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# AN EVALUATION STUDY OF FIFTH-GRADE INDEPENDENT READING AND READING ACHIEVEMENT

Kari Allen
*Southeastern University - Lakeland*

# An Evaluation Study of Fifth-Grade Independent Reading and Reading Achievement

by

Kari Allen

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Dr. Patty LeBlanc, Ph.D. Committee Chair

Dr. Thomas Gollery, Ed.D. Committee Member

Dr. Bette Heins, Ph.D. Committee Member

Dr. James Anderson, Ph.D. Dean, Southeastern University

# Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, James Allen, and daughters, Sydney and Hadley, who were so patient with me while I spent hours upon hours at my computer over the last three years. Although I know it was difficult at times, they loved and supported me to the end. I would also like to dedicate this work to my grandmother in heaven, Barbara James, whose love, support, and encouragement inspired me to follow my heart and pursue my passion for becoming an educator.

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I am honored to have been blessed with a dissertation committee that was in every way perfectly selected by God, and to Him I give thanks for opening doors and lighting the path that led me to this incredible accomplishment.

## ABSTRACT

Independent reading has been implemented in elementary classrooms for decades. However, what independent reading looks like, teacher expectations related to it, and student attitudes toward it differ greatly depending on the individual classroom. Increasing demands on teachers to improve student achievement has resulted in more time spent in teacher-directed instruction and teacher-selected text, and less time for students to read self-selected, engaging text, resulting in lack of interest and purpose for reading (Gran & DeVoogd, 2008). Effective implementation of independent reading is necessary to improve student achievement, increase reader stamina, and build positive attitudes toward reading in general (Lee, 2011). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom on reading achievement of fifth-grade students. The research used an experimental pre-test/post-test control group design. Quantitative data were compiled using paired composite scale scores for fourth- and fifth-grade students on the Florida Standards Assessment in English Language Arts (FSA ELA). Fourth-grade FSA ELA composite scale scores served as the reading pre-test, and fifth-grade FSA ELA composite scale scores served as the reading post-test. Two t-tests of independent samples were conducted to compare differences between the experimental and comparison groups on pre- and post-test scale scores on the FSA ELA. Although the differences between the experimental and control groups were not significant, ancillary analyses within the experimental group uncovered significant reading results related to gender, ethnicity, and qualification for free or reduced lunch. In addition, qualitative results within the experimental group identified the need for future research related to independent reading in the classroom and its impact on student achievement.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Introduction

Independent reading in the classroom allows students opportunities to spend time reading self-selected books at their independent reading levels (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005). However, some teachers perceive independent reading as a waste of time, eliminating it completely (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). In an era in which standardized assessments require students to read complex text for extended periods of time, teachers should provide opportunities for students to read independently in books that interest them as well as to read grade level text in order to build stamina and reading ability necessary for success (Sanden, 2014). Identifying key factors contributing to the success of independent reading are necessary to developing an effective independent reading environment (Sanden, 2014). According to research, factors that influence independent reading include student engagement, accountability, reading environment, access to a variety of text, time to read, and consideration of student, teacher, and parent attitudes toward reading (Allington, 2012; Clausen-Grace & Kelley, 2007; Garan & DeVoogd, 2008; Hall, Hedrick, & Williams, 2014; Hiebert, 2014; Reutzel & Juth, 2014; and Sanden, 2012).

Reutzel & Juth (2014) identified five major concerns related to independent reading and student engagement that should be addressed by classroom teachers: 1) how students self-select reading materials--if students are not properly taught to select text based on interest and ability, their level of engagement will be low; 2) stamina and time on task – teachers must allocate time for independent reading in order to build stamina for reading; 3) accountability – in order to make sure students are spending time reading, there should be an accountability measure, such as a reading log 4) student talk about text – when students know there is an expectation to discuss what they are reading with their peers or teachers, they have a purpose for reading and will

employ effective reading strategies; and 5) teacher engagement – by modeling her own enthusiasm and love of reading and reading aloud and discussing books with students, the teacher creates an engaging reading environment for the students. Highly engaged readers have the ability to self-select text, read for extended periods of time, self-regulate, and maintain focus throughout independent reading (Reutzel & Juth, 2014). Readers who are highly engaged actively interact with text, seeking to understand what they are reading, resulting in higher levels of reading achievement (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009).

Teachers have the important task of helping students learn to recognize the behaviors that support or detract from their learning (Hall, Hedrick, & Williams, 2014). Students with little reading experience rely on the teacher to provide them with the necessary tools for developing a positive attitude toward reading (Reis, et al., 2008). The teacher serves as a mentor and role model in fostering a love for reading the student may not otherwise develop. Students who participate in an effective independent reading environment develop greater enjoyment for reading, are more involved in their reading, and read more widely, resulting in increased reading achievement (Williams, Hall, Hedrick, Lamkin, & Abendroth, 2013).

Reutzel & Juth (2014) identified four evidence-based components that support silent reading fluency development: allocated practice time, which is foundational to developing elementary students' reading fluency; a supportive classroom environment, including an organized classroom library, quiet space, and comfortable seating for multiple students; engaged reading, which allows student choice of reading materials and opportunities for conferring, interacting with the teacher, and parental involvement; and teacher scaffolds and instruction, because explicit instruction is effective in helping students spend independent reading time wisely. The successful implementation of an effective independent reading block should display

all of these components. Developing independent reading needs to become a habit, formed over an extended period of time, and continued grade after grade in school (Padak & Rasinski, 2007). Teachers who are willing to invest time on independent reading across grade levels will see gains not only in reading achievement, but also in reading attitude (Tse et al., 2013).

Teachers who are willing to embrace independent reading in the classroom support the independence of their students, focus on reading growth, and commit to student-centered practices (Sanden, 2014). In these classrooms, independent reading is not viewed as supplemental, but as an integral part of reading instruction (Sanden, 2014). A supportive independent reading environment results in students' reading because they look forward to it, not as an act of obedience (Williams et al., 2013).

Kelley & Clausen-Grace (2009) identify eight steps for teachers to follow in creating an effective independent reading environment: 1) clearly communicate the goals and expectations for independent reading, 2) support student reading so that students know reading time is highly valued, 3) pay attention to students who have issues with engagement, 4) build a library around student interests, 5) build a predictable structure for daily independent reading, 6) develop tasks related to independent reading for accountability, 7) use independent reading time as an opportunity to reinforce comprehension, and 8) model a love for reading so that students will follow suit. Providing a structured independent reading experience and modeling efficient reading results in the development of good independent reading habits (Hiebert, 2014). Readers who develop good independent reading habits have good attitudes toward reading, which may enhance reading achievement (Tse et al., 2013). The potential for growth in reading ability through structured independent reading practice is worth serious consideration. Children are born with a range of potential reading trajectories, and independent reading contributes to

stronger reading development, allowing students to reach their fullest potential in reading (Harlaar, Deater-Deckart, Thompson, DeThorne, & Petrill, 2011).

Enlisting the support of school administrators, parents, and community members increases opportunities to create a positive independent reading experience for students. Understanding that parent attitudes toward reading impact student attitudes toward reading, teachers should communicate the importance of independent reading at home, making sure students have access to text by sending books home when needed (Tse et al., 2013). In addition, enlisting the help of community volunteers to spend time reading with students, either during or after school, can further support positive attitudes toward reading (Tse et al., 2013). As mentioned previously, the goal is to develop a positive, engaging reading experience; gaining the support of adults both in and out of school can help provide that experience.

Independent reading is an opportunity for students to spend time quietly in books of their own choice, and teachers have a responsibility to effectively develop an environment that promotes student enjoyment for reading. In order to do so, teachers must establish a daily independent reading routine with clear expectations and goals, provide a classroom library containing books that interest their students and meet student reading levels, hold students accountable for their reading through reading logs, reading responses, or some other means of record, and model a positive attitude toward all aspects of reading. Students who have opportunities to read build a repertoire of reading skills and strategies that will increase comprehension and stamina when taking standardized assessments. Increased comprehension and stamina will result in higher rates of student achievement, not only when taking standardized assessments, but in preparation for accomplishing college and career-related tasks with proficiency (Reis et al., 2008). Although many teachers are hesitant to allow students

independent time for reading, the potential for exponential growth in literacy achievement by establishing an effective independent reading environment in the classroom is well worth the risk. This study examined the effects of scheduled, daily independent reading in the classroom on fifth-grade student reading achievement.

**Background of the Study**

Fifth-grade students in a southwestern Florida school district had struggled to meet achievement expectations on the state-standardized assessments in reading for multiple years, primarily because students were unable to read grade-level text and did not have the stamina to maintain momentum for the required 80-minute test sessions.

When children were given time to absorb themselves in books they could read with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension, significant differences in student engagement and achievement in reading were observed (DeWitt & Serravallo, 2014). Even though research provided evidence of the benefits of independent reading in the classroom, many teachers in the district were still hesitant to implement a consistent independent reading program because the demands of standards-based instruction and assessments were so high. Like the teachers in Serravallo's study (2015), teachers simply did not know how to fit it into their daily schedules.

This quantitative pre-test/post-test research study was designed to evaluate the impact of 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom on fifth-grade students' reading achievement at a high need, low socioeconomic elementary school in southwestern Florida. Administrators at the school recognized that many students were reading one or more grades below grade level and, as a result, performed poorly on district and state assessments. Based on this need, the school opted school-wide – kindergarten through fifth-grade - to pilot the Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA) and 100 Book Challenge®, programs developed

by the American Reading Company to help foster independent reading and to increase student achievement in reading.

Professional development by American Reading Company was offered at the end of the 2015-16 school year so that teachers could begin using the program during Summer Bridge, a six-week program of additional instruction offered to elementary students entering first- through fifth-grade who had been identified as struggling readers. At the beginning of the school year, additional IRLA training and support was offered so that all teachers would be prepared to use the program with fidelity at the beginning of school. Each student was assessed by a team of faculty and classroom teachers in order to determine independent reading level within the first month of school, and classroom libraries were supplied with books correlated to the reading levels of students. In addition to piloting the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge®, the school also identified two 30-minute blocks during the school day for opportunities to read independently. The administrators expected that implementation of the program would result in increased stamina, engagement, and overall academic success.

This study focused on students who had attended the same school for both fourth- and fifth-grade and who had state assessment data for both years. Student learning gains for fifth-grade had been some of the lowest in the district. This group was thus considered to have the highest potential for growth. Classroom teachers were expected to implement the IRLA program with fidelity, and school administrators monitored progress through: 1) classroom observations and walkthroughs; 2) the online component of IRLA, SchoolPace, used to track reading growth across the school year; and comparison of Florida Standards Assessment in English Language Arts (FSA ELA) scores for both the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years.

Results of this study have the potential to initiate changes in teachers', students', and parents' mindsets regarding the importance of designated independent reading time in the classroom. This research also has the opportunity to increase student literacy and achievement by increasing stamina and reader engagement, which are directly related to time spent reading independently.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom on reading achievement of fifth-grade students. FSA ELA composite achievement scale scores of students who attended the same school for fourth-grade during the 2015-2016 school year and fifth-grade during the 2016-2017 school year were used to determine reading achievement of fifth-grade students.

**Research Question and Hypotheses**

The following research question and hypotheses guided this research study:

Q1: Does 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom impact reading achievement of fifth-grade students as measured by composite reading scale scores on the Florida Standards Assessment in English Language Arts (FSA ELA)?

$H_a1$: There is a significant difference between composite reading scale scores of fifth-grade students who participated in 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom and composite reading scale scores of fifth-grade students who did not participate in 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom on the FSA ELA.

Q2: Does 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom impact reading achievement of fifth-grade students within the experimental group as measured by composite reading scale scores on the FSA ELA?

$H_a2$: There is a significant difference between pre-test and post-test composite scale scores on the FSA ELA among fifth-grade students who participated in 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom.

**Definitions**

*Achievement levels* are levels of student achievement based on observed scale scores on the Florida Standards Assessment (FLDOE, 2016). Using pre-established cut scores, the scale scores are translated into achievement levels from 1 to 5; levels 1-2 are considered below grade level, level 3 is on-level, and levels 4 and 5 are considered above grade level.

*Adequate yearly progress (AYP)* is defined differently by each state, but the term generally specifies the yearly performance gains students are expected to make each year on standardized assessments and the degree of improvement schools make each year based on student gains (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

*Fluency* is the ability to read with speed, accuracy and expression. Well-developed word recognition skills increase reading fluency, as well as reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).

*Independent reading* in the elementary school setting is characterized by the opportunity for children to read choice text on their independent reading level, with little or no assistance from adults (Spear-Swirling, 2005). Independent reading may take place both at school and at home.

*Learning gap, achievement gap, and reading gap* all reference the gap between the body of knowledge a student has actually learned and what he or she was expected to learn at a specific age or grade level (FLDOE, 2016).

*Running record*s are a means of determining instructional reading levels of individual students by assessing their ability to read at specific degrees of difficulty, of analyzing oral reading skills and documenting growth over time, and of monitoring strategies students use to decode print and construct meaning from texts (Literacy Footprints, 2016).

*Scaffolding* describes the process of initially providing a high level of support in learning situations, then gradually releasing responsibility to the learner. Scaffolding is also referred to as the gradual release model, and consists of first modeling a skill, then performing the skill with students, and finally having students perform the skill independently (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005).

*Stamina* is the ability to sustain mental effort while reading independently and to stay focused over a period of time, without scaffolding or adult support (Hiebert, 2014).

**Limitations**

The participants of this study were fifth-grade students attending two public schools having similar demographics in Southwestern Florida. Only those students who had attended the same school in both fourth- and fifth-grade were selected for the study, which resulted in a somewhat reduced sample size ($n$=116). The comparison of mean composite scale scores on the FSA ELA accounts for one school year's intervention at the experimental school.

This research study assumed that students in the comparison school did not participate in 60 minutes of scheduled daily independent reading in the classroom, since independent reading was not part of the district's curriculum. Assumptions were also made that classroom teachers in the experimental school implemented the initiative with fidelity throughout the 2016-2017 school year. Periodic observations were made by the researcher, student reading logs were checked, and teachers reported weekly minutes read for each student, all of which indicated full implementation of the initiative.

Although the focus of this study was on fifth-grade students, research exists to support the benefits of independent reading in the classroom for students of all grade levels (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008).

**Significance**

This research study has the potential to impact the structure of the daily reading block in elementary school classrooms. Currently, independent reading is not expected or required within the reading block in the school district of the study, but teachers who see the value and student growth have found ways to integrate it into their daily schedules. The results of this study may lead to an appreciation of the merits of independent reading in the classroom and provide the impetus to including daily independent reading in the elementary reading block.

Although much research supports quality independent reading time to increase stamina, engagement, and comprehension (Allington & Gabriel, 2012), there is minimal research relating independent reading to standardized assessment scores (National Reading Panel, 2000). This study adds to the body of literature supporting independent reading as part of rich, meaningful, and purposeful reading instruction.

In addition, implications of the research study may support further professional development and training opportunities for classroom teachers, providing education in the elements of effective independent reading practice during the reading block. An increase of effective independent reading programs in classrooms will provide a larger research sample and will support additional research on the effects of independent reading in the elementary classroom.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom on reading achievement of fifth-grade students.

The first section of this literature review focused on independent reading, including the development of independent reading habits over time; effective implementation of independent reading in the elementary classroom and teacher best practices; potential benefits of independent reading, such as increased reader engagement related to student choice of books, academic achievement gains, and increased stamina; and the role of both teachers and students during independent reading. The second section of the review of literature provided descriptions of the Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA) and 100 Book Challenge® reading programs, both of which were developed by the American Reading Company and utilized as the experimental intervention in this study. Research related to both programs and their impact on struggling readers, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, minority students, and academic achievement were included. The conclusion of the literature review included a summary of findings related to previous research, as well as implications for further research on the topic of independent reading related to student achievement.

## Theory Base

Jeanne Chall theorized that readers acquire certain characteristics and masteries in literacy skills by moving through five stages of reading development as they grow from birth to adulthood (Chall, 1996). Chall's Stages of Reading Development (Figure 1) propose that readers must first develop certain foundational skills in reading which build on one another and increase reader competency (Brace, 2017). Competent readers continue to develop as readers, adding to

their toolbox the reading skills and strategies required to attain reading mastery (Brace, 2017). Readers who achieve mastery level have the ability to read widely and for a variety of purposes and also understand how to apply specific skills and strategies depending on the type of text (Brace, 2017).

**Figure 1** Chall's Stages of Reading Development

**Chall's Stages of Reading Development**
**Source: Jeanne S. Chall, *Stages of Reading Development*. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983.**

| Stage | Approximate Age/Grade | Characteristics and Masteries by End of Stage | How Acquired | Relationship of Reading to Listening |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stage 0: Pre-reading "pseudo reading" | 6 months – 6 years<br>Preschool | Child "pretends" to read, retells story when looking at pages of book previously read to him/her, names letters of alphabet; recognizes some signs; prints own name; plays with books, pencils and paper. | Being read to by an adult (or older child) who responds to and warmly appreciates the child's interest in books and reading; being provided with books, paper, pencils, blocks, and letters. Dialogic reading. | Most can understand the children's picture books and stories read to them. They understand thousands of words they hear by age 6 but can read few if any of them. |
| Stage 1: Initial reading and decoding | 6 – 7 years old<br>1st grade and beginning 2nd | Child learns relation between letters and sounds and between printed and spoken words; child is able to read simple text containing high frequency words and phonically regular words; uses skill and insight to "sound out" new one syllable words. | Direct instruction in letter-sound relations (phonics) and practice in their use. Reading of simple stories using words with phonic elements taught and words of high frequency. Being read to on a level above what a child can read independently to develop more advanced language patterns, vocabulary and concepts. | The level of difficulty of language read by the child is much below the language understood when heard. At the end of Stage 1, most children can understand up to 4000 or more words when heard but can read about 600. |
| Stage 2: Confirmation and fluency | 7 – 8 years old<br>2nd and 3rd grade | Child reads simple, familiar stories and selections with increasing fluency. This is done by consolidating the basic decoding elements, sight vocabulary, and meaning context in the reading of familiar stories and selections. | Direct instruction in advanced decoding skills; wide reading (instruction and independent levels) of familiar, interesting materials that help promote fluent reading. Being read to at levels above their own independent reading level to develop language, vocabulary and concepts. | At the end of Stage 2, about 3000 words can be read and understood and about 9000 are known when heard. Listening is still more effective than reading. |
| Stage 3:<br>Reading for learning the new<br><br>Phase A<br><br>Phase B | 9 - 13 years old<br>4th – 8th grade<br><br>Intermediate 4th – 6th<br><br>Junior high school 7th – 9th | Reading is used to learn new ideas, to gain new knowledge, to experience new feelings, to learn new attitudes, generally from one viewpoint. | Reading and study of textbooks, reference works, trade books, newspapers, and magazines that contain new ideas and values, unfamiliar vocabulary and syntax; systematic study of words and reacting to the text through discussion, answering questions, writing, etc. Reading of increasingly more complex text. | At beginning of Stage 3, listening comprehension of the same material is still more effective than reading comprehension.<br><br>By the end of Stage 3, reading and listening are about equal for those who read very well, reading may be more efficient. |
| Stage 4:<br>Multiple viewpoints | 15 – 17 years old<br>10th – 12th grade | Reading widely from a broad range of complex materials, both expository and narrative, with a variety of viewpoints. | Wide reading and study of the physical, biological and social sciences and the humanities, high quality and popular literature, newspapers, and magazines; systematic study of words and word parts. | Reading comprehension is better than listening comprehension of materials of difficult content and readability. For poor readers listening comprehension may be equal to reading comprehension. |
| Stage 5:<br>Construction and reconstruction | 18+ years old<br>College and beyond | Reading is used for one's own needs and purposes (professional and personal); reading serves to integrate one's knowledge with that of others, to synthesize it and to create new knowledge. It is rapid and efficient. | Wide reading of ever more difficult materials, reading beyond one's immediate needs; writing of papers, tests, essays, and other forms that call for integration of varied knowledge and points of view. | Reading is more efficient than listening. |

*Figure 1* Matrix describing the developmental stages of readers according to Chall. Adapted from "Chall's Stages of Reading development," by J. Chall, 1983, *Stages of Reading Development.*

The first level of Chall's Stages of Reading Development is Stage 0, pre-reading, including preschool readers ranging from six months to six years of age (Chall, 1996). At this stage, readers are exposed to books and oral language and begin to mimic actions of the adults who are reading to them (Chall, 1996).

As readers reach first and second grade, they enter Stage 1, initial reading and decoding, where they learn letter-sound relationships and begin to read simple texts which include high frequency words and words that can easily be sounded out (Chall, 1996). In order to increase word and language recognition at this stage, students should be provided with daily opportunities to read both independently and aloud (Brace, 2017).

Once students have developed the ability to recognize and read high frequency words with automaticity and are able to apply decoding strategies when faced with tricky words, they enter Stage 2, confirmation and fluency (Chall, 1996). Readers at this stage begin to read more fluently and begin to apply reading comprehension strategies such as using context clues to determine the meaning of new vocabulary words (Chall, 1996). Oral and independent reading become increasingly important in developing reader competency and proficiency at this stage (Brace, 2017).

Competent and proficient readers consistently apply comprehension strategies to understand texts. Readers at Stage 3, reading for learning the new, are reading increasingly complex texts across multiple genres and for a variety of purposes in order to gain new knowledge (Chall, 1996). This stage typically spans from fourth- through ninth-grade as students increase volume of reading and continue to increase background knowledge through reading experiences (Chall, 1996). Independent reading at school and at home should be part of Stage 3 readers' daily routine, preparing them for the independent learning experiences of high school and college, Stages 4 and 5 (Brace, 2017).

Based on Chall's theory, fifth-grade students in this research study would probably be in Stage 3 of reading development. Likewise, fifth-grade students' independent reading should reflect the characteristics of Stage 3 in order for readers to continue learning and building

knowledge through exposure to a wide range of reading materials in a variety of genres (Chall, 1996). The researcher believes that Chall's stages relate well to the premises of independent reading: student motivation to read, reader choice and engagement, literature discussions, and the importance of listening as well as reading.

While Chall's ideas about learning to read were slighted in the 1980s among whole-language proponents, her ideas were later vindicated and continue to inform reading practice. Even those who disagreed with her ideas valued her meticulous research and adherence to evidence when proposing reading policy and programming (Ravitch, et al., 2001).

**Independent Reading**

Several acronyms have been used over the years to refer to the time students spend in the classroom reading books of their choice on their reading level quietly and independently. Some of these acronyms include drop everything and read (DEAR), sustained silent reading (SSR), and sustained quiet uninterrupted independent reading time (SQUIRT). Regardless of the names, independent reading is not a new concept in elementary school classrooms. However, consistent and effective implementation of independent reading combined with teacher support and fidelity is not always present, giving some teachers reasons to disregard independent reading as an effective means of instruction completely. The distinguishing feature of independent reading is that students have a consistent block of time each day to read a book of choice (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008). Many teachers are unwilling to schedule the time and lack trust in students' ability to fully participate in such student-centered learning. The following review of literature indicates the need to revive and revitalize structured time during the school day for students to read independently, discuss what they are reading, and perform tasks related to reading to promote student success and achievement.

Exposing students to a print-rich environment at an early age is important for developing pre-reading skills, which in turn leads to building literacy skills essential for reading proficiently (Lee, 2011). Krashen (2009) stated that "only one method of improving reading ability really works: engaging in a great deal of interesting (better yet, compelling), comprehensible reading" (p. 20). Teachers and parents should create opportunities for children to "read" books by themselves or with others in natural settings, even prior to elementary school age, in order to expose them to enriched reading environments (Lee, 2011). Early opportunities to read, such as handling, exploring, and exposing children to a variety of genres of books, are the building blocks of student literacy (Lee, 2011). Through these experiences, students learn to hold books properly, view pages from left to right, and turn pages from beginning to end while at the same time being exposed to rich reading environments. Classrooms that encourage young readers to develop emergent reading behaviors through exploration of books awaken an early love of literacy, inviting students to experience the joy of reading in the classroom (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008).

Independent reading does not necessarily mean silent reading, especially in the primary grades. For instance, first grade students typically do not read independently, but often benefit from oral reading experiences, such as reading to a buddy or reading aloud to themselves (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008). Student interactions such as these are an early means of increasing reader engagement and access to a wide range of texts. In some cases, independent reading was found to be more effective when it included the elements of peer discussion and teacher conferencing (Hiebert, 2014). Discussions that are centered on text allow readers additional time to process and develop deeper meaning of what they have read (Hall et al., 2014). While silent reading may be the goal for students in the intermediate grades and beyond, independent reading may not

always occur as a silent activity. Many students require opportunities for oral reading and peer interactions in order to benefit from the overall reading experience (Sanden, 2014). Effective classroom teachers have the ability to recognize the individual needs of students and to adapt the structure of independent reading to benefit each student, resulting in independent reading time that may differ significantly from traditional independent reading programs (Sanden, 2014).

Prior, Fenwick, Saunders, Ouelette, O'Quinn, & Harvey (2011) conducted a study of 173 students in first through seventh grades, comparing reading comprehension following oral reading to comprehension following silent reading. Each participant was required to read two passages, one oral and one silent, then answer ten comprehension questions for each passage. Student comprehension following oral reading was significantly higher than comprehension following silent reading in participants who were in first through fifth-grade, while there were no significant differences in comprehension for sixth grade students following oral or silent reading. Seventh grade students scored significantly higher on the comprehension test following silent reading than following oral reading (Prior et al., 2011). Although comprehension was significantly higher in the elementary grades following oral reading, the researchers suggested a balanced approach to independent reading, including opportunities for both oral and silent reading, as well as the inclusion of teacher read alouds (Prior, et al., 2011). They further explained that the increase in comprehension following silent reading in seventh grade was due to the fact that the majority of reading at this age is typically done silently (Prior, et al., 2011). The results of this study suggest that students in the elementary grades benefit from both oral and silent reading; allowing opportunities for both arouses internal developmental processes that students need to build comprehension skills (Prior, et al., 2011).

The first step in creating a literacy rich environment in the classroom that supports student independence while reading is to lay a strong foundation. Allington & Gabriel (2012) suggest that six elements of reading instruction should be included each day in the elementary classroom in order to promote student success during independent reading: 1) student-selected text – providing access to a wide range of books and allowing students to choose books according to individual interests are the most powerful elements for increasing motivation and comprehension among young readers. Students will read more, have greater understanding, and be more engaged when given the opportunity to choose what they read; 2) accuracy – students who read text at 98% accuracy or above have solid word recognition and comprehension skills, leading to greater enjoyment and less frustration while reading; 3) comprehension – readers are more engaged and more likely to read for enjoyment when they understand and appreciate the books they are reading; 4) writing about reading – when students are given the opportunity to practice reading skills and strategies through writing, the connection to text becomes deeper, more personal and meaningful, inviting students to think more critically about what they are reading; 5) accountability talk – providing time for students to engage in academic conversations with peers about what they are reading increases speaking and listening skills, improves comprehension and engagement, and helps students make connections to text and other readers; and 6) teacher read aloud – listening to the teacher read aloud is a powerful model that increases fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, builds background knowledge, and exposes students to a variety of text structures and genres. Although creating a literacy rich environment is beneficial to all students, struggling readers and English language learners (ELLs) benefitted the most from implementation of these six elements and a focus on reading development (Allington & Gabriel, 2012).

Independent reading also requires thoughtful arrangement of the classroom and well-planned processes and procedures in place in order to be successful (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005). Building and maintaining a vast classroom library that appeals to a wide range of student interests, cultural backgrounds, genres, and reading levels is crucial (Sanden, 2014). Classroom libraries should contain a variety of genres, including nonfiction books, as well as text at various reading levels above and below the classroom grade level, so that all students have books available at their independent levels across genres (Sanden, 2014). Books can be organized in bins within the classroom library in a variety of ways: by genre, topic, author, level, series, etc. Having an organized, accessible classroom library allows students to browse and "book shop" efficiently and effectively.

In addition to organizing the classroom library, developing processes and procedures for independent reading time is essential to building the desired expectations for independent reading. Reutzel & Juth (2014) proposed that lessons for building effective daily independent reading include teacher modeling of independent reading; providing purpose for reading; holding students accountable for their reading through the use of reading logs and reading responses connected to reading; assigning tasks connecting classroom reading instruction to independent reading; and establishing time-on-task expectations in order to build stamina (Reutzel & Juth, 2014). Organizing the classroom library and setting clear expectations for independent reading time results in more engaging and meaningful reading experiences for all students.

When properly implemented, independent reading becomes a natural element of the daily reading block in which students have opportunities to apply instructional strategies they have learned during explicit reading instruction. However, many teachers are resistant, taking comfort in more easily observable and measurable reading activities, such as guided reading groups or

whole group assignments, citing that monitoring student engagement during independent reading is difficult (Williams, Hall, Hedrick, Lamkin, & Abendroth, 2013). An effective independent reading environment is the result of teachers' trusting that students are actually reading; but some teachers have a hard time giving up control of the process (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008).

Research supports certain observable behaviors during independent reading. Williams, et al. (2013) conducted a study to develop an observation instrument for measuring in-school independent reading. Researchers collected a combination of 121 videotaped and real-time observations of 27 third-grade students who participated in 20 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom over the course of five weeks. Observations were then coded based on 12 observable behaviors, which were then ranked on a scale of one to four; a rating of one meant that the behavior was observed none of the time, and a rating of four meant that the behavior was observed all of the time. Results of the study indicated that student "attention to text" was observable through book position, student position, eyes focused on and moving across text, external distractions, such as doors opening and closing, and students' own movement distractions, including scratching or tapping (Williams, et al., 2013). Student scores in each of these observable areas were significantly correlated to student attention to text while independent reading ($p<.001$), demonstrating that classroom teachers can monitor reader engagement during independent reading (Williams, et al., 2013).

Teachers and administrators may also avoid or eliminate independent reading during class time due to the research by the National Reading Panel (NRP), which found no significant research supporting implementation of independent reading (NRP, 2000). The findings of the NRP indicated that of the 14 studies reviewed by the council, none contained significant findings to associate independent reading with fluency, comprehension, or any other reading skills,

especially among struggling readers (NRP, 2000). What teachers and administrators tend to overlook when reviewing the report is that the NRP did not recommend eliminating independent reading in the classroom. In fact, the panel encouraged additional research in order to further explore potential benefits that were not uncovered by the panel in the research (NRP, 2000).

Since the NRP report (2000), considerable research has been conducted on independent reading, its benefits, and effective classroom implementation. Findings indicate that in order for independent reading in the classroom to be successful, teachers must first understand that procedures need to be put into place and followed each day (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005). Clausen-Grace & Kelley (2007) conducted an action research study consisting of one class of middle school students (approximately 25 participants). In order to be more strategic and engaging, independent reading time was restructured to include specific elements. Results of the study indicated that in order to be successful, an independent reading program must include access to a wide variety of texts, a conducive reading environment with teacher support, consistency, teacher modeling, and sustaining reader enjoyment through planned activities connected to independent reading (Clausen-Grace & Kelley, 2007). Based on these results, the researchers subsequently restructured independent reading in the classroom to include five key components: reading, relaxing, reflection, response, and rapping (Clausen-Grace & Kelley, 2007). During read and relax time, students were expected to read quietly and independently, with no movement around the room, while the teacher first conducted a "status of the class" to observe whether students were on task, and then conferred with individual students. Following independent reading time, students completed reflection tasks based on the skill or strategy that had been taught during explicit reading instruction. For example, the reflection task for a vocabulary lesson included students' jotting unknown words in a journal, writing how the word

was used in the text, then predicting the meaning of the word. Finally, students participated in a "rap" session, taking time to discuss reflection responses with a partner, then sharing responses with the class. By the end of the school year, researchers found that students' metacognitive awareness (understanding of one's own knowledge) while reading independently had increased by 89%, from 11% at the middle of the year to 100% at the end of the year (Clause-Grace & Kelley, 2007). The metacognitive growth related to independent reading in this study indicated that the positive impact of independent reading in the middle school classroom relied heavily upon structure and intentional planning on the teachers' parts.

When correctly implemented, classroom independent reading increases student engagement, stamina, and time on task. Accountability talk, conferring, and skill application provide a purpose for reading, and student choice motivates readers to actively participate.

**Teacher Support**

Teachers spend a great deal of time at the beginning of the school year developing, communicating, and reviewing class rules, mission statements, processes, procedures, and expectations. Teachers may even model expected behaviors and ask students to practice things such as lining up, walking in the hallways, and raising hands to speak. In order to set the tone for successful daily independent reading routines, students require similar supports from the teacher. Explicit instruction in using the classroom library, properly selecting books, acceptable storage and treatment of books, completing a daily reading log, setting reading goals, conferring with the teacher, and appropriate participation in peer discussions are all necessary elements in laying a strong foundation for independent reading time (Reutzel & Juth, 2014). In addition to providing explicit instruction of processes and procedures, teachers who create effective independent reading environments consistently model a love of reading by talking about books

and reading books aloud with expression and enthusiasm, motivating students to read for enjoyment, and increasing reader engagement (Reutzel & Juth, 2014).

Teachers send powerful messages to students by investing time to survey student interests in reading, assessing for appropriate reading levels, and developing classroom libraries that are organized and that include a wide variety of levels and genres (Hall, Hedrick, & Williams, 2014). Text available to students, including books in the classroom library, should be culturally diverse, free of stereotypes, and compatible with community values (Commission on Reading of the National Council of Teachers of English, 2004).

Once the classroom library is in place, providing consistent time for students to read during a thoughtfully planned independent reading block helps readers to develop the traits and habits of independent and critical thinkers and to recognize that certain conditions can either support or detract from learning during this time (Hall, Hedrick, & Williams, 2014). A firm commitment to daily independent reading time lends authenticity to classroom reading instruction as a whole (Jonson, 1998).

Independent reading is an important part of quality reading curricula, complementing explicit skills instruction and providing young readers opportunities to practice those skills in "just-right" books, i.e., high interest books on students' independent reading levels (Moss & Young, 2012). In addition, effective independent reading involves time spent in class for students to focus on their reading with accountability (Moss & Young, 2012). Even the most resistant readers have the potential to develop good reading habits when immersed in a literacy-rich environment. Treptow, Burns, & McComas (2007) conducted a study to determine whether difficulty of text would impact comprehension of third grade students who were identified by classroom teachers as having low percentages of on-task behaviors and high indicators of

reading difficulties. Results of the study indicated that struggling readers' time-on-task and comprehension increased when the text they were reading was at either independent or instructional levels of individual students (Treptow, Burns, & McComas, 2007). Comprehension of struggling readers was highest when students read at their independent levels, indicating the need for teachers to spend time getting to know their students as readers through interest inventories and conferences and to build classroom libraries that include appropriate reading materials to support the success of all readers (Treptow, Burns, & McComas, 2007). A successful independent reading environment relies heavily upon classroom teachers' full investment in creating a literacy rich environment and building a diverse classroom library filled with books of various content and genres.

An important element of building a culture of independent reading is taking time to assess students in order to determine baseline independent reading levels. In many cases, teachers use a running record to assess fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. However, teachers who want to understand their students more deeply as readers also use professional judgement based on observation and anecdotal records in order to determine more specific individual reading performance and proficiency (Halladay, 2012). For example, students' interests and prior knowledge may have an impact on comprehension of texts, specifically those selected for running records; teachers should consider the content of the text in addition to running record performance (Halladay, 2012). For instance, a student who has never traveled outside of Florida has probably never seen snow, so the teacher cannot expect him or her to read and comprehend text about a blizzard, let alone know what the word "blizzard" means. In addition, some students experience anxiety during the oral reading required during running records, which could impact fluency and comprehension scores. Gathering additional data about

the student as a reader through observation, formative assessment, written response, or even book talks may provide a bigger and better picture of the student's reading ability (Hallady, 2012). Understanding students as readers is not as simple as a single assessment. Combining assessment information with professional judgement, based on information gathered on the reader as a whole, provides opportunities for richer, more meaningful independent reading experiences.

According to Sanden (2012) "Independent reading, as practiced by highly effective teachers, contains components such as adult support, embedded instruction, and a student focus that holds real potential for reading growth." The success of independent reading in any given classroom ultimately depends on whether the classroom teacher actively promotes and implements it (Jonson, 1998). Teachers must spend time planning for independent reading just as they do for other parts of the reading block (Jonson, 1998).

In a year-long study of eight highly effective teachers who implemented independent reading in the classroom, Sanden (2012) found several commonalities across classrooms that supported reader growth. The study included classes ranging from first through fifth-grade in several elementary schools reflecting diverse cultures, socioeconomic status levels, and first language status. Teachers were selected for the study based on principal recommendation, and data were collected through both observation and conversations with teachers during the independent reading block. Results of the study indicated that effective independent reading time in the classroom relied heavily upon ongoing teacher support, as referred to by the researcher as "guided" independent reading (Sanden, 2012). Guided independent reading balanced a number of critical components: 1) student responsibility for selecting text on his or her appropriate level, 2) student choice of an area to sit that was conducive to productive reading,

3) students' ability to self-monitor and problem-solve, and 4) ongoing teacher support through monitoring and guidance of student choices, modeling appropriate behaviors, and providing differentiated instructional support through individual student conferences (Sanden, 2012). The balance of responsibility between teacher and student supports the overall intended outcome of independent reading, which is reader growth (Sanden, 2012). A teacher's understanding of effective and intentional planning and implementation of independent reading in the classroom is necessary in order to support the success and growth of students as readers.

**Student Engagement**

One of the goals of independent reading in the classroom is for students to learn and apply reading strategies when reading both fiction and nonfiction text (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2017). In any given classroom, teachers should note that some students are likely to be more engaged than others during independent reading, requiring teachers to plan for differentiation (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Children who are not engaged in reading tend to be struggling readers who have not experienced success with reading (Richardson, 2009). Classroom teachers should maintain the mindset that all students like to read, but they might not know it because they have not been introduced to the right books – books that are interesting and easy for them to read – at the right time (Gallagher, 2015). In order to engage students during independent reading, the teacher should keep in mind and communicate the intended purpose for reading (Halladay, 2012). Readers need to understand the purpose for reading each day, and the teacher's responsibility includes building accountability. The teacher who understands that there are various types of readers in every classroom has the ability to provide appropriate guidance and support that will engage all readers, and can be intentional about increasing students' abilities through instruction (Sanden, 2014).

The level of student engagement during independent reading sometimes stems from the reader's overall attitude toward reading. Readers with well-developed reading skills are more likely to experience success while reading, resulting in a positive attitude toward reading (Tse, Xiao, & Lam, 2013). On the other hand, struggling readers who have experienced frequent failure and frustration in reading are likely to have a negative attitude toward reading (Tse, et al., 2013). Struggling readers will likely require increased teacher involvement and encouragement over several years in order to develop and maintain a positive attitude toward reading (Reis, Eckert, McCoach, Jacobs, & Coyne, 2008). In addition to teacher support, student growth and attitudes toward reading also depend upon student selection of text, meaningful conversations about books, movement from dependent to independent learning, and increased confidence as readers - all of which influence reader attitudes (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005). The amount of time spent reading independently each day also influences reader engagement (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005). In order to develop a strong reading identity, students should spend 60 minutes per day reading independently – 20 to 30 minutes in school and 20 to 30 minutes at home (Allyn & Morrell, 2016). As a result of reading more, students read better, write better, spell better, and have better vocabulary (Krashen, 2009).

Some students come to school with a familiarity of literature, but others do not, making it necessary for classroom teachers to provide intervention and interaction for experiences students have not had at home (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008). In fact, children from wealthy families heard more than 1,500 more words per hour on average than children from poor families (Padak & Rasinski, 2007). According to Reis et al. (2008), an alarmingly high percentage of culturally diverse and low-income students were unprepared for college-level reading upon exiting high school, including 79% of African American students, 67% of Hispanic students, and 33% of

students who come from families with annual household incomes below $30,000. For students in these subgroups, school may be the only place where students have access to high-quality, appropriate, and interesting books for independent reading (Hall et al., 2014). Knowing that many students do not have access to high-quality text, teachers send a powerful message by intentionally filling classroom libraries with books that meet student needs and match student interests, thus providing opportunities for students to make their own choices, to develop ownership of their independent reading time, and to empower themselves as growing readers (Hall et al., 2014). A consistent independent reading program ensures that all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have time to read each day without interruption (Williams et al., 2013). In addition, teachers further support readers by developing partnerships with parents by providing reading materials for families who do not have books, allowing students to take books home, and giving incentives for students to read with parents at home (Padak & Rasinski, 2007).

**Student Choice**

Literacy research has identified student choice as a key component affecting reading habits and resulting in literacy growth; when students have opportunities to choose what they read, they become more involved in their reading (Hall et al., 2014). The ability for students to choose what they are reading also boosts motivation (Richardson, 2009). Teachers empower students and build independence by giving students choices when reading; student choice also provides opportunities for teachers to monitor the decisions students make and to provide additional support when necessary, especially with regard to reading books at appropriate independent levels (Sanden, 2014). Student choices during independent reading positively impact reader involvement and student enthusiasm toward reading (Hall et al., 2014). Choice of

text also allows students to read within their individual area of interest and to manipulate reading speed according to their reading level and the complexity of the text (Tse et al., 2013). Reis, et al. (2008) suggest that the positive impact of student choice during independent reading may have an even greater positive impact on urban students than on suburban students, due to the fact that urban students tend to have less access to text outside of school. Krashen (2009) suggested that socioeconomic status was a strong predictor of reading ability, mainly because children of poverty do not have access to reading materials outside of school. Krashen's (2009) findings indicate the importance of providing access to a wide variety of appropriately-leveled and engaging texts to all students. Although teacher monitoring and guidance may be necessary initially, the ultimate goal is for readers to engage in reading appropriately challenging and interesting self-selected texts (Reutzel & Juth, 2014). Giving students the opportunity to self-select texts builds a foundation for developing a stronger vocabulary, reading higher level text, and developing an overall love for reading.

Students need to be guided toward texts that interest them and then given the freedom to explore them (Dickerson, 2015). Teaching students to choose "just-right" books ensures that students are reading books on their independent reading level; some sort of color-coding, labeling, or leveling in the classroom library makes it easy for students to do so (Sanden, 2012). In a study of third- through sixth-grade students attending two culturally diverse, low-socioeconomic elementary schools, students showed significantly higher responses on a reader attitude scale when they were given interest-based, self-selected, individually challenging text choices during independent reading than students who participated in remedial and test-prep work (Reis, Eckert, McCoach, Jacobs, & Coyne, 2008). When students, particularly struggling readers, are given the ability to self-select text, engagement increases, resulting in more

successful reading experiences (Allington, 2011). According to Allington (2011) "self-selected text is twice as powerful in reading development as teacher-selected text" because students take ownership of their reading and are motivated when reading high-interest text on their independent reading levels.

Struggling readers read less than half as many words per day as good readers (Allington, 2014), so it is crucial to provide struggling readers access to text that is not only high interest, but also comprehensible at their independent reading level (Allington, 2014). Some students may even be motivated to read more difficult texts when they have opportunities to choose (Halladay, 2012). Although the text might be above the student's independent reading level, self-selection based on interest, prior knowledge, or even social influence (reading books their friends are reading) engages the reader and encourages reading growth (Halladay, 2012). Independent reading time is an opportunity for students to choose books according to interest and to adjust reading rates to align with individual reading levels (Tse, Xiao, & Lam, 2013).

Hall, Hedrick, and Williams (2014) conducted qualitative research on a class of 21 third-grade students, 75% of whom were on free or reduced lunch and had little or no access to books outside of the classroom. The researchers wanted to investigate whether student choice in reading materials increased reader involvement during independent reading time. After conducting a survey on reader interests and determining independent reading levels of students, approximately four books per student were purchased and added to the existing classroom library. In addition, students were given the option of listening to classical music using iPods during independent reading and were allowed two minutes at the end of independent reading time to discuss the books they were reading with a peer. Researcher observations indicated a general increase in student attitudes toward independent reading. Students were excited about

the new books that were added to the classroom library and looked forward to the time they were given to read during the school day, often even reminding the teacher when it was independent reading time (Hall, Hedrick & Williams, 2014). In addition, students looked forward to the time spent talking about their books at the end of independent reading; researchers observed that one student's off-task behaviors decreased during independent reading because he knew he would have an opportunity to talk after reading each day. The student engagement that resulted from thoughtfully planned and structured independent reading time was worth the initial time and effort required of the teacher in order to create that environment (Hall, Hedrick, & Williams, 2014).

As mentioned previously, Kelley & Clausen-Grace (2009) conducted a six-week case study that implemented specific independent reading strategies in a middle school classroom: read, relax, reflect, respond, and rap. Researchers measured student engagement during independent reading by the students' ability to assess themselves and set goals while reading. Results of the study indicated that students who were engaged during independent reading, defined as those who were able to self-assess and goal-set, were more likely to interact with the text; average student reading comprehension scores increased from 50% to 95% following the intervention (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Teachers can support student engagement by knowing reader interests, valuing independent reading time, and making readers accountable with activities such as peer conversations, written responses, and teacher-student conferences (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Teacher support is particularly important to struggling readers, who may be less likely than their peers to actively and fluently read during independent reading (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). Creating an environment where children are invested in time spent reading not only as an expectation, but also because they have developed a love of reading sets

the tone for students to become successful readers (Allyn & Morrell, 2016). In addition, exposing students to a reading-rich environment that includes repeated opportunities for independent reading motivates students to read on their own in natural settings (Lee, 2011).

Tse, et al. (2013) studied 4,712 fourth grade students averaging 10 years of age and found that frequency of classroom independent reading was a significant determining factor in reader attitudes as a direct result of the regular classroom time to choose their own books and read at their own pace. When given the opportunity to take ownership and responsibility for their reading, students also took more pride and were more heavily invested in what they chose to read and the attitudes they had towards their reading.

**Student Achievement**

Research regarding whether independent reading significantly contributes to student achievement has been debated over time. However, research demonstrates that the most successful readers are most likely to spend more time reading (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2017). Even the best readers benefit from daily independent practice (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2017). Increasing independent reading time leads to higher levels of fluency and comprehension in all readers and increases overall reader success and confidence levels (Sousa, 2014). Likewise, independent reading increases the volume of content students are reading, resulting in higher achievement (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2017).

Reading fluency, which is defined as rate, accuracy, and expression when reading, is directly related to comprehension, a necessary skill for successful reading. Fluency indicates a reader's ability to focus less on decoding words and more on the overall content of text (Sousa, 2014). Struggling readers may lack foundational skills in phonemic awareness and phonics, resulting in difficulty decoding words and reading slowly and laboriously, and making it difficult

to comprehend when reading (Sousa, 2014). Readers who lack fluency focus so much of their time trying to read the text that they have no time to think about the content they are reading. However, students who read at or above 95% accuracy are more likely to maintain focus, have better self-correcting and monitoring skills, and demonstrate higher levels of comprehension when reading (Allington, McCuiston, & Billen, 2015). Higher rates of fluency result in greater gains in reading development, as well as the increased ability of children to read silently with comprehension for extended periods of time (Allington, McCuiston, & Billen, 2015).

Little & Hines (2006) were interested in determining whether the amount of time spent reading independently would increase student achievement on reading fluency assessments. A sample of 155 third through sixth grade students from eight schools in three districts voluntarily participated in a Schoolwide Enrichment Model-Reading (SEM-R) framework. The program took place after school for a period of 12 weeks and included a daily curriculum which consisted of core instruction, independent reading time, and student choice of enrichment reading activities. Independent reading time was gradually increased from as little as 10 minutes per day at the beginning of the study, to a minimum of 45 minutes per day at the end of the study, with some students reading up to 65 minutes per day (Little & Hines, 2006). A comparison of pre- and post-test scores on reading fluency assessments indicated that students in all grade levels of the sample showed significant gains in fluency, and weekly gains on reading fluency were significantly higher than national norms (Little & Hines, 2006). Results of this study provided further support in favor of the impact of daily independent reading on students' overall reading achievement.

While research has shown the positive impact of structured independent reading on student achievement, additional research supports the fact that when implemented on its own and

without teacher support, independent reading does not improve reading achievement among all children (Harlaar et al., 2011). A study of 191 twin pairs were assessed at ages 10 (pre-assessment) and 11 (post-assessment) using the Word Identification & Passage Comprehension sections of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests-Revised (WRMT-R) to determine reading achievement; students also completed a reading questionnaire at the end of the study to gather information related to reader motivation during independent reading (Harlaar et al., 2011). Analysis of the post-assessments indicated that reading achievement at age 10 was a significant predictor of the students' attitudes toward independent reading at age 11, but student attitudes toward independent reading at age 10 did not significantly predict reading achievement at age 11 (Harlaar et al., 2011). The researchers concluded that early reading achievement of students was a significant predictor of later attitudes toward independent reading, but the simple act of independent reading at an early age did not predict subsequent reading achievement (Harlaar et al., 2011). The qualitative findings of this research study suggested that based on observation, the success of independent reading in the classroom may also be supported by other factors, including processes and procedures that make the reading rich, meaningful, and connected to daily core reading instruction (Harlaar et al., 2011).

The recent shift to Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has resulted in an increase in the number of informational text passages students are expected to read on standardized assessments, requiring teachers to spend more time delivering classroom instruction on strategies for reading nonfiction text (Frey & Fisher, 2013). According to these researchers, fiction text and nonfiction text are very different in structure, and require the application of different skills and strategies when reading. Frey & Fisher (2013) stated that classroom teachers were able to increase students' ability to read higher, complex informational text in several ways: 1)

establishing purpose for reading by modeling and thinking aloud during core instruction; 2) integrating collaborative conversations into daily instruction through book clubs or Socratic seminars; both of these practices addressed speaking and listening standards and allowed students time to process information more deeply, and to interact with both the text and their peers using academic language; 3) providing close reading opportunities that required students to analyze text for deeper meaning by annotating, rereading, and/or answering text dependent questions; and 4) encouraging students to read widely across genres in order to improve their ability to apply various skills and strategies required when reading either fiction or nonfiction text. Developing students' ability to read complex text of any genre throughout the school year sets them up for subsequent success when taking standardized assessments.

The increased complexity of text on standardized assessments resulting from the introduction of Common Core standards has caused concern among classroom teachers. Exposing students to the type of text they will see on standardized assessments during classroom instruction is one way teachers have tried to ensure student readiness and success. However, research indicates that doing so may not increase student achievement. Cheatham, Allor, & Roberts (2014) conducted a study of 62 second-grade students in order to determine whether reading multiple-criteria text during independent reading would increase student achievement. Multiple-criteria text integrates a variety of structural supports for the reader: word repetition, use of high-frequency words, and meaningfulness (Cheatham, Allor, & Roberts, 2014). Participants in both the treatment and control groups read independently for 25-30 minutes per day in class; students in the treatment group read from a selection of 50 multiple-criteria books written specifically for the research study, while students in the control group read books of their choice. A pre-test, post-test comparison of overall scores on the dynamic indicators of basic

early literacy skills (DIBELS) assessment and the subtests of nonsense word fluency (NWF) and oral reading fluency (ORF) indicated no significant gains in scores of the treatment group when compared to the control group following 10 weeks of intervention using multiple-criteria text (Cheatham, Allor, & Roberts, 2014). However, findings provided preliminary evidence that second-grade students who had not yet mastered basic phonics skills might benefit from reading multiple-criteria text independently (Cheatham, Allor, & Roberts, 2014). Results of this research indicated that exposure to complex, multiple-criteria text in the early grades did not have a significant impact on reading achievement, but researchers also noted that limitations of the study to second grade students provided impetus for further research using multiple-criteria text in the intermediate grades, when readers typically apply vocabulary and comprehension skills more frequently during independent reading.

Standardized assessments provide overall achievement scores for students, but lack the ability to provide deeper understanding of students as readers. For instance, standardized assessments measure students' silent reading abilities, making it difficult to determine how the reader handles print (Serravallo, 2014). In addition, the majority of standardized assessments consist of multiple choice response items, making it difficult to determine what the reader may have been thinking when selecting an answer (Serravallo, 2014). Finally, research supports the provision of text that is interesting and engaging to individual students; standardized assessments use the same passages and articles for all students (Serravallo, 2014). Readers who have no interest in the topic of the assessment passage may have difficulty maintaining focus, comprehending, and answering questions, all of which hinder assessment scores in ways that do not necessarily reflect reading ability.

Teachers can assess students in a variety of ways during independent reading in order to gain more in-depth information and to prepare students for the challenges they face on standardized assessments (Serravallo, 2014). Formative assessments conducted during independent reading time provide rich and authentic information about students as readers. One type of formative assessment is the individual conference. A well-planned schedule in which teachers meet with students on a regular basis in order to talk about reading is an effective way to learn more about students as readers. Conferences are an opportunity to conduct ongoing formative assessment checks on fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills, and to determine necessary supports to prepare students for standardized assessments (Serravallo, 2014).

In addition to conferring, building accountability into the independent reading block by having students jot information on sticky notes or in journals, or by discussing their reading with peer partners, can provide much richer opportunities to assess students as readers in a more comfortable and natural environment (Serravallo, 2014). Listening to students talk to one another about reading and evaluating how they respond to reading through writing are two invaluable means of authentic assessment to gather ongoing data that can be monitored throughout the school year. Tracking reading growth and achievement through formative assessments is an avenue for both teachers and students to see authentic and realistic reading improvement leading up to and in preparation for standardized assessments (Serravallo, 2014).

**Student Stamina**

Once an independent reading routine has been established, students begin building stamina, which is defined as the ability to sustain mental effort without support by the teacher (Heibert, 2014). In order to be successful on Common Core based standardized tests, students need daily opportunities to read the text of their choice and access to a wide range of materials

on a variety of topics and genres so that they can read broadly and widely, and build knowledge, experience, and joy in reading (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). Some students do not have the stamina required to interact with texts and think about them meaningfully and independently (Hiebert, 2014). When schools support independent reading programs, students are more likely to become proficient at silent reading and develop the stamina and perseverance necessary when faced with complex texts and challenging assessment tasks (Hiebert, 2013). Foorman, Schatscneider, Eakin, Fletcher, Moats, & Francis (2006) conducted a qualitative study of 1,285 first- and second-grade students in 17 schools in which they examined 20 time-allocation variables during the 90-minute reading block. The student demographic consisted of 95% African American students, 4% Hispanic students, .5% Caucasian students, and .5% Asian students; percentages of students on free or reduced lunch ranged from 84% to 100% across the 17 schools. Researchers observed teachers and students during the 90-minute traditional reading block, then coded activities into 20 time-allocation variables based on teacher-led instructional activities and student-centered activities in which students were working without teacher assistance (Foorman, et al., 2006). Teacher-led activities included instruction in oral language, grammar, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, book and print awareness, spelling instruction, letter recognition and reproduction, alphabetic instruction, word work, structural analysis, previewing text before reading, reading comprehension, and giving directions and preparing for instruction. Student-centered activities included reading texts either independently or with a partner, writing, reading their own writing, spelling in context of reading instruction, non-reading activities, conferring and feedback, and activities that were considered uncodable (Foorman, et al., 2006). An experimental word list was used in October to assess the initial reading ability of students; in addition, the letter-word identification, word-attack, and passage comprehension subtests of the

Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery-Revised was used to determine post-test achievement scores. Researchers found that student time spent reading was the one main effect among the 20 time-allocation variables, explaining 2% of the between-level variance in word-attack outcomes (Foorman, et al., 2006), a primary focus in first and second grades. While 2% does not appear to be large, results of the study suggested that students who spent more time reading were more successful readers.

Many teachers are hesitant to create time for independent reading because they believe independent reading means letting go, giving up control, and trusting that students are actually reading (Hiebert, 2014). In some cases, breaking independent reading into several small parts, for as few as five minutes at a time may be helpful. In this way, student stamina builds, and teacher confidence in students' ability to read responsibly increases. Over time, the independent reading period should gradually increase, extending to 15 or even 30 minutes per day (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008). Garan & DeVoogd (2008) suggested 20 to 30 minutes of daily independent reading in primary classrooms and 30 to 40 minutes of daily independent reading in intermediate classrooms.

Beginning in third grade, students are expected to read and respond to texts for extended periods of time across two or more days on standardized assessments; building stamina throughout the school year is crucial to student success (Hiebert, 2014). In addition, students who are allowed time to read independently in the classroom develop a habit of reading, resulting in increased time spent reading both inside and outside of the classroom (Hiebert, 2013). Researchers Hiebert, Spichtig, & Bender (2013) studied 30,000 students in second through eleventh grades who participated in an individualized, online reading practice program called *Reading Plus*. The program consisted of a total of 40 lessons, which included reading

extended texts and answering comprehension and vocabulary questions. Each lesson was approximately 15 minutes long, totaling about 10 hours of intervention over the course of two months (Hiebert, Spichtig, & Bender, 2013). According to the researchers, students' pre- and post-test reading comprehension scores increased in all grade levels following 10 weeks of the intervention. Below-level students increased an average of 18% in reading comprehension; borderline students increased an average of 10% in reading comprehension; and students who were identified as being on grade level increased an average of 4% in comprehension. Average reading gains among students by grade level and group appear in Table 1. Students in second- through twelfth-grades showed average reading gains equivalent to one year of growth, and students read an average of nine words faster than prior to the intervention (Hiebert, Spichtig, & Bender, 2013). Results of the study suggested that the *Reading Plus* intervention was most beneficial to struggling readers, especially in secondary grade levels, due to the ability of the program to target and address foundational gaps in reading.

Table 1

*Average student reading gains following* Reading Plus *intervention*

| Reading level | Grade | Number of students | Average fluency gains (words per minute) | Average grade-level gain |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Not ready | 2-3 | 533 | 6 | .6 |
| | 4-5 | 410 | 9 | .7 |
| | 6-8 | 426 | 9 | .7 |
| | 9-10 | 172 | 14 | .9 |
| | 11-12 | 80 | 16 | 1.3 |
| | All | 1621 | 9 | .7 |
| Borderline | 2-3 | 1214 | 21 | .9 |
| | 4-5 | 2509 | 28 | 1.0 |
| | 6-8 | 2167 | 34 | 1.1 |
| | 9-10 | 810 | 34 | 1.2 |
| | 11-12 | 287 | 35 | 1.3 |
| | All | 6987 | 30 | 1.0 |
| Ready | 2-3 | 931 | 30 | 1.1 |
| | 4-5 | 4570 | 36 | 1.4 |
| | 6-8 | 7577 | 44 | 1.5 |
| | 9-10 | 5359 | 48 | 1.9 |
| | 11-12 | 3265 | 55 | 2.2 |
| | All | 21,702 | 44 | 1.7 |

Note: Adapted from "Building capacity in low-performing readers: Results of two months of Reading Plus® practice," by E. H. Hiebert, A. Spichtig, & R. Bender, 2013, *Research Brief*, 2(1), p. 2.

As a result of the *Reading Plus* study, Hiebert (2014) offered seven actions teachers can take to increase student stamina during independent reading: 1) give students responsibility for the first read of texts, 2) be explicit about the degree of challenge students should seek when selecting texts for independent reading, 3) require students to develop explicit goals towards an increase in stamina, 4) increase the number of texts students are reading, 5) increase student engagement through connected activities, such as book clubs and literacy circles, 6) increase student responses through written and oral discussions, and 7) use sample assessments as a means of practice so that students know what to expect when the actual assessment day arrives. Research clearly indicates that students need time to read independently and regularly in order to build stamina, increase reading ability, and to become good readers (Hiebert, 2014).

**Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA)**

The Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA) and 100 Book Challenge® are two research-based independent reading programs developed by former teacher and reading specialist, Jean Hileman, who began the American Reading Company (ARC) after successful results of independent reading in her elementary classroom (ARC, 2017). The company has since added several additional programs, including core reading curricula that support research-based literacy development. ARC is supported by a highly qualified academic advisory board including literacy researcher, Richard Allington, and authors Kylene Beers and Robert Probst, both of whom have published a number of literacy-based professional development and support books (ARC, 2017).

The IRLA is primarily used as an assessment tool for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade in order to identify their independent reading levels. Each reading level is correlated to a color using the IRLA leveling system. IRLA reading levels align with Chall's Stages of Reading Development, beginning with print concepts at the entry levels and gradually progressing through levels that include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and mastery (Chall, 1996). IRLA also meets many of the best practices in independent reading discussed by Kelley & Clausen-Grace (2009) including accountability while independent reading, student choice in texts, peer discussion and reflection following independent reading, and the development of stamina through reader engagement and consistent daily time spent reading.

In addition to determining students' independent reading level, the IRLA is also diagnostic in nature, assisting classroom teachers in determining any gaps individual students may have in foundational skills such as phonemic and phonological awareness. These gaps can

then be targeted during differentiated instruction using a variety of intervention and remedial resources developed to complement IRLA, including foundational skills toolkits and online lesson plans, games, and other activities for student practice.

The 100 Book Challenge® is a means of setting up school-wide independent reading programs in order to develop good reading habits across grade levels. The 100 Book Challenge® includes elements such as documenting and tracking 60 minutes per day of independent reading which may include school and home reading; ensuring that students are reading books at appropriate levels; reading texts that are aligned to language arts standards; and developing a home/school connection in which families and teachers work together to support independent reading (ARC, 2017). The goal of the 100 Book Challenge® is to improve student reading achievement by increasing self-esteem and confidence when reading independently (Florida Center for Reading Research, 2006).

In addition to providing a structural support system, IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge® include classroom libraries for each classroom consisting of six baskets – two below grade level, two within grade level, and two above grade level – to provide reading materials to match the needs of all students. Each basket contains 30 texts that have been carefully selected to include a variety of topics, genres, and cultural groups. In addition, teachers can determine IRLA levels for existing classroom library selections using an online tool.

**IRLA & 100 Book Challenge Research**

Several research studies relate the positive impact of IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge® on student achievement in reading. Significant findings were identified among African American students and students from low socioeconomic levels (ARC, 2017). Research also suggests that student literacy development and achievement is supported when students have

access to high interest books at their independent reading levels, and time is set aside to read independently each day both in the classroom and at home (ARC, 2017).

A pilot evaluation of the 100 Book Challenge® measured reading growth among 1,409 third- through fifth-grade students from November to May by implementing the independent reading program in six elementary schools (Dezmon, Brooks, & Kennedy, 2008). Results of the evaluation study were measured using IRLA's measurement of student growth metric: 1 month = 0.1. Significant growth was revealed during the six-month evaluation period, with an overall mean increase in student reading levels of 0.8, equivalent to eight month's growth. In addition, evaluators documented average gain scores of 0.6 (six months) among ELL students; 0.8 (eight months) among students on free or reduced lunch; 1.1 (one year, one month) among gifted and talented students, and 0.7 (seven months) among students with disabilities (Dezmon, Brooks, & Kennedy, 2008). During the six-month evaluation period, students were expected to make average gains of 0.6 using IRLA's growth metric. Overall average reading gains were 0.8; on average, students were performing two months above expectations even though students were only required to read independently for 15 minutes per day, which is 45 minutes less than expectations of the 100 Book Challenge®. Program evaluators predicted greater reading growth with continued implementation of the pilot, and recommendations were made to increase expectations for daily independent reading time to at least 30 minutes per day (Dezmon, Brooks, & Kennedy, 2008).

Offenberg (2005) conducted a study of IRLA among 89 public schools with similar demographics among a sample of 15,972 first- through third-grade students in Philadelphia. The treatment group consisted of 14 schools and 2,556 first- through third-grade students; the control group consisted of 75 schools and 13,416 first- through third-grade students (Offenberg, 2005).

Following one school year's implementation of the 100 Book Challenge® in the treatment group, statistically significant growth was found among two subgroups: African American students and first-grade students who showed signs of being early readers at the onset of the study (Offenberg, 2005). Students in the African American subgroup closed the minority/non-minority reading achievement gap by 71%. The first-grade students who showed signs of being early readers scored 20% higher in reading than first-grade students who showed signs of being early readers in the comparison group (Offenberg, 2005). African American students and first-grade early readers made up 79% of the sample, indicating that nearly 80% of students in the experimental group experienced significant growth in reading (Offenberg, 2005). Although students who were considered baseline, or average, at the onset of the research study did not show significant growth in reading achievement scores, the impact within the two subgroups was substantial, indicating that implementation of the 100 Book Challenge® helped meet unique needs of specific students (Offenberg, 2005).

A case study of 330 elementary school students in kindergarten through fifth-grade, was conducted to determine the impact of IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge® on student reading (ARC, 2011). The sample included 89% of students on free or reduced lunch. Following one school year's implementation of the independent reading program, student gains in reading on the Pennsylvania state assessment were compared to those of the previous school year. For the first time in three years, the school met adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements (ARC, 2011). The school's performance index score increased by 7.6 points from the previous year's state assessment scores (ARC, 2011). Overall average reading scores of students in third-through fifth-grade increased by 16%, with significant gains demonstrated primarily in third-grade (ARC, 2011). Similar to the findings of the Offenberg (2005) study, the subgroup of

African-American students showed statistically significant reading gains of 24%; subgroups of economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities also showed gains of 16% and 15%, respectively (ARC, 2011). Following just one year of participation in the 100 Book Challenge®, the ARC researchers found that student reading gains closed the achievement gap for the lowest subgroups of students.

Additional research on the 100 Book Challenge® was conducted when ARC partnered with a South Carolina elementary school consisting of 684 students in kindergarten through fifth-grade. The partnership was initiated as a result of the school's desire to increase student achievement in reading, specifically among African American students. As a result of the partnership and implementation of the 100 Book Challenge®, African American students showed significant gains in reading proficiency on the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) (ARC, 2010). Prior to the independent reading program's implementation, African American students at the school had overall average reading proficiency scores of 47%; after the intervention, scores increased to an average of 81% reading proficiency – an average increase of 34% - on the same assessment following one year of implementation of the 100 Book Challenge (ARC, 2010). Students with disabilities in this study also demonstrated significant gains on the PASS, indicated by increased student proficiency levels in reading of 17% after one year's implementation (ARC, 2010). In addition to quantitative data, this research study also gathered qualitative data regarding teacher attitudes toward the program. Overall, teachers who participated in the program agreed that the 100 Book Challenge® had a positive impact on student achievement in reading (ARC, 2010).

Research on the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® indicated that the IRLA assessment tool was a significant predictor of elementary students' reading performance on the Oregon

Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS), a state-standardized assessment (Ralston, Waggoner, Tarasawa, & Jackson, 2016). The study was conducted as part of a district's search for an instrument and intervention that would raise student reading achievement scores by matching a screening tool to the unique needs of the student population; in addition, the district wanted to turn around low performance scores of ELL students on the OAKS The IRLA was chosen for its unique features, including: 1) its ability to assess every standard for literature and informational text, as well as language standards, and 2) its ability to be used as both a diagnostic and formative assessment tool that tracks student progress in real time by first finding baseline data, then marking student growth points with each successive formative assessment conference (Ralston, Waggoner, Tarasawa, & Jackson, 2016). The Oregon study consisted of 2,303 third- through fifth-grade students in 11 elementary schools; the study's population consisted of 44% Latino/Hispanic students, and 47% of the students were either receiving or being monitored for ELL services.

District researchers compared student reading scores on IRLA to student reading scores on the OAKS in order to determine whether performance on IRLA would correlate with and predict similar performance on the OAKS. Results of the study indicated that IRLA was a significant predictor of student performance on the OAKS (Ralston, Waggoner, Tarasawa, & Jackson, 2016). Results of the study included findings that IRLA and OAKS reading scores were in agreement for 80% of the students who were either meeting or not meeting benchmarks; IRLA and OAKS scores showed an 83% agreement rate among third grade students, a 79% agreement rate among fourth grade students, and a 77% agreement rate among fifth-grade students (Ralston, Waggoner, Tarasawa, & Jackson, 2016). Significant results were also found within specific subgroups; among ESE students, there was a 90% agreement rate on IRLA and

OAKS reading scores, an 86% agreement rate among ELL students, a 77% agreement rate among African American students, and an 80% agreement rate among white students (Ralston, Waggoner, Tarasawa, & Jackson, 2016). Results of this study followed just one year of implementation of the IRLA and 30 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom. Researchers reported that additional reading growth continued to be evident during the second year of implementation of the IRLA (Ralston, Waggoner, Tarasawa, & Jackson, 2016). The predictive nature of the IRLA on student performance on the OAKS state assessment indicates the need for additional research regarding the relationship between the IRLA and standardized measures of reading achievement.

**Conclusion**

The review of related research indicates that independent reading provides a means of increasing student achievement in reading when effectively implemented. Students require access to a wide variety of engaging texts that they can choose according to topics and genres of interest, and teachers set the tone by modeling a love for reading, creating a literacy-rich environment, and providing opportunities to read independently each day to apply skills and strategies taught during explicit instruction. In addition, opportunities to participate in peer discussions and respond to reading through writing increase reader engagement and motivation related to independent reading.

Independent reading has been found to increase fluency (Little & Hines, 2006), reader engagement (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2017), and comprehension (Heibert, Spichtig, & Bender, 2013) – all of which are necessary for students to become successful readers. The skills developed during independent reading help students navigate the complex text to which they are exposed on standardized assessments. In addition, time on task, or stamina, increases over time

with effective implementation of independent reading (Hiebert, 2013). Time spent reading is significantly correlated to reading achievement, indicating the importance of allowing students time in the classroom to read independently (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2017).

Implementation of structured programs such as the IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge® have significantly increased overall reading ability and performance on standardized assessments. These structured programs assist classroom teachers in determining and targeting learning gaps, and provide research-based reading materials and resources to develop effective independent reading environments in which students are highly motivated, engaged, and eager to become strong readers.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this research study was to evaluate the impact of 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom on fifth-grade reading achievement by answering the following research questions and hypotheses:

1) Does 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom impact reading achievement of fifth-grade students as measured by composite reading scale scores on the Florida Standards Assessment in English Language Arts (FSA ELA)?
2) Does 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom impact reading achievement of fifth-grade students within the experimental group as measured by composite reading scale scores on the FSA ELA?

The research design, context of the research study, research sample, instruments used for data collection, procedures, data analysis tools, and a summary of the methodology are detailed in this chapter.

Based on the research questions, the researcher hypothesized that 1) There is a significant difference between composite reading scale scores of fifth-grade students who participated in 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom and composite reading scale scores of fifth-grade students who did not participate in 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom on the FSA ELA, and 2) There is a significant difference between pre-test and post-test composite scale scores on the FSA ELA among fifth-grade students who participated in 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom.

## Research Design

The research design of this study was non-random, pre-test/post-test control group design. The independent variable in the study was 60 minutes of daily independent reading in

the classroom. The dependent variable was composite scale scores on the FSA ELA. Pre-test scores consisted of fourth-grade FSA ELA composite scale scores for the 2015-2016 school year. Post-test scores consisted of fifth-grade FSA ELA composite achievement scale scores for the 2016-2017 school year.

**Research Context**

The research study was conducted as a program evaluation study within one school district on the west coast of Florida. The experimental school was selected by the researcher based upon implementation of the Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA) and the 100 Book Challenge® during the 2016-2017 school year as a school-wide intervention in kindergarten through fifth-grade. The IRLA was the tool used for measuring students' independent reading levels and providing appropriately leveled, diverse, and engaging classroom libraries. The 100 Book Challenge® supported independent reading by challenging students to read independently for 60 minutes each day during classroom time. Both programs were developed by the American Reading Company. The comparison school was recommended by the school district's Assessment, Accountability, and Research (AAR) department and selected by the researcher as a school with similar demographics to those of the experimental school. The research intervention covered one complete school year from August 2016, to May 2017.

The administration at the experimental school was offered the opportunity to pilot IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge® by the district based on the fact that overall FSA ELA scores in third- through fifth-grade were below district and state averages. After review, the experimental school's administrators believed that IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge® would potentially provide the additional reading support needed to increase student scores on the state assessment in ELA. During the 2015-2016 school year, only 25% of fifth-grade students in the experimental

school made learning gains on the FSA ELA from the previous school year. Learning gains are established by the state of Florida and are calculated based upon the growth in scale score that a student should make from one school year to the next on the FSA ELA. Of the 60 fifth-grade students enrolled in the experimental school in the 2015-2016 school year, only 15 students made learning gains equivalent to one school year's growth from the previous school year.

At the end of the school year prior to accepting the opportunity to pilot IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge®, teachers were surveyed in order to determine teacher buy-in. One hundred percent of kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers were in support of the program and agreed to attend professional development, coaching sessions, and come to school over the summer to practice administering the IRLA with students attending summer school.

**Sample**

The experimental elementary school was selected for this research study based upon its school-wide implementation of the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® as an intervention. The comparison elementary school was selected by the researcher as a result of the district AAR department's recommendation based on similar demographics and size as the experimental school.

The sample selected for this study consisted of fifth-grade students who had attended either the experimental or comparison school for both fourth- and fifth-grades and who had taken the FSA-ELA in both fourth- and fifth-grade since fourth-grade's scores served as the pre-test. The number of students included in the sample was determined by the number of students in each school who had attended the same school for both fourth- and fifth-grades and who had FSA ELA scores for both years. The total sample included 116 fifth-grade students; 51 students attended the experimental school, and 65 students attended the comparison school.

**Instrumentation**

The FSA ELA was used to measure the dependent variable, reading achievement, in this research study. FSA ELA composite achievement scale scores of fourth-grade students for the 2015-2016 school year and composite FSA ELA achievement scale scores of fifth-grade students for the 2016-2017 school year were provided by the district's AAR department for both the experimental and comparison groups. Fourth-grade composite scale scores on the FSA ELA for the 2015-2016 school year served as pre-test measures, and fifth-grade composite scale scores on the FSA ELA for the 2016-2017 school year served as post-test measures for both the experimental and comparison groups. FSA ELA scale scores consisted of a range of scores determined by the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) for each grade level: fourth-grade scale scores ranged from 251-372 and fifth-grade scale scores ranged from 257-385. Within each grade level's range of scores there were cut scores, also determined by the FLDOE. Cut scores were developed using the range of scale scores in order to indicate students' achievement levels, with an achievement level of one being the lowest range of scale scores and an achievement level of five being the highest range of scale scores.

The FSA ELA was developed to align with the Florida Standards, which were implemented to motivate Florida students to acquire stronger critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills (FLDOE, 2015). Based upon expectations for the fifth-grade language arts Florida standards (LAFS), the fifth-grade FSA ELA consisted of 50 items: 14 items assessing knowledge of key ideas and details; 14 items assessing knowledge of craft and structure; 12 items assessing integration of knowledge and ideas; 8 language and editing tasks; and 1 text-based writing assessment (FLDOE, 2015). Although the number of items for each

category remains the same from year to year, the weighting of each item may vary, making it difficult to analyze data by category across multiple years.

Validity of the FSA ELA was measured through analysis of content standards, test specifications, test development, and alignment of FSA item banks to the content standards and benchmarks (FLDOE, 2015). Blueprints of the FSA ELA were developed to ensure that test items aligned to the Florida standards. A third-party alignment study found that test items aligned to the standards and that FSA ELA test items demonstrated a "good representation of the standards" (FLDOE, 2015).

The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) measured the reliability of the FSA ELA through analysis of internal consistency, marginal reliability, test information curves and standard error of measurement, reliability of achievement classification, precision at cut-scores, and inter-rater reliability of writing prompts (FLDOE, 2015). Reliability coefficients were calculated to determine internal consistency of the fifth-grade FSA ELA using Cronbach's alpha (0.91), stratified alpha (0.91), and Feldt-Raju (0.89). Marginal reliability coefficients, which measure the overall reliability of the test based on average standard errors estimated at different points on the achievement scale for all students were very similar to the internal consistency coefficients (0.91). The FLDOE studies suggest that the FSA ELA is a reliable and valid instrument.

**Intervention**

Fifth-grade students in the experimental group participated in the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® as the experimental intervention during the 2016-2017 school year, while students in the comparison school did not participate in daily independent reading in the classroom. Both the experimental and comparison schools used the same core curriculum from the district for

daily instruction in ELA. The experimental school was assigned a half-time literacy coach who provided teacher support and assistance for two weeks each month, while the comparison schools was assigned a full-time literacy coach. The role of the literacy coaches in elementary school was to support classroom teachers in planning and implementing the school's curriculum through modeling of lessons, providing teachers with feedback related to instructional strategies, and offering side-by-side support in the classroom as needed.

In the 2016-2017 school year, the researcher was assigned to the experimental school half-time as a literacy coach. Regular observations were conducted by the researcher in fifth-grade classrooms to determine whether the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® were being implemented by classroom teachers with fidelity. All three fifth-grade teachers in the experimental school scheduled two 30-minute blocks of time within the school day for students to read independently and to confer with students, as suggested by the developers of IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge®. Based on the researcher's observations, the intervention was implemented with fidelity in all of the experimental teachers' fifth-grade classrooms.

In addition to classroom observations, the researcher was able to access Schoolpace, the online database for IRLA. This resource provided real-time data depicting student reading growth across the school year, as well as conference notes entered by the classroom teacher. Access to this resource was an additional tool to confirm teacher fidelity since Schoolpace tracked how often teachers met with students. In fifth grade, two of the three teachers conferred with students once every two weeks as suggested by the developers of the IRLA.

Professional development was provided by representatives of the American Reading Company for six days during the implementation of the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge®: once in June 2016 as an introductory training and five times throughout the 2016-2017 school year.

An IRLA coach was assigned to the experimental school to provide specific instruction and assistance based on any areas of need identified by teachers and administrators related to the program. The IRLA coach was employed and trained by the American Reading Company to provide on-site support to schools that implemented the program. Coaching support from American Reading Company was included as part of the experimental school's pilot of the IRLA.

The comparison group did not participate in the experimental intervention using IRLA. However, the comparison school did employ a full-time literacy coach, whose role was to support teachers in ELA instruction.

**Data Collection**

Prior to conducting research in the school district, the researcher completed an application explaining the research study and requesting permission to conduct the study in the district and at the experimental school. The application was approved on October 14, 2016. In addition, the research study was approved by Southeastern University's IRB committee.

The researcher obtained the existing pre-test data for both the experimental and comparison groups from the district AAR department for the 2015-2016 school year. The AAR department assigned each student a number in order to maintain anonymity. Assigned student numbers were the same for both the pre- and post-tests in order to assist the researcher in identifying students who had attended the same school for both fourth- and fifth-grade. Demographic data related to gender, ethnicity, ESE identification, and socioeconomic status were provided by AAR on each student. FSA ELA data included composite scale scores and achievement levels for fourth- and fifth-grade.

Following nine months of IRLA intervention at the experimental school, students at the experimental and comparison schools took the FSA ELA at the end of fifth-grade, which served as the post-test measure. These data were provided to the researcher by AAR in June, 2017. Students who were not identified as having a matching student number for both pre-and post-tests were removed from the sample, as well as those who did not have FSA ELA scores for one or both school years. A total of 82 students were removed from the sample for either of these reasons.

Once the FSA ELA data were compiled, pre- and post-test composite scale scores on the FSA ELA were analyzed using SPSS. In addition, the researcher examined IRLA scores of a sample of fifth-grade students at the experimental school to determine whether there were significant differences from pre- to post-test. These scores were subsequently disaggregated to explore differences from pre- to post-test on the IRLA based on demographic variables.

**Data Analysis**

Initial FSA ELA pre-test data from district AAR consisted of 252 students. Students who attended a magnet program within the experimental school and who did not participate in the intervention were removed ($n$ = 80) from the data set, reducing the sample to 172 students. Students who did not attend the same school for both fourth- and fifth-grade were also removed from the data set ($n$=45), as were students who did not have FSA ELA composite scale scores for both fourth- and fifth-grade ($n$=11). A sample of 116 students remained: 51 students at the experimental school and 65 students at the control school.

The district provided student demographic data for each student including gender, ethnicity, ESE status, and qualification for free or reduced lunch; this information was used to disaggregate the data using descriptive statistics.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine whether significant differences existed between the experimental and comparison groups on the pre-test. Cronbach's alpha was also used to establish the internal reliability of the FSA ELA for each group and for the total sample.

Composite student scale scores on the FSA ELA served as pre- and post-test data to compare the experimental and comparison groups using t-tests of independent samples. Student achievement levels on the FSA ELA were included in the data set, but the researcher believed that scale scores were more specific and accurate when measuring student growth over time. In addition to calculating mean composite scale scores for the experimental and comparison schools, demographic data were subsequently disaggregated and analyzed.

Mean composite scale scores for both the experimental and comparison schools on the fourth-grade FSA ELA were compared to mean composite scale scores on the fifth-grade FSA ELA in order to determine differences between the two groups. Additional comparisons were conducted after disaggregating the experimental group's data based on the demographic variables of gender, socio-economic status, ESE status, and ethnicity.

IRLA pre- and post-test scores of two of three classes of fifth-grade students at the experimental school ($n$ = 39) were compared to determine whether any significant differences existed within the group from pre- to post-test.

The results of the research analyses are discussed in chapter four.

# Chapter 4: Results

## Introduction

The focus of this research study was to evaluate the impact of 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom on fifth-grade students' reading achievement as measured by the FSA ELA. Composite scale scores of fifth-grade students on the fourth-grade FSA ELA for the 2015-2016 school year and the fifth-grade FSA ELA for the 2016-2017 school year provided pre- and post-test measures for students in the experimental and comparison groups. The researcher first analyzed differences between mean pre- and post-test scale scores on the FSA ELA for fifth-grade students in the experimental and comparison groups. Ancillary analyses of differences in mean pre- and post-test scale scores on the FSA ELA of fifth-grade students in the experimental group were also conducted to further investigate differences between and within groups based on the demographic variables of gender, ethnicity, ESE identification, and socioeconomic status. A detailed description of the sample by gender, ethnicity, ESE identification, and socioeconomic status is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

*Demographic Summary of Participants (n = 116)*

| Subgroup category | Experimental | | Comparison | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| Gender | | | | |
| Male | 45% | 23 | 49% | 32 |
| Female | 55% | 28 | 51% | 33 |
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| Black | 51% | 26 | 69% | 45 |
| White | 29% | 15 | 26% | 17 |
| Hispanic | 6% | 3 | 3% | 2 |
| Multiracial | 12% | 6 | 2% | 1 |
| Asian | 2% | 1 | | |
| ESE | 12% | 6 | 20% | 13 |
| Free/Reduced Lunch | 84% | 43 | 82% | 53 |

**Preliminary Analyses**

Prior to addressing the stated research questions and hypotheses associated with the study, relevant preliminary analyses were conducted to determine whether any differences existed between experimental and control groups on the pre-test. The first of these preliminary analyses centered on a comparison of the experimental and comparison groups' pre-test performance on the 2015-2016 fourth-grade FSA ELA using a t-test of independent samples. Results of the comparison are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3

*Pre-Test Comparison of Experimental and Control Groups*

| Treatment group | *n* | Mean FSA ELA scale score | *SD* | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental | 51 | 297.88 | 19.97 | 0.41 | .68 |
| Control | 65 | 299.46 | 20.81 | | |

$t_{(114)} = 0.41$; $p = .68$

One can see that the fourth grade mean FSA ELA pre-test scores of the experimental and control groups were not significantly different, indicating that the samples were not significantly different with regard to reading achievement. Non-significant differences between the groups on the pre-test point allowed the researcher to focus analyses on differences between the post-test scores.

**Internal Reliability**

Table 4 depicts an analysis of the internal consistency (reliability) of participant performance on the post-test composite scale scores of the FSA ELA using Cronbach's alpha test of internal consistency.

Table 4

*Internal Consistency (Reliability) of Participant Performance on FSA ELA as Measured by Cronbach's alpha*

| Group | *n* | *A* |
|---|---|---|
| Total Group | 116 | .90*** |
| Experimental group | 51 | .93*** |
| Control group | 65 | .87*** |

***$p < .001$

The internal consistency of student performance on the FSA ELA between pre- and post-test measures is considered very high ($a = .90$; $p < .001$) for the entire sample. Participants in the experimental group demonstrated an internal consistency alpha level of .93 ($p < .001$), which is considered to be very high. Participants in the control group demonstrated an internal consistency alpha level of .87 ($p < .001$), also considered very high.

**Experimental Results**

The research question driving the study aimed to determine whether independent reading in the classroom impacted reading achievement of fifth-grade students as measured by composite reading scale scores on the Florida Standards Assessment in English Language Arts (FSA ELA). The researcher hypothesized that there would be significant differences between fifth-grade FSA ELA scale scores between the experimental and control group.

Since the preliminary analysis of the FSA ELA scale scores revealed no significant differences between the experimental and comparison group on the fourth-grade pre-test scores, analysis focused on post-test scores of the fifth-grade FSA ELA scale scores. In order to address the research question, t-tests of independent samples were conducted to compare mean post-test scale scores of the experimental and comparison groups. Table 5 depicts the results of the comparison of the two groups.

Table 5

*FSA ELA Post-Test Comparison of Experimental and Comparison Groups*

| Group | *n* | Mean | SD | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental | 51 | 303.20 | 23.72 | 1.39 | .17 |
| Comparison | 65 | 308.97 | 21.10 | | |

Comparison of the post-test mean scores between the experimental and control groups was not statistically significant; therefore, research hypothesis 1 was not supported.

In hypothesis 2, the researcher hypothesized that there would be significant differences from pre-to post-test on the FSA ELA among the fifth-grade students who participated in the experimental intervention at the school. A t-test of dependent samples was conducted to determine whether fifth-grade students in the experimental group demonstrated significant differences from pre- to post-test on the FSA ELA. The results indicated that participants in the experimental group demonstrated a mean difference in FSA ELA scale scores of 5.32 scale score points from the pre- to post-test conditions of the study. This mean difference was highly significant ($t_{(50)} = 3.40$; $p = .001$). Research hypothesis 2 was supported.

**Ancillary Results**

Based on the significant differences between mean scale scores of the pre- and post-test on the FSA ELA for the experimental group, follow-up analyses were conducted to compare the experimental and comparison groups based on gender, ethnicity, ESE identification, and socioeconomic status and are reported in the ancillary results section that follows.

In order to determine whether any differences existed between males and females on the FSA ELA post-test scores within the experimental and control groups, t-tests of dependent samples were conducted to compare reading growth over time within each group. Table 6 depicts the comparisons of post-test composite scale scores on the FSA ELA by gender within experimental and comparison group participants.

Table 6

*FSA ELA Pre-Test/Post-Test Reading Composite Scale Score Differences Within Experimental and Comparison Groups by Gender*

| Gender of participants | *n* | Mean pre-test scale score | Mean post-test scale score | Mean scale score difference (pre-test/post-test) | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental | | | | | | |
| Females | 28 | 302.11 | 305.89 | 3.78 | 1.73 | .09 |
| Males | 23 | 292.74 | 299.91 | 7.17 | 3.24 | .004** |
| Comparison | | | | | | |
| Females | 33 | 304.79 | 314.48 | 9.69 | 4.79 | .001** |
| Males | 32 | 293.97 | 303.28 | 9.31 | 3.17 | .003** |

**$p < .01$

One can see that changes in composite scale scores on the FSA ELA from pre- to post-test were highly significant among fifth-grade male students in both the experimental and comparison groups as well as among the female students in the comparison group. These results indicate that both the experimental and comparison males grew significantly in their FSA ELA composite scale score measures from pre-test to post-test; these findings point to the possible reduction of the reading gap between males and females in this sample. Interestingly, the pre/post comparison of females in the experimental group approached, but did not reach, statistical significance. The fact that the comparison group outperformed the experimental group in overall reading growth over time demands further research.

When t-tests of independent samples were conducted to compare differences in reading growth on the FSA ELA scale scores of the experimental and comparison groups, there were no significant differences between fifth-grade males and females in the experimental group, but

there were significant differences in the comparison group. The results of the comparisons are depicted in Table 7.

Table 7

*FSA ELA Post-Test Comparisons by Treatment Group and Gender of Participants*

| Gender | *n* | Mean | SD | Mean Difference | *t* | *p* | *95% CI Lower/Upper* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental | | | | | | | |
| Female | 28 | 305.89 | 20.99 | 5.98 | 0.89 | .38 | -19.42/7.46 |
| Male | 23 | 299.91 | 26.78 | | | | |
| Comparison | | | | | | | |
| Female | 33 | 314.48 | 21.30 | 11.20 | 2.20 | .03* | -21.36/-1.05 |
| Male | 32 | 303.28 | 19.61 | | | | |

*$p < .05$

The gender gap between male and female students in the experimental group was narrow, but females in the comparison group did perform significantly higher than males on the post-test. More research is needed to determine whether the experimental intervention resulted in reducing the reading achievement gap between males and females.

In order to determine whether any differences existed between pre- and post-test reading achievement within the experimental and comparison groups on the FSA ELA based on ethnicity, t-tests of dependent samples were conducted within ethnicity groups. The Hispanic and Multi-Racial groups' data are included in Table 8 below, but t-test comparisons were not conducted due to small sample sizes in both the experimental and comparison groups.

Table 8

*FSA ELA Pre-Test/Post-Test Comparisons within Groups by Ethnicity*

| Ethnicity | *n* | Mean pre-test scale score | Mean post-test scale score | Mean scale score difference | *SD* | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental | | | | | | | |
| Black | 26 | 298.19 | 302.62 | 4.43 | 12.25 | 1.84 | .08 |
| White | 15 | 298.33 | 304.27 | 5.94 | 9.41 | 2.44 | .03* |
| Hispanic | 3 | 299.00 | 309.00 | 10.00 | 8.54 | | |
| Multi-Racial | 6 | 294.83 | 303.17 | 8.34 | 11.18 | | |
| Comparison | | | | | | | |
| Black | 45 | 293.62 | 302.49 | 8.87 | 15.96 | 3.73 | .000*** |
| White | 17 | 313.71 | 325.25 | 11.54 | 9.31 | 5.16 | .000*** |
| Hispanic | 2 | 301.50 | 310.50 | 9.00 | 12.73 | | |

*$p < .05$ ***$p < .001$

Although a non-significant effect was found for overall (non-disaggregated) participant ethnicity on the post-test comparison ($F_{(4.46)} = 0.19$; $p = .94$), the composite scale score change from pre- to post-test was statistically significant for one of the disaggregated ethnicities, Whites, in the experimental group. Composite scale score differences from pre- to post-test was highly significant for both Whites and Blacks in the comparison group. Because the sample sizes of Hispanic students in both the experimental and comparison groups and Multi-Racial students in the experimental group were insufficient for statistical comparison, t-test comparisons were not conducted or displayed in the table. However, the reader will note the sizable changes in measurable reading growth from pre- to post-test for these two groups. While sample size precludes generalizability, the researcher was encouraged to see sizable gains in reading

achievement among Hispanics and Multi-Racial students at both the experimental and comparison schools.

Further analyses were conducted in order to determine whether significant differences were apparent between the experimental and comparison groups among fifth-grade black students and white students. Table 9 provides a summary of findings.

Table 9

*FSA ELA Post-Test Comparisons by Treatment Group and Ethnicity of Participants*

| Ethnicity (Treatment Group) | *n* | Mean | SD | Mean Difference | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Black (Experimental) | 26 | 302.62 | 22.65 | 0.13 | 0.01 | .98 |
| Black (Comparison) | 45 | 302.49 | 15.58 | | | |
| White (Experimental) | 15 | 304.27 | 30.33 | 21.08 | 2.12 | .04* |
| White (Comparison) | 17 | 325.35 | 26.01 | | | |

*$p < .05$

One can see that there were no significant differences between black students in the experimental and control groups on the FSA ELA post-test. However, the difference between white students in the experimental and control groups was statistically significant in favor of the comparison group. One should note that this result may be have been influenced by female scale scores within the comparison group on the FSA ELA post-test.

Inferential test comparisons between the experimental and control groups based on ESE status were not conducted due to small sample sizes. Table 10 represents a descriptive summary of findings for students identified as ESE in the experimental and comparison groups.

Table 10

*Mean FSA ELA Post-Test Score Comparison of Participants Identified as ESE by Group*

| Group | *n* | Mean pre-test scale score | Mean post-test scale score | Mean difference | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental | 6 | 278.33 | 285.17 | 6.84 | 21.20 |
| Comparison | 15 | 289.47 | 304.47 | 15.00 | 18.99 |

Students in the experimental group identified as ESE ($n$ = 6) demonstrated a mean scale score increase on the FSA ELA from pre- to post-test condition of the study of 6.83 points. While small sample sizes did not allow for t-test comparisons between experimental and comparison groups, the researcher is encouraged by sizable reading gains among fifth-grade students in both groups.

To determine whether there were significant differences between the experimental and comparison groups for students receiving free or reduced lunch, a t-test of independent samples was conducted comparing the post-test scale scores of the two groups. The results are depicted in Table 11.

Table 11

*FSA ELA Reading Composite Scale Score Comparison of Participants Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch by Group*

| Group | *n* | Post-test mean | SD | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental | 43 | 300.44 | 21.26 | 0.98 | .33 |
| Comparison | 53 | 304.38 | 18.06 | | |

Comparisons of the post-test composite scale scores on the FSA ELA between students receiving free or reduced lunch were not significantly different. However, the mean change in

FSA ELA composite scale score from pre- to post-test for students in the experimental group who were receiving free or reduced lunch was 4.40 points and statistically significant ($t_{(42)} = 2.51$; $p = .02$).

**IRLA Results**

The researcher evaluated IRLA scores for a selection of fifth-grade students in the experimental school following one year of implementation of the IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge®. The selection was based upon availability of data for students enrolled in two of the three fifth-grade classes. Data for the third class were not available. The IRLA scores at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year were designated as the pre-test scores, and scores at the end of the 2016-2017 school year became the post-test scores. IRLA scores are calculated by year and month. The whole number represents the grade level (e.g. 3.00 is equivalent to third-grade). The tenths and hundredths represent months and days (e.g. 3.13 is equivalent to third grade, one month, and three days). Since the IRLA metric constitutes continuous level data, statistical analyses were appropriate; t-tests of dependent samples were conducted to compare reading growth over time of males, females, and combined genders among the experimental group. Table 12 depicts a summary of the comparisons.

Table 12

*IRLA Pre-Test/Post-Test within Group Comparisons by Gender for the Experimental Group*

| Gender of participant | *n* | Mean pre-test IRLA score | Mean post-test IRLA score | Mean IRLA score difference (pre-test/post-test) | *t* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Whole Group | 39 | 3.41 | 5.59 | 2.18 | 6.36* |
| Male | 17 | 3.13 | 5.11 | 2.02 | 1.04 |
| Female | 22 | 3.61 | 5.94 | 2.33 | 8.77* |

*$p < .001$

Although the mean change in IRLA scores from pre- to post-test was significant only for females, both males and females at the experimental school demonstrated the equivalent of more than two years of growth in reading after one year's implementation of the independent reading program. The general expectation is that Florida students should make approximately one year of growth each school year. Fifth-grade students at the experimental school exceeded this expectation by more than one-hundred percent. Even more encouraging was the finding that experimental students were reading at a fifth-grade level at the end of the intervention compared to reading at a third-grade level at the beginning of the school year. These IRLA results indicated that female experimental students appeared to be on target for transition to 6$^{th}$ grade based on their mean score of 5.94. Males students in this comparison of experimental students started the year at a lower IRLA score than females, and their progress, while impressive, reveals the need for additional support for males in reading. While female students in the experimental group did not demonstrate significant differences pre/post on the FSA ELA, they did show highly significant differences in reading growth when measured by the IRLA. More research is needed to determine whether the IRLA is a more specific and sensitive instrument for measuring reading growth than the FSA ELA.

**Qualitative Findings**

Although this study was quantitative in nature, the researcher was able to gather notable qualitative, anecdotal data related to implementation of the Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA) and the 100 Book Challenge® while conducting research at the experimental school. These qualitative data support research that were referenced in the literature review in the areas of teacher support, student engagement, student choice, and reading stamina.

Prior to making a decision to pilot IRLA and the 100 Book Challenge®, administration at the experimental school surveyed kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers to determine whether they were interested in the program. An overwhelming one hundred percent of teachers responded in support of the pilot program. As a result of the high level of buy-in, teachers developed classroom environments that supported the pilot program. The researcher observed evidence of high levels of support as measured by organized and diverse classroom libraries, one-on-one teacher/student reading conferences, accountable talk, and consistent and structured independent reading time. These observations support the research findings of Sanden (2012) and Jonson (1998) on the importance of teacher support for developing and maintaining an effective independent reading environment. In addition, high-quality professional development was provided by both the reading coach and the representative of the American Reading Company at the experimental school to ensure consistency and follow-through during the pilot program.

IRLA classroom libraries are specifically developed to represent diversity and a wide range of genres in order to support student choice and high levels of reader engagement. Teachers at the experimental school reported to the school administrator and the researcher that students were able to see themselves in the books that they were choosing to read, resulting in a greater desire to read independently for greater lengths of time. Reports of increased student engagement and reader choice support the research findings of Hall et al. (2014), who determined that diverse classroom libraries provided opportunities for student choice and ownership of independent reading time.

The most notable change observed and reported by teachers at the experimental school was an increase in student stamina across all grade levels as a direct result of the experimental

intervention. Hiebert (2014) defined stamina as the ability to sustain mental effort without teacher support. In October, two months after implementing the pilot program with all students at the experimental school, third-grade students were required to take a district standardized assessment. Teachers reported to the administrator and researcher that students were able to sit quietly and focus on the assessment for 30 to 40 minutes at a time as opposed to 20 to 30 minutes the prior school year. By April 2017, when students were required to take the state standardized assessment, teachers reported that student stamina had increased in third- through fifth-grade students to the point that they were able to focus for nearly 60 minutes during the assessment without observable distraction. Student stamina had doubled since the beginning of the school year, supporting the research findings of Hiebert (2013) that students who participate in independent reading are more likely to become proficient at silent reading and to develop the stamina and perseverance necessary when faced with challenging assessment tasks. This qualitative observation is a very important finding of the pilot program and warrants further research.

**Summary**

FSA ELA composite scale scores between the experimental and comparison schools were not significantly different; research hypothesis 1 was not supported. Composite scale scores on the FSA ELA for fifth-grade students in the experimental group were significantly different, supporting research hypothesis 2. A number of interesting results were uncovered in this research study that were tangential to the research questions and hypotheses. Significant differences between pre- and post-test scores on the FSA ELA were observed among fifth-grade students in the experimental group for male students ($p = .004$), white students ($p = .03$), and students who qualified for free or reduced lunch ($p = .02$). Comparisons of IRLA pre- and post-

test scores revealed significant among the overall experimental group of male and female students, as well as among female students.

Qualitative findings supported the overall evaluation of the IRLA pilot reading program at the experimental school. These findings revealed high levels of teacher support and fidelity in implementing the intervention, increased student engagement during daily classroom independent reading, high interest in reading related to student choice, and increased student stamina during daily classroom independent reading and during standardized assessment sessions. A discussion of the results of this study follows in chapter 5.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

This research study was conducted to evaluate the impact of 60 minutes of daily independent reading in fifth-grade on reading achievement as measured by the Florida Standards Assessment in English Language Arts (FSA ELA). Fifth-grade students in a southwestern Florida school district had struggled to meet achievement expectations on the state-standardized assessments because students were unable to read grade-level text and lacked the stamina required for the 80-minute test sessions of the FSA ELA. This chapter includes a summary of the study and its results, ancillary results, and recommendations for future research.

The experimental school participated in a school-wide pilot of the Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA) and the 100 Book Challenge®, which provided a structured independent reading program for the classroom and diverse classroom libraries targeted at independent reading levels of all students; the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® served as the experimental intervention. The researcher and her administrator observed excellent implementation fidelity during the school year of the pilot. A comparison group of fifth-grade students was selected by the district Assessment, Accountability, and Research (AAR) department based on similar demographics to the experimental school; the comparison group did not participate in the experimental intervention.

An experimental pre-test/post-test control group research design was used to compare fifth-grade reading achievement as measured by FSA ELA scores of the experimental and comparison groups. The research sample included 51 fifth-grade students in the experimental group and 65 fifth-grade students in the comparison group. Fourth-grade FSA ELA composite scale scores served as the pre-test measure and fifth-grade FSA ELA composite scale scores served as the post-test measure.

**Discussion of Experimental Results**

Quantitative comparisons of the experimental and comparison groups did not demonstrate significant differences between post-test composite scale scores on the FSA ELA for fifth-grade students as hypothesized. Certain limitations identified by the researcher may have contributed to these results. First, the researcher did not have control over the selection or identification of the comparison school; the comparison school was selected by the district assessment, accountability, and research (AAR) department based on similar demographics to the experimental school. While the reading standards, assessments, and district reading curriculum in fourth- and fifth-grades were identical in the experimental and comparison groups, the variables of professional development, teaching strategies, student characteristics, and other factors may have influenced the non-significant differences between the experimental and control groups on the FSA ELA.

An additional limitation of the study that may have impacted the results was the fact that the research study was conducted following just one year of implementation of the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge®. The American Reading Company suggests that greater gains are typically observed in the second year of implementation (L. Lindsey, personal communication, March 29, 2017). For this reason, the administration and teachers at the experimental school decided to continue implementing the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® for a second year in hopes that continued growth in reading scores will be realized. An evaluation study following the second year of implementation may demonstrate further measurable gains.

**Discussion of Changes within the Experimental Group**

Significant, positive differences on FSA ELA scale scores from pre- to post-test were observed among fifth-grade students in the experimental group as hypothesized. From a

program evaluation perspective, these results provide promising evidence of the efficacy of the experimental intervention. Analysis of school data after a second year of implementation of the reading intervention, as suggested by the creators of the programs, will make an important contribution to the body of literature on daily independent reading in the classroom and on the overall effectiveness of the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® program.

**Discussion of Ancillary Results**

Results of analyses using data from the experimental group indicated significant growth in reading among fifth-grade students when disaggregated by gender; male students in the experimental group demonstrated significant growth in composite scale scores on the FSA ELA, indicating a possible reduction in gender gap in reading. With regard to ethnicity, white students in the experimental group exhibited significant growth in composite scale scores on the FSA ELA, revealing the need to continue efforts to reduce reading gaps of minority students. Fifth-grade students in the experimental group who received free or reduced lunch demonstrated significant growth in composite scale scores on the FSA ELA, a positive finding for educators who work to reduce the effects of poverty on students. Although the sample size was insufficient for statistical analysis, experimental fifth-grade students identified as ESE demonstrated a mean difference score from pre- to post-test of 6.83 scale score points on the FSA ELA. A larger sample would be required to determine whether an independent reading program would result in significant findings.

Comparisons of IRLA pre- and post-test scores of fifth-grade students were conducted to evaluate reading growth over time for students who participated in the experimental intervention; these comparisons revealed highly significant reading gains after ten months of daily independent reading in the classroom. These findings corroborate the findings of significant

differences in pre- to post-test scale scores on the FSA ELA (research question 2). In addition, the results may point to the IRLA as a more sensitive instrument for measuring reading growth over the academic year than the FSA ELA, although further research is warranted. Overall, fifth-grade students in the experimental group began the 2015-2016 school year at a third-grade reading level and ended the school year at a fifth-grade reading level, indicating the positive impact of implementing a structured independent reading program in the classroom. Significant growth was exhibited among female students in the experimental group from pre- to post-test, suggesting that additional support is needed among male students to promote independent reading.

The results of pre/post-test analyses of the experimental group revealed a number of important results that point to the overall efficacy of the experimental intervention. In addition, qualitative observations and reports by teachers, administrators, and representatives of the American Reading Company drew attention to the many positive effects of the intervention and warrant further research. Qualitative data were collected and analyzed by the researcher to augment the program evaluation of the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® at the experimental school. These qualitative findings revealed strong teacher support for the experimental intervention and its fidelity, increased student engagement during independent reading, and increased stamina during standardized testing.

Possibly the most important qualitative result observed and reported by classroom teachers was that of increased stamina during standardized testing after just two months of implementation of 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom. Most educators would agree that children are easily distracted, especially in today's hyperlinked, non-print-based world. If reading stamina, attention, and focus can be significantly increased by adjusting the

normal reading block to include 30 to 60 minutes of daily independent reading after just two months, then the return on the time invested would certainly be worthwhile. These sort of findings would encourage reluctant teachers to try independent reading in their classrooms, especially when validated by quantifiable research.

**Discussion of School-wide Ancillary Results**

While this research study focused exclusively on reading achievement of fifth-grade students, a number of interesting changes were observed at the experimental school after one year's implementation of 60 minutes of daily independent reading. Each year, the state of Florida calculates the success of public schools by assigning grades using a complex regression model measuring growth over time and annual yearly progress. At the elementary level, school grades are calculated based on achievement and learning gains of fourth- and fifth-grade students in English Language Arts and Math, and fifth-grade scale scores on the Science FCAT (FLDOE, 2017). The experimental school improved its school grade from a C in the 2015-2016 school year to a B in the 2016-2017 school year after implementation of the independent reading program.

Learning gains as measured by FSA achievement levels for fourth- and fifth-grade students on the FSA ELA improved in several areas at the experimental school: 29% of students earned a level 3 in reading achievement (considered on-grade level) or higher, a five percent increase from the previous year; 41% of students made learning gains demonstrating the equivalent of one or more years of growth in reading, an 11% increase from the previous year; and 41% of students in the lowest quartile made learning gains in reading, a 16% increase from the previous year. The improvement in school grade and increase in percentage of students that

made learning gains in reading – especially the lowest quartile of students – provided further support for daily independent reading in the classroom.

Following one year of implementation, the experimental school was recognized by the American Reading Company as one of the top ten schools in the nation for its overall growth in IRLA scores. The school will be utilized as a model school for the district during the 2017-2018 school year, and the administration has been asked to present and share successes at American Reading Company's 2018 Leaders in Literacy conference in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.

Several schools within the study's district purchased the intervention piece of IRLA, called Foundational Skills Toolkits, and plan to use the toolkits specifically with students identified as ESE. However, it should be noted that implementation of the IRLA strictly as an intervention for ESE students rather than for a school-wide initiative is discouraged by the American Reading Company due to the fact that similar results may not be observed.

As a result of the experimental school's success in implementing the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge®, multiple schools within the same district have requested to visit and observe the intervention at the experimental school. The high level of interest across the district has prompted representatives from the American Reading Company to conduct two on-site sessions called "Seeing is Believing" at the experimental school. Those who attend will have the opportunity to ask questions, learn more about IRLA, and observe classroom teachers and students at the experimental school.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Any discussion of the results of this study would be incomplete without a brief discussion of the possible variables leading to the improved growth in reading experienced by fifth-grade students at the experimental school. The research design of this study did not attempt to parse

out the specific factors leading to increased growth by students at the experimental school. One could hypothesize that in addition to the 60 minutes of independent reading, growth effects might have been the result of teacher conferences, student-led discussions, student choices, leveled reading, or other factors discussed in chapter 2. As the literacy coach, the researcher clearly observed best practices in reading education implemented at the experimental school in all grade levels as a result of the intervention's research-based design and its successful implementation at the school. Explorations of the impact of the specific best practices most closely correlated to reading growth would yield important and valuable information to teachers, administrators, and districts, as well as to the American Reading Company.

This study yielded considerable evidence that may stimulate further research regarding the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge®, the best practices integrated into the program, and possible specific elements of the program that produce the greatest growth in reading. An obvious recommendation for future research would be the replication of this study's research design after two years of implementation at the experimental school. This school year's fourth-graders who transition to fifth-grade will have had two years of the reading intervention, which is the recommended implementation time to maximize results (L. Lindsey, personal communication, March 29, 2017).

In addition to fifth-grade students, research could be expanded to include all elementary grades, which would also increase the size of ethnic groups for comparison purposes, and to include students who attend the gifted magnet program within the experimental school in order to determine whether independent reading in the classroom yields similar results.

A great deal of qualitative data related to implementation of the IRLA and 100 Book Challenge® were obtained from teachers and administrators as a result of the study. Gathering

and analyzing qualitative data in the form of teacher and student interviews and/or surveys, as well as classroom observations, would provide a rich source of information regarding the program and its efficacy and possibly lead to other quantitative research studies.

The experimental school implemented 60 minutes of daily independent reading in the classroom consisting of two thirty-minute sessions, twice the 30 minutes daily recommended by Allyn & Morrell (2016) in elementary school. Additional research implementing 30 minutes of daily independent reading would provide valuable information to determine whether the impact on student achievement is similar to results obtained in this study and to determine which grade levels benefit most by 30 or 60 minutes. When one considers the reading development theory of Jeanne Chall discussed in chapter 2, the differences between students and independent reading time becomes obvious. Two 30-minute periods of daily independent reading in the classroom might not be developmentally appropriate for kindergarten or first-grade students who are still learning the basics of reading, while 30 minutes might be too little time for fifth-grade students who are reading for information, building fluency and vocabulary, and developing increased enjoyment of reading specific genres and authors.

Another potential research topic might focus on the types of students for whom daily independent reading is most beneficial. Studies that examine the effects of independent reading programs on various types of readers, such as fast readers vs slower readers, gifted students vs average students, and on-grade level vs below-grade level students, would provide a rich source of research to guide decision-making in classrooms and schools and to further develop the literature in reading education.

Students in the experimental group of this study consisted of those who attended the general education program within the experimental school; students attending the gifted magnet

program within the experimental school were not included in the study. Inclusion of students in the gifted magnet program may produce different results than those represented in this study, providing rich opportunities for additional research.

Finally, research on increases in student stamina observed by administration and teachers at the experimental school following implementation of daily independent reading in the classroom should be conducted to determine the impact of increased stamina on student achievement in the classroom and on standardized assessments. Additional research related to student stamina may further support the research of Hiebert (2013), indicating the important relationship between independent reading and developing the stamina and perseverance that students need in order to read complex texts and face challenging assessment tasks.

**Significance of the study**

This research study was conducted to determine the impact of daily classroom independent reading on fifth-grade students' reading achievement. Comparisons between composite scale scores on the FSA ELA of experimental and comparison students were not significantly different. However, students in the experimental group demonstrated significant growth in reading achievement as measured by the FSA ELA and IRLA. Fifth-grade students in the experimental group exhibited an average of more than two years of reading growth after participating in the daily independent reading program for 10 months. Students entered the 2016-2017 school year reading at a third-grade level; after the intervention of IRLA, the two-year reading gap was closed and students were reading on grade level by the end of the school year. In addition, teachers at the experimental school reported increased student engagement during independent reading and increased stamina during standardized testing. These findings

point to the overall effectiveness of the daily independent reading program and add to the body of literature on this important area of reading education in elementary school.

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