his dilemma:

> I found I was either simplifying a lesson to reach the lower learners or shooting over the heads of those students in order to challenge more advanced readers. I needed something that could allow a student who is reading below grade level the chance to still apply the concepts we were learning without feeling overwhelmed, and those who were more advanced could select something more challenging.

In a beginning-of-the-year reading survey of his students, only 23 had a library card, 29 indicated they had access to books at home, and 41 had read fewer than two books for pleasure within the last school year.

Gathering Student Feedback

Chris outlined his proposal on the smartboard:

> Imagine an English class where you get to pick what you read. It doesn't matter if you want to read Harry Potter or an autobiography on your favorite athlete. YOU get to pick. You'd still have to learn concepts like point of view and voice, but instead of basing them on a book we read as a class, they will apply to your book.

> Instead of handouts, you will have a one-on-one conference with me to discuss your book. Your only homework every night would be to read for 30 minutes and you would read in class. What will be some benefits of this? What will be some drawbacks? Would you like a classroom like this?

Students responded in their journals. During the sharing, Chris encountered various opinions, from the desire to get under way ("Can we start tomorrow?") to assorted concerns. A range of students' comments include the following:

> I honestly think this is an amazing idea because if everyone had to pick what they would read, they would actually read. Some drawbacks would be that you wouldn't be able to tell if they were reading or not. I would love a class like this.

> I like the self-selected reading better because I get to read what I want to. Also I can read at my own pace and don't have to worry about falling behind in the book. The strengths are that we better understand our books. Also we actually want to read them. The weaknesses were that some may say they're reading but aren't and there are no quizzes so we wouldn't know if they were reading or not.

> I think that if we read books that we wanted, I would be much happier. I would probably read larger books than the stuff we read as a class.
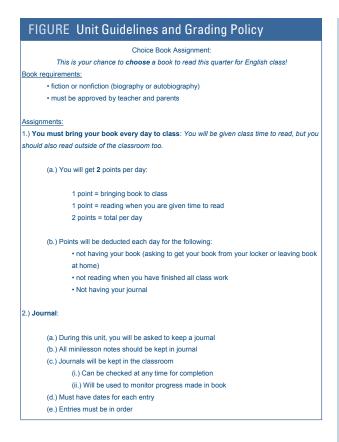
> Yes, this would be the best idea ever in an English class. People would probably actually read the book… So, wait, are we actually going to do this?

During the discussion, students asked many questions ("We can read what we want?" "We can put it back if we don't like it?"). And repeatedly, in some form, students asked, "What's the catch?" To many students the idea of reading a choice book, with the focus more on the reading than on the assessments, caused them to search for a hidden trap. Even though some students expressed concern, many were intrigued, and Chris move forward.

Instructional Decisions

Chris wanted a structure that allowed ample time for students to read their own books but still left time for instruction and assessment. Chris decided to follow a Reading Workshop format (Atwell, 2007). He created

FIGURE Unit Guidelines and Grading Policy

Choice Book Assignment:

*This is your chance to **choose** a book to read this quarter for English class!*

Book requirements:

- • fiction or nonfiction (biography or autobiography)
- • must be approved by teacher and parents

Assignments:

1.) **You must bring your book every day to class**: *You will be given class time to read, but you should also read outside of the classroom too.*

    (a.) You will get **2** points per day:

        1 point = bringing book to class
        1 point = reading when you are given time to read
        2 points = total per day

    (b.) Points will be deducted each day for the following:
        • not having your book (asking to get your book from your locker or leaving book at home)
        • not reading when you have finished all class work
        • Not having your journal

2.) **Journal**:

    (a.) During this unit, you will be asked to keep a journal
    (b.) All minilesson notes should be kept in journal
    (c.) Journals will be kept in the classroom
        (i.) Can be checked at any time for completion
        (ii.) Will be used to monitor progress made in book
    (d.) Must have dates for each entry
    (e.) Entries must be in order

a handout outlining the guidelines, expectations, and grading policy for this unit (See Figure).

At the heart of this unit was a student's ability to select a choice book. Though many students had access to books from their personal collections or public library, Chris realized the necessity of having books in his classroom so that if hesitant readers could not find something of interest on their own or became bored with a book, Chris could recommend something immediately.

Chris informed the students that they would act as their own librarians. They would talk about the TV shows, movies, video games, and books they loved and hated, and from there they would recommend book titles to one another that they thought would fit those interests. A student who was a history buff and a former honor student borrowed *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. A student who was a big fan of police procedurals and scary movies borrowed a James Patterson novel. Before the unit began, every student had selected a book.

Minilessons and Journals

Chris taught through minilessons, short 10- to 15-minute lessons about a concept (Atwell, 2007).

During minilessons, students were asked to keep journals to take notes and make connections to their reading. Journals were graded weekly, with Chris providing feedback or further corrections if needed. Chris mapped out concepts aligned with state standards to teach during the unit. Chris taught and assessed students on the following concepts:

- • Point of View
- • Conflict
- • Plot
- • Direct/Indirect Characterization
- • Mood/Tone
- • Flashback/Foreshadow
- • Irony

Following each minilesson, students read and Chris conferred with students. Chris worked to make connections between the minilesson content and his students' personal books. For example, during a minilesson on Connotation vs. Denotation, his students discussed and defined both terms. Students compared words such as *tired* and *exhausted* and discussed which had a stronger connotation. Then they saw that the dictionary definitions, their denotations, were similar.

Students were asked to identify three words on their current page and list them in their journal. Beside each word they wrote another word with the same denotation but perhaps a different connotation. They reflected on why the author selected that particular word. They wrote in their journal contemplating if the word was significant to the plot or revealed something significant about the character that used it.

Chris conferred with students as they read, asking them probing questions regarding the concept and their journal entry. For the students who typically struggled, he was able to check to see if they understood the concept. For example, Chris was able to ask Brian (student names are pseudonyms) about his examples. Brian's entry showed he struggled with the concept that a word could have both a connotation and denotation. He was able to give the connotation for a word in his passage, but initially used the same definition for the denotation.

For his upper-level learners, Chris nudged them toward deeper thinking. For example, with David, they discussed how the author's use of words that have

a darker connotation gave the reader a hint there had been a shift in the narrator's disposition. On Fridays, Chris used the period to catch up anyone who had missed a day or to work more closely with students who needed additional guidance. Fridays became weekly time when he could work with students individually or in small groups.

Conferring

Instead of giving quizzes or tests, Chris conferred with individual students. He explained,

> It is hard to play the fake reading game when you have to talk to someone face-to-face. With time gained from not guiding them through *my* interpretation of the text, I had time to actually talk to with students.

It was through conferring that Chris could both talk to students about their books and see their application of the minilesson. Guided by the idea that the language teachers use with students is a "most powerful tool" (Johnston, Ivey, & Faulkner, 2011, p. 233), Chris was mindful of his stance when conferring. He knew his talk could help students develop a sense of agency about their reading and thinking about the book. By asking them what they "noticed" or how they enjoyed their book, he allowed students to feel like this was a "conversation," not an "interrogation" (p. 235). He approached his students as a fellow reader and wanted them to do the same, to engage in literate conversations about their reading.

At the same time, Chris provided instruction, scaffolding students' understandings in their conversations. He provided target feedback, essential for his students' growth. He balanced having reader-to-reader conversations along with ensuring that students understood how certain literary elements could deepen their understanding of the text.

Chris wheeled a stool from student to student when conferring. He took notes on a chart that included space for each student's book title, current page, and concept discussed during the conference. Chris struggled with time when conferring, averaging about two minutes per conference, wanting to have a helpful conversation with students but also trying to see as many students as possible.

At first, Chris's students wanted to merely summarize what they read. Rather than applying the day's concept, they retold their story. To counter this tendency, he posed questions such as "What's been the best scene you've read since we last conferred?" or "I know you said last time that you thought you'd hit a slow part of the book. Has it picked up?" He often referred to previous conversations to guide current ones.

Chris then posed questions connected to the minilesson. After a lesson on mood and tone, he asked, "What words can you find that the author uses to show us mood of the piece?" or "Can you describe a passage or plot element that helped set the tone of the piece?" He followed up with "Why do you think the author chose that tone for the book? Does it help the book's purpose or hurt it?" If the students understood the concept quickly, he used the remaining moments of the conference to explore their books further.

Chris felt no two conferences were ever the same. In some cases he struggled to support students in making sense of the minilesson content, often rewording a question or providing more support to help students see links from the lesson to their readings. Several students who struggled with reading expressed an appreciation for conferring because it allowed them to talk through their responses as opposed to taking a quiz. They had the comfort of their book in hand and the chance to explain further.

Chris used a clipboard while conferring. At first, he tried to take copious notes. For example, conferring with Lance on *The Book Thief* and a minilesson on mood vs. tone, he wrote, "Gets mood and tone as a concept. Not sure if he has read enough to get tone of book yet. Able to pull words for mood and accurately address them." His notes for Nick read, "Able to understand purpose of setting in novel, clear understanding of the concept." For Kate, he wrote, "Could explain concept of setting, connection to novel was surface level, recheck." And for Brian, he noted, "Unable to give basic definition for setting, but upon coaching was able to describe in novel, recheck on next conference."

Chris felt he was spending too much time writing rather than looking students in the eye. Chris developed a coding system to use with each conference in addition to jotting quick notes to capture important information. He coded conferences in the following way:

- 5—Competent answers that reveal thorough reading and connection of the concept
- 3—Surface-level comprehension of the text and attempted connection of the concept

- 1—Poorly supported answers and lack of connection of the concept
- 0—Demonstrates lack of reading and connection of the concept

He found he could gather information on a student's level of demonstrated understanding while also providing information about next steps. For example, after conferring with Jessica he noted a "3—missed tone." This reminded him to work with Jessica on clarifying tone at her next conference.

Using this new coding system allowed him to determine the necessity to reexamine a certain topic with the class. When over half the students in the second-period class had codes in the 1 and 3 range, Chris knew he needed a follow-up lesson. This clarification was not necessary for the first-period class. Chris found students became more comfortable with and better prepared for conferences as the unit progressed. Students were more able to give support to their claims and highlight those concepts. His scores and notes allowed him to examine patterns in his students' understanding quickly and take action.

In reflecting on his conferring experience, he wrote,

> Perhaps the best thing I took away from conferring was getting to know my students better. I learned Katie was a hopeless romantic who loved a story where the girl is forced to choose between two beaus. Nick enjoyed war stories told from the perspective of the soldier because he currently had a cousin serving our country. I would never have known that through literary analysis. I gained more than their understanding of denotation and connotation, I learned who they were as young adults. I talked with my students for longer than 5 seconds as I greeted them daily at the door. I know them better as human beings now that I've taken the time to give them choice, while also giving them the attention they deserved.

Differentiating Instruction

In the beginning, not every reader was onboard. Some readers would "fake read" or have a book open at their desks and turn pages every so often. These students were quickly "discovered" upon conferencing. For example, one student selected a book he had read in middle school. Instead of rereading it, it appeared he told Chris about it from his previous reading. So when Chris asked him, "Now that you're in high school, what have you noticed has changed about how you see the book since the last time you read it?" the student admitted he hadn't reread it. Chris suggested reading *The Knife of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness, and the student finished this book.

Of the 54 students, Chris found four students initially reluctant to embrace reading. In each case, he found the reluctance a matter of the wrong book selection. A trial and error process found the right balance of high interest and appropriate reading level for these students. Once students found a book that matched their interests and ability levels, Chris no longer struggled to coax them to read, and they were better able to apply minilesson concepts to their books.

For struggling readers, the fact that no "book report" was due at the end of the project allowed them to select longer, more complex works. For strong readers, opportunity existed to read several books in the time it may have taken their peers to complete only one novel. Students who could easily get through a high school–level book were often given suggestions of more adult contemporary novels that would stretch their abilities yet still hold their focus. This allowed them to grow as readers without discouraging lower-level readers.

Overall, Chris's students read 81 books, with 22 of his 51 students reading more than one book during the unit. The students spoke positively about their experiences. For some, this opportunity provided them with time to read, something that was challenging to find within the confines of their busy lives. Kelsey commented, "If I had to rate this idea, I'd give it a 10, because I honestly love to read, but I never have time to just pickup a book." Noah commented on appreciating the "privilege" of having time to read during class, because he doesn't always read at home. Students have busy lives outside the classroom. Teachers can hope students read at home, but that simply is not always the case. To ensure students read on a regular basis, time needs to be allocated for it in class.

How Students Responded

Initially opposed to this choice unit, David found it helped him rediscover reading. In the beginning he wrote, "This class wouldn't work for me. For one I wouldn't know what book to read. Also it would bother me how many kids would cheat the system by finding a good Sparknotes page and getting the

corresponding book." After the choice unit, he felt the experience was "very effective in capturing my attention," allowing him to "appreciate books" again, something he had "lost" before. He said:

> I like just reading which I haven't done a lot since all the assigned books I had to read the last few years. This more relaxed style is really nice. I have nothing to criticize about it. My book is very interesting and captivating making me look forward to this class.

Veronica's before and after responses represent some of the dilemmas teachers face when thinking about adding choice in their teaching. Initially, Veronica wrote:

> This is an interesting idea, my friend told me about this yesterday, so I've already been thinking about it a lot. I love the idea of being able to read whatever I want and that would probably get more kids to actually read. But, I would miss group discussions and lit circles… and being forced to read a book opened my eyes more, because we read books in class that I normally wouldn't just pick up and start reading. And I like that because it forces me to read some really great books. Also, looking into the future, parents wouldn't be able to say to their kids "Oh, I remember when I read that book in school." I always found it to be so exciting when I'm reading a book my mom, dad or even big sister read when they were in school. I always love discussing it with them.

In the end, some of Veronica's fears were put to rest as she reflected:

> At first I didn't like the idea of everyone reading a different book…but now that I've been doing it and reading. I love it!…I loved my book. It was so amazing and if I never had to find a book for this project, I would never have discovered this book. I also liked my second book that I started outside of school a while back and was able to finish the last bit in class. It was sort of hard to get through because it was more of an adult book so it had a lot of big words, but I used our reading tips to get by.

Veronica also expressed a concern that many high school teachers across the nation often hold. She wrote, "Being able to pick my own book keeps me in my comfort zone of reading…but when a book is chosen for me it forces me to explore outside and leave my comfort zone." Chris combated this by encouraging stronger readers to challenge themselves, often recommending a higher-caliber book. At the same time, Marc, like many other students, realized through this experience that his "interest in books still exists" even though it had "subsided with the assigning of books of polar interest to me in school."

Mitch revealed to Chris that he had never read a book. He got by with Google and barely passing grades on quizzes. Initially, Mitch struggled to get into a book. Chris worked with him to find the right book, and he coached Mitch as he tried to "fake read" during early conferences. After realizing Chris was persistent, Mitch finally settled into a book. Several months later, Mitch sent Chris a Facebook message along with a picture of him in a bookstore, holding another book by the same author that he was about to purchase.

Perhaps most telling were the grades. Based on journals, conferences, and an assessment that checked their ability to apply the concepts, Chris's students finished the unit with 46 As, 9 Bs, and 2 Cs. Of the 14 students on IEPs, 13 ended up with an A or B, with improved performance from previous assessments.

Discussion

Chris found that choice did offer his students more control over their reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and they were more engaged (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Although the middle school teachers in Ivey and Johnston's (2011) study changed their instructional practices entirely, Chris did not do that. As a high school English teacher, he believed in having students read some canonical literature, but he did not want that to be *all* they read.

Chris explored the tension between helping students become more active readers and teaching them concepts they needed to grow as readers. Left with little research literature to guide him as a high school teacher, he designed a unit grounded in choice based on trial and adjustment. He found students could apply minilesson concepts to their own books. In fact, he realized that unlike class discussions, students could not hide behind other readers by not participating in the discussion. They had to seek out those concepts in their own texts. Within this choice unit, Chris had to negotiate student concerns over "missing out" on whole-group discussions or helping students find the right book to stay engaged. This took time and outside effort on Chris's part.

Students often are less motivated to read because of teachers' instructional practices (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and the book they are asked to read (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). By changing his instructional practice, he faced his fear of "not getting it all covered." He knew that by devoting time to choice reading, something had to go. Chris let go of short stories and novels that did not need as much teacher support, affording him time to implement this unit.

Chris's experiences were limited in that this was a short-term unit with sophomores, but his experiences contribute to the conversation about choice and the ways teachers can structure choice within high school settings. Although an examination of student performance on high-stakes assessments were beyond the scope of our investigation, as Ivey and Johnston (2011) found, choice in reading materials has the potential to positively affect high-stakes assessments. This finding is encouraging to fellow educators interested in investigating the role choice can play in their curricula.

In the end, Chris felt he was able to teach in such a way that students could apply these concepts to their own books, and he witnessed students becoming more engaged with their reading. Chris implemented this unit during the second quarter and continued to implement opportunities for choice during the remainder of the year while also balancing more canonical works. This renewed focus on the pleasure and reward of reading for its own sake extended beyond the walls of English classrooms. Teachers in different subject areas commented on the positive change they saw in students and the appearance of books in their classrooms, along with having to address students "sneaking" in reading during their classes.

Three weeks is a small period for implementation, but in that time Chris was able to help many of his students get back to reading while finding a way to teach literary elements. Fellow English teachers in his department also began offering some choice to students throughout the year. As the new school year began, Chris's students still messaged via Facebook or tweeted to ask for "the next book" they should read. It became a melding of the two worlds, but one in which the potential technological distractions were used to further reading interactions. And Chris's students learned that rediscovering reading by choosing good books turned out to be the only catch.

Note

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Take Action
STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

✓ Consider your students' reading abilities and interests and gather a wide range of books to meet their varied needs.

✓ Choose minilesson topics that students can apply to their own texts.

✓ Create a note-taking system that allows you to keep track of students with whom you have conferred.

✓ Prepare to witness students falling back in love with reading.

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More to Explore
CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

IRA BOOKS

- *R⁵ in Your Classroom: A Guide to Differentiating Independent Reading and Developing Avid Readers* by Michelle J. Kelley and Nicki Clausen-Grace

- *Revisiting Silent Reading: New Directions for Teachers and Researchers* edited by Elfrieda H. Hiebert and D. Ray Reutzel

ONLINE RESOURCE

- Penny Kittle's Reading 2011 video on the importance of book choice for high school students: www.pennykittle.net/index.php?page=reading-2011