Can pupil choice over English curriculum content improve pupils' sense that the subject is 'for them'? Assessing the impact of curriculum choice on pupils' engagement, confidence and sense of inclusion in the English Classroom

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Assessing the impact of curriculum choice on pupils' engagement, confidence and sense of inclusion in the English classroom.

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Abstract

In this qualitative research and development project, I investigated the impact of pupil text choice on engagement in English lessons. School curricula have been shown to favour middle-class pupils (Demie and Lewis, 2010) and this project focused primarily on the experiences of a school priority: Pupil Premium pupils. Two low-attaining Year 7 classes from a co-educational comprehensive school were used for this study. Pupils chose their own novel from a shortlist to study for one term. Independent reading and collaborative activities developed while teaching became focused on skills over content. Attitudes to engagement were assessed qualitatively using Likert-scale questions, free text questionnaires and semi-structured group interviews before, during and after the intervention. Findings showed the positive impact of choice on engagement. Pupils overwhelmingly enjoyed their book, looked forward to English lessons more and began reading more frequently at home. Many felt they were learning more, were better independent readers and knew what book they would read next. Interviews revealed many pupils were beginning to develop greater self-identities as readers as a result of choice. Some inconsistencies between questionnaire and interview data led to revelations about pupil perceptions of reading and its difference between the home and the school. Implications for further practice are discussed.

Can pupil choice over English curriculum content improve pupils' sense that the subject is 'for them'? Assessing the impact of curriculum choice on pupils' engagement, confidence and sense of inclusion in the English classroom.

Introduction

According to his friend and biographer James Boswell, Samuel Johnson once remarked that 'a man ought to read just as inclination leads him; for what he reads as a task will do him little good' (Knowles, 2009: 439). Though we should not, perhaps, take Johnson or Boswell at their word, this comment raises salient questions about reading choice. What 'good' do we aim to achieve when pupils read? How far should we allow 'inclination' to lead them? Does reading in school seem a mere 'task' for many students? These questions, and others, arose as I continually tried to engage my pupils in reading on the curriculum and often encountered lack of interest or what I identified as disengagement. That this occurs with increased frequency as pupils grow older (Clark and Teravainen, 2017) should be of concern to all teachers.

During my first term at my current school, Trelawney College (this name, and all subsequent ones, are pseudonyms), I followed department policy by asking pupils in Year 7 (aged 11-12 years) to read independently for 20 minutes at the start of each lesson. Over the course of two months, I witnessed a variety of reading habits. Some pupils brought a novel from home each lesson, some brought a magazine of personal interest, some borrowed books from the classroom library. Many could find nothing of interest on these poorly-stocked shelves and often were reduced to reading the same book repeatedly or choosing a book at random and absent-mindedly turning pages. I was frustrated that this reading often felt 'tagged on' to the

lesson, bore little relevance to lesson content and ultimately did little to engage those readers who spent the 20 minutes doing anything but reading. Moreover, it was not a system that allowed me to assess my pupils' reading habits, comprehension or enjoyment. The eventual pointlessness of this task culminated in a moment when my teaching assistant, Mr Johnson, said to a pupil who was struggling to find a book of interest 'Just hurry up and choose something or I'll choose one for you'. I wanted to make this activity more useful and relevant and, ultimately, I wanted to change pupils' perceptions that they were not readers, to engage them in reading they could enjoy.

In addition to this personal grievance, three broader factors compelled the present study. In recent years, the UK government has implemented the teaching of more challenging texts in Key Stage 4 (KS4, the years of schooling for pupils aged 14-16) in preparation for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE, the compulsory school-leavers' examination in England). My school contains a high number of, traditionally-underachieving, pupils in receipt of the Pupil Premium Grant (PPG, additional funding for pupils in English schools identified as 'disadvantaged' (Education Funding Agency (EFA), 2016)). An impetus from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the government's school inspection body, to maintain good reading habits, especially among boys, was identified in the school's most recent inspection report. Enhanced pupil engagement in reading improves wider reading ability and comprehension (Twist *et al*., 2007) and proficiency across the curriculum (Education at a Glance, 2011). Fostering a sense of classroom inclusion through reading, particularly as pupils make the transition from primary to secondary school, has academic as well as social advantages. As pupils progress into adolescence, their enjoyment of reading wanes (Clark and Teravainen, 2017), with boys, White British pupils and those in receipt of free school meals (FSM) the most at risk groups. As the first year of the reformed English

GCSE takes effect, with its emphasis on academically-demanding texts, it is increasingly important to nurture regular – and enjoyable – reading habits among all pupils.

There are persuasive arguments for the need for this study in my current school: the cumulative effects of poverty, predominantly low levels of family education and the prevalence of at-risk pupil populations regarding reading engagement and attainment. Trelawney College is a secondary academy situated within a small urban area in Cornwall, a rural county in the south west of England. It serves over 1,300 pupils from the town and various small surrounding villages. In 2015, five of the wards in the school's catchment area were in the most deprived 10% areas nationally and five were in the most deprived 20% (Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), 2015: 2); the ward immediately surrounding the school is in the bottom 3% (Ordnance Survey (OS), 2017). Within the school, 31.7% of pupils receive the PPG (Ofsted, 2016), compared to 29.1% nationally (Pupil premium 2016 to 2017, 2017). The area is one of low ethnic diversity, with 93.9% of pupils on school roll identified as White British and just 2.4% speaking English as an additional language. In its most recent Ofsted report in 2012, the school was ranked 'Good' and is currently aiming for an 'Outstanding' judgement. Despite this, there are various factors threatening outstanding progress by pupils. The implications of the reformed English GCSE, coupled with the multiple stressors associated with poverty, must be acknowledged. In an area that is predominantly in the bottom 20% most deprived for employment and education (OS, 2017), it should not be assumed that the progress and standards the school has already achieved will continue without adapting to the needs of new pupils and developing new interventions.

The most recent Ofsted report identifies some effective reading strategies already in Trelawney College. 'The additional reading sessions and use of technological aids for students in Years 7 and 8 are used well to encourage boys in the reading habit', it notes

(School Inspection Report, 2012: 5), in addition to the observation that 'Boys commented favourably on the progress they have made in reading, "I don't mind having a go now," was a typical remark in discussions' (School Inspection Report, 2012: 8). In the five years since then, however, reduced funding has led the school to abandon its use of the Accelerated Reader programme, shown to significantly boost reading enjoyment (Clark and Cunningham, 2016). It no longer runs designated library lessons and, in the current Year 7 cohort, has received an intake of below average attainment at KS2. In Year 7, 38% of pupils are PPG and 43% have a reading age below their chronological age (Appendix 1). PPG pupils are disproportionately amongst those with a reading age currently below their chronological age, compared to those with a reading age equal to or greater than their chronological age, where a below average PPG number for the cohort is evident. This trend of lower attainment in reading for poorer pupils is common (Strand, 2015) and there are myriad reasons for this, including widespread societal concerns that, arguably, are beyond the power of the school to address (Bhattacharya, 2010). Nevertheless, these data show there is a need for a reading intervention to raise the standards of all pupils in Year 7, particularly those who are already disadvantaged.

Within the Year 7 cohort, 45% of boys and 41% of girls have a reading age below their chronological age, showing a more pressing need to address boys' reading primarily. This, compounded with research showing a national and even international trend for girls to outperform boys in reading achievement (Schwabe *et al*., 2015) and evidence from Trelawney College that 'boys are not always given opportunity to stretch themselves as well as they could' (School Inspection Report, 2012: 6), shows the urgent need to implement a reading intervention that supports boys in particular.

This practitioner research asked the following question: 'Can pupil choice over English curriculum content improve pupils' sense that the subject is "for them"?'. The emphasis here is on assessing pupil perceptions of reading after the application of a reading intervention, rather than on quantifying ability through, for example, reading age data. There are several reasons for this focus. In England, compulsory school instruction time devoted to reading, writing and literature is reduced from over 20% of the time for 9-11 year-olds to just 11% for 12-14 year-olds (Education at a Glance, 2010); 77.6% of 8-11 year-olds nationally enjoy reading compared to 55.2% of 11-14 year-olds and just 43.8% of 14-16 year-olds. Those that enjoy reading are nearly five times more likely to read each day outside school than their peers (Clark and Teravainen, 2017). As instructional time reduces, so too does pupil enjoyment of reading and their desire to do it, this at a time when pupils prepare to sit public examinations covering Shakespeare, 19th-century novels, Romantic to modern poetry and unseen 19th-century literary non-fiction (Reformed GCSE subject content consultation (Reformed GCSE), 2013). If reading can be made more enjoyable and relevant for teenagers then reading frequency increases. This is particularly significant as instructional time decreases. More frequent reading impacts upon pupils' attainment in English examinations (Kirsch *et al*., 2002), as well as more broadly across the curriculum (Education at a Glance, 2010) and, indeed, on pupils' future lives (Adult Literacy and Numeracy, 2014). Although reading ages and test scores may be effective measures for assessing progress, this study seeks to find ways of embedding reading engagement, a characteristic with longer-lasting consequences (Moje *et al*., 2008).

Central to this study is an understanding that education has broader aims than merely getting pupils to achieve targets or fulfil a preconceived idea of their academic potential (Pring, 2010). Not all pupils are engaged by the often reductive version of English taught in schools

(Coles, 2013; Elliott, 2014) and thus it was important for me not only to discover my pupils' existing levels of engagement with reading but also to trial a new way of engaging them.

Literature Review

Many studies show the positive effects on engagement of allowing pupils reading choice in the English classroom (Pitcher *et al*., 2007; Gaskins, 2008; Parks Duncan, 2010). To better understand the reasons for this, I surveyed existing literature under the following six Literature Review questions:

Q1) Do the ideological and pedagogical assumptions behind the existing national curriculum facilitate inclusive access to learning for all students?

Q2) In what ways can 'Literacy Engagement' be understood?

Q3) Can pupil choice improve engagement?

Q4) Are there cognitive benefits to pupil choice?

Q5) How can pupils make appropriate choices?

Q6) Which pupils need to be engaged?

<u>Q1: Do the ideological and pedagogical assumptions behind the existing National Curriculum facilitate inclusive access to learning for all students?</u>

There is little debate about the importance of all pupils having 'inclusive access to learning'. Debate does exist, however, around the merits of allowing pupils choice in the curriculum.

To investigate the reasons for this, it is necessary to investigate the ideological and pedagogical assumptions behind the existing National Curriculum because therein lie differing interpretations of how pupils can best achieve. 'Ideological assumptions' refers here to what may be called the beliefs behind politically-motivated decisions taken in education in England in recent years. 'Pedagogical assumptions', which cannot entirely be separated from 'ideological' ones, refers to educational practices stemming from and closely (perhaps necessarily) linked to the political ideology (Bernstein, 1977b; Pring, 2010).

The National Curriculum itself contains implicit ideological assumptions. It aims to introduce pupils to 'the best that has been thought and said' by prioritising 'essential knowledge' (The National Curriculum in England (National Curriculum), 2014: 5). Michael Gove (Conservative Secretary of State for Education from 2010-2014), with specific regard to the reformed English GCSE, emphasises 'high quality challenging texts' (Reformed GCSE, 2013: 7). The language of Gove and his National Curriculum echoes Matthew Arnold's famous description of culture as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world' (Arnold, 2006: 51). Indeed, using Arnold's words to justify studying particular kinds of knowledge and not others has been at the root of those arguments that promote a 'traditionalist' curriculum (Yandell and Brady, 2016). The peculiarly idealist meaning of 'culture' as 'refinement of mind, taste, and manners; artistic and intellectual development' ('Culture', 2017), with the implications of excellence and sophistication this carries, has been promoted by the National Curriculum over other meanings such as the more anthropological sense of 'popular culture' (Logan, 2017), a conceptual understanding which can facilitate access to learning for a broader section of society, beyond the dominant population (Ferdman, 1990).

An example of this is Conway, writing as Gove began his reforms in 2010, that:

> Without the widespread dissemination of culture, Arnold feared the conditions of modernity would brutalise sensibility and make for a more disorderly society (Conway, 2010: xxiv).

These words, published by the think tank *Civitas* – an organisation favoured by the then Secretary of State (Millar, 2013) – reveal an understanding of 'culture' as a civilising force in opposition to perceived malign influences (Collini, 2004). Moreover, the argument follows the ideological assumptions of curriculum traditionalists such as F.R. Leavis (1930). To adopt Leavis' terms, Conway's argument positions 'mass civilization' against 'minority culture' and promotes the latter in the school curriculum because 'minority culture', that is, learning that must be acquired through individual hard work and which is thus only available to the minority, becomes equated with moral virtuousness.

Current proponents of a school curriculum held to contain 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2010: 5) (one with supposed epistemological objectivity) believe that the practical 'dissemination' of culture is a way of preserving society (Conway, 2010). The National Curriculum prizes 'essential knowledge' (National Curriculum, 2014: 5) though in reality this knowledge is essentially minority culture (Williams, 1983; Hanley, 2017); in Bernstein's terms, the aim of such a curriculum is 'cultural reproduction' (Bernstein, 1977b: 514) which favours those who design it: the middle class.

To turn to Arnold for the justification of such ideological assumptions is to misrepresent his viewpoint, however (Yandell and Brady, 2016; Free Thinking, 2017). Elsewhere, he describes the need to turn:

> a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly (Arnold, 2006: 51).

Here, his metaphor of mechanisation warns against the unconscious imbibing and promulgation of knowledge without employing the critical mind. He criticises those who view culture as 'class distinction', a 'badge' that separates them 'from other people who have not got it' (Arnold, 2006: 81). Arnold's intention was to promote the necessity of active thought to complement action. He held culture, learning and the acquisition of knowledge in opposition to staunch and mechanical action, and believed a text should be appreciated not in and of itself but could become a device for new ways of thinking and, importantly, for taking action. However, his argument is rarely viewed in this way (Yandell and Brady, 2016). Instead, through the glorification of some kinds of knowledge over others – through the belief that some knowledge is 'essential' (National Curriculum, 2014: 6) – subject matter becomes regarded in isolation from the world around it, to be merely learned through the supposedly simple application of mind (Dewey, 2004). Such a viewpoint is evident in the words of Gove who, espousing the musical qualities of Richard Wagner over the Arctic Monkeys, writes: 'there is such a thing as the best' (Gove, 2011). Inherent within these words are the ideological assumptions of the National Curriculum.

There are clear pedagogical assumptions stemming from this ideology. Ferdman (1990) argues that in a culturally-homogenous society, literacy is conceptualised as a set of skills or a characteristic within an individual whereas in a multicultural community, literacy can be more easily conceived of as being culturally framed. Cultural homogeneity or diversity may not be the only conditions required for this understanding, however, since the National Curriculum's emphasis on particular kinds of knowledge leans to an understanding of literacy as values and functional skills that *must* be acquired rather than the ability to communicate within cultures of class, ethnicity, gender or age. Hirsch (1987, 2006) has been much utilised by Gove to justify his convictions. His observation that those with less economic, social and cultural capital perform less well academically than their peers has been

borne out more recently in the UK (Strand, 2015). His championing of cultural literacy (2006) to mitigate this has necessarily resulted in the promotion of acquiring knowledge before skills, a theme easily exploited by National Curriculum ideology. Hirsch argues that teaching reading strategies after fundamental decoding skills have been mastered is futile because acquiring broad cultural knowledge to better understand texts can become neglected. 'For children to make substantial progress in reading, they must make early and substantial progress in knowledge' (Hirsch, 2006: 11), he writes, though he is selective with empirical evidence. The study he cites here and elsewhere to support this (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1997) found fluency in cultural literacy to be just *one* predictor (among print exposure in general) of successful reading in later years.

The way culture is understood and valued affects conceptions of literacy; this, in turn, affects learning in schools. Hirsch's work, for example, has become simplified in popular teaching discourse such as blog posts driven more by beliefs than evidence. Kirby (2016) writes 'memorising facts is a great way to learn' while Didau (2017), expounding the benefits of acquiring knowledge, suggests 'the more information we acquire from external sources, the richer our thought processes will become. This much seems self-evident'. While it might be easy to dismiss such reliance on 'self-evident' empiricism, with over 50,000 Twitter followers between them, these voices wield a not insignificant influence on current teaching practice in the UK.

Debate against the supposition that some knowledge is more important than others also traces its roots to Arnold. Yandell and Brady (2016) read Arnold as desiring 'complex and contingent interactions between texts and readers' (Yandell and Brady, 2016: 57). Through their observations of the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet* in the very different English and Palestinian classrooms, they found pupils from different cultures responding differently to the

social and moral themes raised in the text. These different interpretations, discussed and developed through dialogue, allowed the pupils to use the text as a tool to broaden their own thinking, rather than to absorb the apparent certainties of the canonical work.

Their finding has deep relevance for this study. Twenty-first-century Britain is a place of increasing social and economic polarisation (Savage *et al*., 2015: 3) and although it is widely acknowledged by curriculum traditionalists that the poorest pupils in society often lack the cultural literacy required to succeed in schools (Hirsch, 2006), the result has been to place more emphasis than ever on teaching this and to neglect engagement. Learning in the current National Curriculum is easier for pupils with higher levels of social, economic and cultural capital (Savage *et al*., 2015); these are not the low-attaining and high-poverty pupils of my class or school. If 'minority culture' is cherished, this unavoidably neglects the culture of the majority and denies 'inclusive access to learning' for many. The Matthew effect, a term used to describe 'rich-get-richer and poor-get-poorer patterns of reading achievement' (Stanovich, 1986), persists.

The ideological assumptions of the National Curriculum contain a belief in the supposed superiority of some knowledge over others; the pedagogical assumptions include disseminating this knowledge and instilling it within pupils. This facilitates learning for pupils with more economic, social and cultural capital since it prioritises knowledge those pupils already have more ready access to, thus making it harder for all pupils to participate. This could lead to greater disengagement among pupils for whom the cultural orientation of the National Curriculum is not an immediate point of reference.

Q2: In what ways can 'literacy engagement' be understood?

Identifying a pupil as an 'engaged reader' is complex, since many factors (context, purpose and reading material) all carry influence (Ivey, 1999). However, in this section I assess differing theoretical frameworks which go towards understanding 'literacy engagement'.

'Engagement' is etymologically related to the notion of 'pledge', with formal or legal connotations (Onions *et al*., 1966: 314). Its meaning now includes the softer idea of 'occupied' or 'focused' attention (Axelson and Flick, 2010) and its use as a synonym for 'motivation' in education dates more particularly from the 1980s (Hruby *et al*., 2016). Three forms of engagement have been defined: cognitive, emotional and behavioural (Jimerson *et al*., 2003). The fact that a pupil may appear behaviourally engaged but not be so cognitively, or vice versa, reveals the overlapping nature of these definitions and the complexity of separating them completely.

Twentieth-century literature on motivation has been categorised into intentional, respondent, constructed and contingent metatheoretical frameworks, formed on the agentive assumptions in the research (Hruby *et al*., 2016). The way that a pupil is understood to be motivated affects the ways that motivation is assessed. In an 'intentional' framework (Huey, 1908; Dewey, 1913), the child has an intrinsic ability to learn and through a functional process will develop effective learning evidenced in their environment. In a complete inversion of this, a 'respondent' paradigm posits the causes of motivation to be external while the effects are internally located. Deriving from behaviourist frameworks of studying motivation (Hull, 1947), this theory of motivation is relevant to reading engagement inasmuch as the reader is considered a 'passive object of structured conditioning or textual constraint' (Hruby *et al*., 2016: 622). Mapping onto the theoretical grounds of New Criticism (the close reading of literature perceived as a self-contained aesthetic object), the 'respondent' paradigm removes

motivational agency from the pupil because it identifies a 'motivated' pupil as one who merely *responds* to external stimuli. Within this 'respondent' framework, many studies surveyed student interest in reading although consensus over a reliable methodology for assessing this was not reached (Purves and Beach, 1972). Moreover, active pupil engagement is still only understood as a phenomenon connected to society's needs: 'the researchers never quite freed themselves from notions of what students' interests "should be"' (Purves and Beach, 1972: 76).

The 'constructed' framework, by contrast, influenced by Chomsky (1957), considers both the causes and effects of motivation to be internal. Within literacy instruction this influenced an 'epistemologically rationalist, and often ontologically idealist' paradigm (Hruby *et al*., 2016: 612). To the extent that literacy engagement was assessed, the role of the individual and their internal state was paramount: 'the only real reading is that which comes out of one's own drives and interests' (Douglas, cited in Farrell, 1978: 207). The more recent 'contingent' framework (emerging from the late 1980s), however, is characterised by understanding 'the importance of sociocultural context in the development of social and cognitive behavioural (. . .) practices.' (Hruby *et al*., 2016: 622). In this metatheoretical model, the motivated pupil is one who can 'collaborate, co-construct, explore, and use what they already know and do every day to learn literacy content and practices' (p. 617). The pupil's interaction with a text and their resulting motivation contributes to their identity, and the research, through its understanding of literacy as a social activity where meanings are co-constructed, intrinsically challenges the socioeconomic and political status quo. Perhaps because of this framework's emphasis on sociality and societal influences, reading choice is frequently a way of assessing engagement (Beck, 2009; Fisher and Frey, 2012).

This contingent way of thinking about motivation, a term more recently superseded by 'engagement' in sociocultural paradigms, aligns more closely with ways of understanding literacy. Vygotsky described language as a mediator of activity inhabiting both social and psychological realms (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) and it has been suggested that literacy is primarily a social, rather than cognitive, skill (Larson and Marsh, 2015; McCormick, 1994; Pearson and Cervetti, 2015). If this sociocultural way of understanding literacy is accepted, it then becomes possible to acknowledge the roles of power and agency in determining which – and whose – literacy practices are valued (Moje *et al*., 2008). A 'contingent' paradigm, then, appears to facilitate a more transactional process between text, reader and society which takes account of dialogue, differing interpretations and the process of understanding a text (Yandell and Brady, 2016). In this paradigm, an engaged pupil is not one who simply responds to text and *does* activities, but one who seeks out, challenges and explores texts and whose understanding contributes to a framing of their identity. Importantly, these are characteristics of engaged readers at all ages and stages of development (Baker *et al*., 2000).

'Literacy engagement' understood as a process where a pupil's motivation can be instigated externally and by complex means, as well as where a pupil can display the effects of their engagement externally within a discursive community, is a relatively recent framework. This research asks if pupil text choice can enhance pupils' sense of engagement and inclusion in the classroom. The 'contingent' paradigm of literacy engagement accentuates the importance of the teacher in providing stimulating reading materials, the importance of peers with whom to discuss and discover meaning and the importance of acknowledging the individual pupil's interests in relation to society's priorities in literacy instruction.

Q3: Can pupil choice improve engagement?

'Contingent' studies, which account for the variable and serendipitous causes of reading motivation, have shown that pupil choice can increase engagement. Perhaps because of the sociological rather than psychological orientation of such research – the sociocultural rather than cognitive emphasis – qualitative methods have predominantly been used because they help the researcher explore and investigate, not test and certify. Oldfather (1993) observed the 'motivating power of choice' (Oldfather, 1993: 678) in an eight-month investigation into motivation, using primary-age pupils as co-researchers. One of her respondents tellingly commented:

> choice is very important. Like in reading, if I want to read, I'll be excited and do it. If I don't, I won't be interested and won't learn as much (p. 678).

One limitation, however, is that Oldfather investigated already-motivated pupils learning in a classroom culture that clearly valued their voices and interests. Similarly, Sanden (2012) sought teachers deemed to be already 'highly effective' by their school leadership but nevertheless found, in the resulting analysis of the habits and perceptions of eight such teachers across eight different schools, unanimous agreement that pupil text choice with teacher support led to increased engagement shown through greater independence. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) showed that choice could *enhance* engagement rather than that choice was a characteristic of already-engaged readers. The scale of their research distinguishes their study from those previously mentioned; they surveyed 1,765 American 11-12 year-olds from a range of ability levels and socioeconomic backgrounds across 23 schools. In investigating reading preferences they found that 42% of pupils reported feeling more motivated by having choice over reading material. Significantly, this was a finding from pupil responses in open-ended questionnaires, showing the meaningful impact of choice on pupils' perceptions of

their own reading. This finding is complemented by Oldfather (2002) who found that pupils initially not motivated in literacy learning could become so and that one of the means through which this occurred was through greater choices for pupils to decide 'what and how they learned' (Oldfather, 2002: 245). Although many of these studies (Sanden, 2012; Oldfather, 1993, 2002) focus on primary-age pupils and their teachers, similar results have been found with older pupils. Pitcher *et al*. (2007) investigated adolescents' attitudes to reading practices in school; one finding from a survey of 384 teenagers with 100 subsequent interviews was greater enthusiasm when pupils had been allowed to read in literature circles or choose their own books and greater likelihood of disengagement when reading texts assigned by the teacher. As pupils continue to discover and shape their own identity throughout adolescence, the offer of classroom text choice becomes increasingly important as a way of supporting this.

In the focus on adolescence in particular, researchers have found a discrepancy between out of school 'multiliteracies' (Pitcher *et al*., 2007: 391) and in-school reading: though many pupils read widely in different formats beyond school, few self-identified as readers (Pitcher *et al*., 2007). This conclusion is corroborated by O'Brien *et al*. (2007) who found increased student engagement (among struggling 12-14 year-old readers) when new literacy practices, including digital media, were used in the classroom. Traditional literacy practices were found to reinforce notions of incompetence. Bintz (1993) found that many pupils identified as passive or reluctant readers by their teachers were often avid readers at home, they merely read very different kinds of texts; these pupils did not lose interest in reading itself but rather in 'school reading' (Bintz, 1993: 613) Though many pupils, especially teenagers, may read widely in a range of formats beyond school, there remains a tension between so-called school-approved reading and pupil interests. This has a significant impact upon pupils' identities because if pupils repeatedly read texts not of interest, this can lead to

disengagement and beliefs that they are not readers. Having text choice during lessons, however, is one way in which pupils felt able to assert self-expression in school reading practices. Although there are limits to assessing engagement through teacher and pupil perceptions alone, such as the subjective nature of responses, the 'contingent' framework of researching student motivation emphasises the significance of pupils' reflections and perceptions of their own engagement; through this is constructed an identity.

The 'contingent' framework of understanding literacy engagement challenges the implied cultural hegemony of the National Curriculum. Therefore, recent research on literacy engagement and pupil choice has focused on groups traditionally considered to be marginalised or underperforming. Interest in reading declines during adolescence (Clark and Teravainen, 2017) and Moje *et al*. (2008) used research into teenage literacy practices outside of school – and their finding of widespread reading habits – to challenge the notion of an 'adolescent literacy crisis' (Moje *et al*., 2008: 107). Despite this, they found only the independent reading of novels had a definitive impact on academic achievement measured by school grades; the disparity between in- and out-of-school reading persists. Pupil text choice was also found to be a strong factor in motivating secondary-age boys to read (Fisher and Frey, 2012; Wilhelm and Smith, 2014). A more extreme example of engaging marginalised groups is found in Perry and Moses' (2011) ethnographic, 18-month study of three Sudanese refugee families in America. It concluded that children's television and text choices depended on prior interest and that teachers should consider their pupils' interests as a motivation to engage in texts in the classroom. The usefulness of this finding to my investigation of white native English speakers in England may be limited, however, since the fact the refugee families were displaced may have emphasised the need to engage the children socially and intellectually in order to facilitate their motivation in school. Nevertheless, the prevalence of choice from all these studies remains.

My research group consisted predominantly of boys and PPG pupils, two groups which historically underachieve (Watson, *et al*., 2010; Dunne and Gazeley, 2008) and tend to dislike reading independently (Clark and Teravainen, 2017). It is important for such pupils to develop an identity that includes acceptance and enjoyment of reading, especially considering the role of literacy in forming adolescents' individual and social identity (Phelps, 2006). For pupils who are culturally distanced from the National Curriculum (Savage *et al*., 2015), it is essential that teachers acknowledge reading choice tied to personal interest rather than impose their version of necessary knowledge. Pring has persuasively argued that too many young people are neglected in education because: 'the voices they listen to are not considered to be among "the best that has been thought and said"' (Pring, 2004: 52). Pupil choice, then, can improve engagement and teachers and schools have a moral obligation to acknowledge this. Recognising pupil interest and permitting choice fosters children's personal identity and facilitates participation in literacy.

Q4: Are there cognitive benefits to pupil choice?

In a conventional English classroom in this country, a class often shares the reading of a class text, reading typically takes place aloud and will be shared between the teacher and confident pupils (Thompson, 2015). However, this model presents various problems. Thompson has written: 'what do these practices teach the students about reading or the teacher about the pupils' reading development? Virtually nothing of course' (Thompson, 2015: 101). Firstly, it becomes harder to assess pupil engagement in reading when pupils are merely respondent to a text and the teacher's directions (Daniels, 2002); it has been suggested that pupil engagement in such activities is minimal (O'Donnell-Allen, 2006). Secondly, it quells discussion. Dialogue is widely acknowledged to be beneficial to reading comprehension (Gersten *et al*., 2001; Rojas-Drummond *et al*., 2014) and it has been shown that when

conversation about texts is led by teachers rather than peers, dialogue is often suppressed (Applebee, 1996; Skidmore and Murakami, 2012, Almasi *et al*., 2001). If pupils are more engaged, the conditions for comprehension will increase, yet if dialogue and engagement are limited, so too will be comprehension.

Pupil choice leads to increased engagement and increased engagement has been shown to have cognitive benefits (Kelley and Clausen-Grace, 2009). Campbell *et al*. (2000), in their longitudinal study of reading performance in America between 1971 and 1996, used student surveys counterpointed with test results and found higher test scores among those that read more frequently for fun. The gap between those that read 'daily' and 'never' widened from 14 points (average scale score) for 9 year-olds to 33 points for 13 year-olds, suggesting the importance of maintaining reading for pleasure among teenagers. Evidence from PISA shows that engaged readers had higher average reading scores than disengaged. Significantly, this countered the educational disadvantage associated with socio-economic background: highly-engaged 15 year-olds with parents in the lowest occupational status performed significantly better than their disengaged peers with parents in the highest occupational status (an average score of 540 to 491). The researchers warn, however, that 'Cognition and motivation, proficiency and engagement in reading have an entangled relationship. Cause cannot be disentangled from effect' (Kirsch *et al*., 2002: 121). Indeed, findings from Bozack and Salvaggio (2013) concluded that test scores among 13-14 year-old boys were predictive of motivational factors the following year. It should not be assumed that choice leads to engagement which leads to increased competence; rather, engagement and competence are simultaneously present and mutually reinforcing.

Reynolds and Symons (2001) used quantitative methods, which had the benefit of more rigorously determining cause and effect, to investigate the effects of choice on pupils' search

of informational texts. They found that those with choice were faster at finding information and used more efficient searching strategies, such as making use of the index, contents page and skimming and scanning the text. Comprehension as measured by speed and use of active reading strategies was positively correlated with giving pupils choice. Taboada *et al*. (2009) did not present pupils with choice but found reading motivation (as rated by the teacher) to have a significant impact upon later comprehension.

Providing pupils with a choice of culturally-relevant texts has been shown to increase both comprehension and engagement. Culturally-relevant teaching aims to empower pupils through exposing them to myriad literacies in order to challenge the social status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1992). By more closely aligning school and pupil cultures, academic performance improves (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Cartledge *et al*. (2016) found increased reading fluency (measured by number of correct words read per minute) when pupils read culturally-relevant texts. Ebe (2012), rather than offering free choice, used a 'cultural relevance rubric' with which to gauge the similarity between reader and character in the text. She found, albeit in a small-scale study of four participants, increased proficiency and comprehension when reading culturally-relevant texts. Proficiency was measured by ability to re-tell the story unaided and comprehension by number of miscues while reading. By both measures, culturally-relevant texts yielded better results. Significantly, this was also for the older age group of 12-13 year-olds. If pupils like culturally-relevant texts more (Ebe, 2012, Cartledge *et al*., 2016), they will be more engaged and will choose them more frequently (Turner, 1995). This will lead to greater comprehension.

Offering choice enables pupils to be more engaged in an activity (Turner, 1995); moreover the wider the variety of choices – the more books pupils have access to – the more likely they are to be engaged in reading (Merga, 2015). When the conditions of choice are present,

pupils are more likely to use active learning strategies such as summarising and re-reading, which lead to deeper learning, rather than memorising or guessing (Turner and Paris, 1995). These strategies have been shown to be beneficial in improving comprehension through independent reading (Kelley and Clausen-Grace, 2013).

Q5: How can pupils make appropriate choices?

Pupils, including those of low socio-economic status (SES), primarily choose reading material from outside of school and look to school libraries and classrooms last (Worthy *et al*., 1999). When asked to read in school, moreover, many pupils often assume their preferred reading will not be favoured by teachers because their tastes are so rarely represented (Purves and Beach, 1972; Pitcher *et al*., 2007). This may often lead to misconceptions (among both teachers and students) that pupils are not readers. There is a need, then, for teachers to mediate between the cultural poles of school curricula and pupils' lives (Thompson, 2015) by broadening their conception of text, both to include digital media and also texts which hold cultural significance for young people (Phelps, 2006; Parks Duncan, 2010).

Reutzel *et al*. (2008) found that choice increased engagement, though stressed the importance of teachers guiding their pupils in a structured way to help them make appropriate choices, a conclusion consistent with earlier findings (Gambrell, 1996). Debate has often focused on how much guidance to offer pupils when offering reading choice. Reading programmes such as Accelerated Reader guide text choice by difficulty, although it has been suggested that book selection should not be so limited because it leads pupils to accept a pre-determined version of themselves as readers and thus merely perpetuates already-held notions of ability and levels of engagement (Kelley and Clausen-Grace, 2009). Conversely, younger readers have been shown to benefit when their choice is guided by the difficulty of the text (Sanden, 2012). Though the feelings of autonomy over learning associated with choice are desirable,

there is a necessity to match independent reading with curriculum demand and some teacher guidance is necessary for this. Moreover, giving pupils completely free choice often leads to an inability to finish a book or desire to change text choice frequently (Kelley and Clausen-Grace, 2013).

There is much agreement that offering pupils a wide variety of texts is integral to raising and maintaining engagement. A high variety of reading resources fosters motivation for all pupils, particularly those who are lower-attaining (Lenkeit and Hopfenbeck, 2016). It is important that a variety of genres is represented (Coles and Hall, 2002). Parks Duncan (2010) stated:

> Teachers need to broaden their concept of reading material and supply students with a wide range of fiction and nonfiction books, including not only age-appropriate books, but also (. . .) comics, series books, magazines, and other materials not traditionally read in school. (Parks Duncan, 2010: 92).

When the National Curriculum for English demands the study of such challenging texts, however, this ready acceptance of such a wide range of genres is even less likely to occur as teachers' predominant concern becomes how to teach all the content required by examination boards (Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999; Neumann *et al*., 2016).

Fostering pupil choice by allowing a range of texts into the classroom can have a profound impact on reading engagement. If the goal shifts from teaching pupils particular content or 'essential knowledge' (National Curriculum, 2014: 5) to engaging them in the process of reading and allowing them to explore texts closer to their own cultural backgrounds, there can be less anxiety about text genres and more about the process of reading.

Q6: Which pupils need to be engaged?

Boys tend to report enjoying reading less than girls (Clark and Teravainen, 2017) and often read less of the kinds of texts advocated by schools (Coles and Hall, 2002). Educators often try to combat the deficit between lower-attaining pupils and their peers by providing more challenging texts, though this can have an adverse effect. Amendum *et al*., (2016), in a study of early readers, found decreased levels of motivation, engagement and fluency of word recognition when a text was not sufficiently matched to the instructional reading level. These pupils needed to be engaged in reading at their own level if progress was to be made. Finally, the achievement deficit between pupils of low SES and their peers (Strand, 2014) shows the urgent need to engage disadvantaged pupils in reading.

A 'deficit ideology' (Gorski, 2012: 313) leads to assumptions of few literacy activities in low SES homes (Bhattacharya, 2010). This view, however, is unhelpful, since it implies a limit to what schools can achieve (Wamba, 2010). While some research has exposed the tendency of low SES families to use smaller vocabularies (Weizman and Snow, 2001), it is also true that low SES children, more likely to be exposed to the stressors of poor housing, parental job instability, malnutrition and so on, may be dominated by physiological needs – 'the most pre-potent of all needs' (Maslow, 1970: 36) – and may have cognitively adapted accordingly. As Bhattacharya writes: 'the adverse physical conditions that poor children and families face coexist with suboptimal psychosocial conditions' (Bhattacharya, 2010: 119). Disengagement can be a consequence of poverty, though it is not the single cause of poorer educational outcomes for poorer pupils. For such pupils, there is an increased need to engage them through reading that is appropriate for them. One difficulty with this is the seemingly momentous task it can be, particularly when schools are trying to prepare pupils for the

rigours of the English GCSE; consequently, a panicky emphasis is placed upon acquiring knowledge rather than skills. Jensen writes that some schools:

> try to make kids smarter by simply trying to stuff more curriculum into their brains. This strategy is not supported by science and typically backfires by making students feel overmatched or bored (Jensen, 2009: 54).

Policy makers recognise the reading achievement gap between low SES pupils and their peers yet tend to frame discussion about the curriculum in terms of bankable cultural capital which must be topped up in order to mitigate this deficit (Elliott, 2014; Exley and Ball, 2011). Thus the ideological assumptions of the National Curriculum in England are exposed and the pedagogical implications focus on promoting 'cultural heritage' (Elliott, 2014: 282) regardless of the waning support from pupils and teachers (Goodwyn, 2012). For socio-economically disadvantaged pupils, this is particularly detrimental, because there is often greater distance between their cultural orientation and that of the National Curriculum (Brice-Heath, 1994).

Summary

A review of existing literature shows that the attitudes of my low-attaining and high-poverty pupils need to be understood within a framework where 'engagement' is viewed not merely as the willingness of pupils to respond to a stimulus presented by the teacher but as a desire to participate in reading and to co-construct meaning within a community. The existing National Curriculum for English does not necessarily facilitate true engagement and is not inclusive for all pupils, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged ones. Engagement in reading is important because it improves comprehension for all pupils, especially those of

low-ability. Offering pupils choice is effective in improving engagement, and providing access to and encouraging a wide variety of genres helps pupils make effective choices.

As a result of findings in the research, I want to ask the following questions within my main research question:

> RQ1) What are the attitudes of my low-attaining, high-poverty pupils towards reading, both in-school and independently?
>
> RQ2) What impact does pupil choice over curriculum content have on my low-attaining, high-poverty pupils' engagement, confidence and sense of inclusion in the English classroom?

Through these questions, I hope to identify the attitudes of my pupils both before and after attempts have been made to increase their engagement in the activity of reading. For low-attaining and low-SES pupils, in the context of an increasingly demanding terminal examination at GCSE, this is more important than ever.

Methodology

Research model and theoretical assumptions

I carried out this investigation within a qualitative research frame. In observing that many pupils did not feel that the subject of English was 'for them', and in observing the inequity that many of these pupils were low-attaining or socioeconomically disadvantaged, I sought to understand, through inductive enquiry, some reasons for this by assessing the impact of curriculum choice on engagement. Within this investigation, reality is held to be socially-constructed; that is, I refute assumptions of universal foundations of knowledge and instead seek a temporary consensus understood within a community (Bruffee, 1986). I have used the data collected to attempt to make sense of reality.

Following Richards (2014), I acknowledge the bias of this investigation (as in all social research) through the following declaration of ideas. My frustration about the direction of the National Curriculum in the United Kingdom and how this appears to favour pupils with more ready access to social, economic and cultural capital, coupled with my exasperation that many pupils within my school appear at best only nominally engaged in the subject, were the progenitors for this study. I did not assume, however, that pupil choice alone could mitigate this. I was not testing a hypothesis but was seeking to make sense of a situation. By presenting pupils with choice, I sought to clarify ways that engagement could be nurtured among pupils and understood by teachers and researchers.

Qualitative research has been described as lacking theoretical basis (Mitchell and Cody, 1993), for its theories are emergent as it seeks to construct truth from observation. However, having an awareness of the innate theories that underpin one's own initial thinking forms an

important aspect of the ethical considerations of any research project, even qualitative; it is important for such theories to be overt (Gee, 2015) so that others may validate or dispute my findings reliably (Whyte, 1993). In the present study, literacy engagement is theorised within the contingent framework outlined above on p. 19. Beyond that, this study takes a social constructionist approach to knowledge; because knowledge is held to be a social construct (Bruffee, 1986), it is important for readers to construct meanings for themselves and through discussion with peers, rather than simply to accept information from the teacher. My ways of assessing engagement, then, revolved around this notion; namely, that an engaged pupil would be one who was engaged enough to participate critically in constructing meaning from their own text they had chosen. In summary, my intervention was as much built upon theoretical assumptions as it was reacting to observable phenomena; I retain this awareness throughout my data analysis.

In my collaboration with a colleague, Miss Morris, who implemented the same intervention of pupil choice with an equivalent Year 7 class, I did not seek to validate a hypothesis or generalise it by applying the intervention to a wider data set. Rather, the purpose of the collaboration was to allow me to reflect on, discuss and debate issues that arose from the intervention throughout the project. From this, we both used our observations to reach separate conclusions grounded in our own class contexts. We sought to 'understand how [the] glossing of reality goes on at one time and in one place and compare it with what goes on in different times and places' (Cohen *et al*., 2011: 18).

Intervention Design

Four Year 7 classes were utilised for this intervention (n=89): two of my own and two taught by my colleague, Miss Morris. We both had a similar status in the school: this was our first year teaching in Trelawney College and as main scale teachers neither had additional responsibility which could potentially have led to a conflict of interest or priority. I was slightly more experienced with five years of teaching, while Miss Morris had two. Our classes were also similar; the year group was divided arbitrarily into two populations: J and K and classes were ranked by ability from 1 (the highest) to 6. While I taught 7K4 and 7J5, Miss Morris taught 7J4 and 7K5. After some discussion, we decided to use our set 4 classes as control groups who would continue with the pre-existing scheme of work while our set 5 classes would become the research groups. These classes contained pupils with lower prior attainment and generally lower reading ages. Moreover, from our initial observations in the first term, we both felt these students required more help to read independently and were more at risk of disengagement if prescribed work was too difficult. As the project developed, Miss Morris and I participated in shared planning, discussions and reflections which allowed some adaptations to be made as well as different directions to be taken.

In November of term one, pre-intervention questionnaires (see Appendix 2) were distributed to all four classes to assess initial reading engagement. Types of questions used, as well as a consideration of their strengths and limitations, are discussed below. I analysed data collected and discussed findings with Miss Morris. Through our discussion, we identified generic trends amongst our pupils and were able to identify key pupils most at-risk of disengagement. During December, pupils were presented with a shortlist of five novels from which to choose their book for study the following term (see Appendix 3). I compiled the shortlist and

collaborated with my department's Key Stage 3 co-ordinator (KS3, the three years of schooling for pupils aged 11 to 14) and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) lead for KS3, to secure funds to buy new books. I emphasised the school's need to raise literacy levels and secure good reading habits, particularly among PPG pupils.

From January until March (the 11 weeks of the term) Miss Morris and I taught the existing 'novel study' to our control groups and our own versions of this scheme of work to both research groups. Lesson objectives were built around the reading skills assessed at KS3 (textual retrieval and analysis of language and structure) though required pupils to make sense of their novel themselves and with peers, with much less content-driven teaching from us (see Appendix 4 for a typical lesson outline). Throughout this term, Miss Morris and I met with groups of our own pupils four times to administer semi-structured interviews and assess pupils' ongoing perceptions of reading. At the end of the term, post-intervention questionnaires (see Appendix 5) were given to both research groups to assess their reading engagement. I conducted two final interviews: one with my pupils to follow up some responses from the questionnaire and one with Miss Morris to obtain her perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention.

Reading age tests (using the New Group Reading Test) were completed for the whole Year 7 cohort three times throughout the year, one test falling before my intervention started and one at the end. I investigated reading age data for my class to better understand their abilities. This information – including the progress made by most pupils between the first and second tests – is not included to make any claims of the effects of my intervention beyond engagement. The reading age test, indeed, has limitations on the inferences that can be drawn from it (Gorard *et al*., 2015). However, it does show the difficulties faced by my pupils in

accessing the curriculum where the average secondary-level text book has a reading age of 9 years six months (9/6) and average GCSE examination materials have been shown to have a reading age of 15/7 (Teaching Times, 2008-17). I include these data to present a fuller picture of my research group.

Rationale for methods used

Pre-intervention questionnaire

Because this questionnaire was administered to a relatively large data set of 89 pupils I followed Cohen *et al*., (2011) to devise more tightly-structured and closed questions to gain an understanding of the overall picture across all four classes. Some questions were adapted from the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna and Kear, 1990) due to its simplicity, applicability to a range of pupils and its distinction between home and school reading.

Likert-scale questions were used such as 'Do you enjoy reading?' which presented 7-point scales on a continuum from 1 to 7 with the semantic differentials 'Yes, very much' to 'Not at all' at each respective end. The Likert scale was used because of its simplicity and ability to collect large amounts of data (Jha, 2014) while the inclusion of semantic differentials allowed information about values and activity to be obtained (Osgood *et al.*, 1957). The 7-point scale was balanced, gave the important option of a mid-way point to negate the assumption that respondents already had an opinion (Cohen *et al*., 2011) and was more reliable (Schwartz *et al*., 1991). Positive-sounding responses such as 'agree' were variously presented on the right and left of the continua to avoid skewing results (Hartley and Betts, 2010). There are

limitations about the inferences that can be drawn from data collected in this way. It should not be assumed, for example, that a pupil rating themselves as '6' feels this any more strongly than a pupil rating themselves as '5'; the 7-point scale yields relatively crude data (Cohen *et al*., 2011). Despite this, the questions did enable a general understanding of reading perceptions to be gained.

In addition to the use of rating scales, multiple choice questions were used to obtain an understanding of pupils' wider perceptions of reading. Question 4 asked 'I think we read books in school because…' and question 12 asked 'who do you talk to about the books you are reading?'; in both cases pupils were invited to give multiple answers. To eliminate my own bias that the prescribed categories were exhaustive, the option of 'other' was given which asked pupils to give a written answer. A limitation of this question type was the primacy effect (Dillman *et al*., 2003) where items at the start of the list were prone to being selected more readily than those at the end. Despite this, the questions usually asked about specific behaviours, such as question 5, which stated 'in the past month, I have read outside of school…' and gave pupils a list of six frequencies from which to choose one option. These questions required respondents to draw on more chronically-accessible than temporally-accessible information which to some extent reduced primacy effects (Dillman *et al*., 2003).

Only one dichotomous question was used: 'Are you a member of the local library?'. This allowed me to obtain simple nominal data which gave a broad picture of reading habits but which lacked the nuance of other questions such as 'How often do you borrow books from the school learning zone (library)?'. Unlike Merga (2015), who asked students to estimate, quite precisely, the number of books available to them at home, I merely asked pupils to rate themselves (1 to 7 with the semantic differentials 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') in

answer to the statement ‘There are plenty of books at home for me to read’. This yielded less information about the exact number of books but for my purposes was more useful, since it placed more emphasis on student perception. Moreover, I was unsure about my pupils’ reliability when making such estimates.

Post-intervention questionnaire

While the closed questions of the pre-intervention questionnaire provided me with a useful baseline, and an understanding of general reading engagement amongst my two classes, the post-intervention questionnaire used open-ended questions to collect more rich and personal data from my research group. This questionnaire was given just to the two research groups (n=42) to understand the effectiveness of the intervention on those pupils. Open-ended questions were used, partly because the information I sought was less prescribed and partly because, having observed and interviewed the pupils throughout the project, I wanted to allow them to explain their own opinions in their own words.

Questions were reasonably tightly-framed, such as question 5: ‘While doing the project, did you have more, fewer or about the same number of conversations with teachers, family and friends about your reading? Please give an example if you can.’ Arguably, the same information could have been obtained through quantitative methodology, but the open-ended option allowed respondents to give further information such as who they spoke with and why. Moreover, the tight structuring of the question and the fact it was applied to a small data set allowed me to compare responses between participants and to easily present findings in a way that directly compared with the pre-intervention questionnaire: pupils either had more, fewer or the same number of conversations about their reading.

There were limitations to the questions used. The first question ('Did you enjoy your book? Why?') may have biased responses, given the tendency of respondents to agree with a statement (Youngman, 1984). However, the fact pupils were asked to write their own answer to this meant they were able to qualify it with further details and were not confined to a dichotomy of 'yes' or 'no'; stating that they enjoyed their book was not synonymous with stating they enjoyed every aspect of it. The final two questions ('What did you enjoy about last term's project?' and 'Is there anything you did not enjoy?') could be considered leading questions because of the implication that there were aspects the pupils enjoyed and may not have been aspects they did not enjoy. However, I considered the wording to be less assertive than sentence-completion items and I explained to pupils the need to be honest, both verbally, and on the questionnaire itself.

Interviews

Because the wording of written questions can be ambiguous (Cohen *et al*., 2011), I complemented questionnaires with five semi-structured group interviews throughout the term. These allowed me to question individuals in more depth about answers to their initial questionnaire and allowed pupils to raise other issues of importance to them (Arksey and Knight, 1999). To counter the possibility of the interviewees feeling too intimidated to speak honestly (Gadd, 2004), I asked for volunteers, and pupils were interviewed in groups during lunchtime. Interviews were semi-structured because I wanted to give respondents the opportunity to express their own views, uninhibited by what I had anticipated they might say (Silverman, 1993), as well as to avoid response bias (Wright and Powell, 2006) (see Appendix 6 for initial questions). The group interview allowed pupils to respond to each

other as well as to myself, causing a discussion to emerge that was fuller than that which might have occurred with a single interviewee (Watts and Ebutt, 1987). Group interviews are frequently used to assess the dynamics between social relationships and use individuals' responses to corroborate each other (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Though my focus was still on the responses of individuals, the group dynamic allowed pupils to socially construct knowledge, through interaction and discussion, in the same way they had done so in the classroom. It also allowed me to gain richer responses, since opinions expressed could be either challenged or accepted by others (Lewis, 1992). By posing a question and allowing pupils to discuss it, I was able to observe individual responses, both answers directed to me and contributions to the group.

When more than four pupils volunteered to participate in an interview, I organised pupils into groups, to facilitate the discussion and avoid potential difficulties in transcription. Interviews were not filmed or recorded but I did take notes throughout. Although there were pitfalls in this method, such as the fact that such transcriptions can become 'co-authored' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011: 427), it nevertheless allowed me to keep an accurate record of responses made and by whom. Moreover, I did not go through the time-consuming process of recording and transcribing interview data, complete with indications of pauses, laughter, non-verbal cues and so on, because I wanted the 'subject's accounts', not 'linguistic conversational analysis' (Kvale, 2007: 95). Notes taken were written up in full on the same day and, though I did not subject these data to rigorous analysis until the end of the intervention, I nevertheless reflected, with the help of Miss Morris, on some general patterns of engagement during the term.

Intervention of pupil choice

Because this intervention took place during the scheduled term for the novel study, I restricted the focus of pupils' choices to novels. Many fruitful studies focus on pupils' fiction and non-fiction genre preferences (Worthy *et al*., 1999) and assess the impact of this on reading engagement. However, in this study I sought to focus only on the novel. Since prose fiction comprises much of what is taught in English lessons at both KS3 and KS4, pupils' engagement with it has far-reaching consequences for their engagement with the subject in secondary school. Moreover, by limiting the scope of the study in this way, I was able more accurately to assess the impact of *choice* – as an indicator of and precursor to engagement – rather than the impact studying different text types had on motivation.

Following Sanden (2012), who stresses that independent reading is more effective when framed by intervention and guidance from the teacher as and when it becomes necessary, I limited the choice to a shortlist. In compiling this list, it would have been easy to select from a narrow range, perhaps from the unofficial 'canon' of novels most-commonly taught at KS3 in secondary schools. Such novels (based on my own experience of working in four schools) might include John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Michael Morpurgo's *Private Peaceful* and *War Horse*, Louis Sachar's *Holes*, or Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Lightening Thief*, to name a few. It has been observed that English departments often teach an unimaginative range of texts, however, (Barton, 2012) and I deliberately wanted to expose my pupils to a wider range of novels than that which might most often be shown to them.

Two of the protagonists in the five novels were female and three were male. Recent empirical research has countered the assumption that pupils express a preference for protagonists of

their own gender (Bortolussi *et al*., 2010). Nevertheless, I felt it was important to offer novels with both male and female main characters to appeal to differing preferences. I selected novels that encompassed a range of different literary genres, following the findings of Worthy *et al*. (1999). In a study of over 400 pupils across three American schools, they found scary novels, funny novels, novels about people, science fiction and adventure stories to be the most popular prose fiction genres pupils chose independently. The novels were of a similar length, to facilitate the practicalities of studying them all in one term, and though were generally pitched at a similar ability level, did include an easier text (*Millions*) and a more challenging one (*Artemis Fowl*). Finally, I wanted to choose novels that, in addition to being engaging for a wide range of pupils, would also offer sufficient scope for literary study. One of the most important skills taught at KS3 in preparation for the GCSE is analysis of the writer's language and I felt it was important to be able to provide examples from which extracts could easily be selected for analysis that were appropriate to the ability range of my class.

Miss Morris and I deliberately did not agree a way for pupils to choose books, preferring that we both chose a method we felt was suitable for our class and subsequently reflected on our findings. My class was organised into five groups and each was given 15 minutes to look at a copy of each book together, to read the blurb and opening pages and to answer basic questions. Only one pupil refused to make a book choice, insisting that he did not like reading and could find nothing to interest him in any book. In Miss Morris' class, books were laid around the classroom and pupils were given freedom to look at each independently. All her pupils made an initial choice, although three changed half-way through the intervention. Upon reflection, we felt that while my method offered more structure and ensured pupils

persisted with their book choice, hers was more open, which allowed discussions to flourish about what kind of books pupils liked.

Before the project began, I had only a notional idea of how lessons would develop yet deliberately kept this open to allow me to respond to pupils' needs. Collaboration with Miss Morris allowed me to plan and discuss strategies as the project developed. Initially, ideas were appropriated from Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2013) whose 'metacognitive teaching framework' prioritises reading strategy instruction among developing readers, particularly important for my pupils considering their deficit reading ages. I focused on two of their five metacognitive strategies, visualising and summarising, because these were the most under-developed skills among my pupils. In several lessons, I demonstrated the skill to pupils by presenting them with a novel extract (never one of their own texts) and talking aloud my thoughts as I either visualised or summarised. I modelled the process of working out more difficult words by using the context of the extract. In some lessons, pupils were encouraged to record the number of times they used a discrete skill; in others, they were prompted to stop and reflect on what they had just been reading by visualising it in their minds; in others, they drew and labelled a visualisation of the novel or wrote a summary.

My practice diverged from Miss Morris' in the setup of the reading. While my class read in silence and either worked in book groups or independently afterwards, her class formed literature circles (Daniels, 2002) which read the novel aloud. This, she felt, was particularly beneficial for pupils who struggled with their reading, either because lack of interest had previously made it difficult for them to engage, or because difficulties in decoding had led to decreased comprehension and thence decreased engagement. Her pupils were permitted to choose their own groups of no more than four; each member chose how much to read and

subsequently took turns reading aloud. The discussions that followed often allowed lower-attaining pupils to receive help from their peers. Miss Morris reported that initial engagement was extremely high with this model, that the pupils loved the independence and felt more mature.

I trialled this model after our discussion and found that pupils diverged in their responses, with lower-attaining pupils such as Mason enjoying group support while others, such as Kiera and Joel, preferred the feeling of independence. Trialling different methods of reading instruction exposed to me not only the plethora of preferences pupils might have but also the myriad ways of developing comprehension. While it may not be possible to cater to all individual choices as a means of raising engagement, it is important to vary teaching methods so that teachers can further their knowledge of their pupils and consequently make accessing the subject of English in schools more enjoyable.

Analysis

Analysing qualitative data is so reliant upon interpretation that the interpretation itself can become new data (Cohen *et al*., 2011). Following Miles and Huberman (1984), I began analysing questionnaire data as soon as it was collected, so that interviews could be used to pursue questions that arose from it. My findings highlight nomothetic and idiographic qualities of the data because this reflected the process of analysis; seeing trends led to investigating the behaviour of individuals which allowed further similarities and differences between respondents to emerge. Dealing with respondents' 'pre-interpreted world' can cause hermeneutic problems (Giddens, 1993: 154) and so to avoid drawing over-generalised deductions from my data, my research question emphasised pupil perceptions. In selecting

from the rich data collected, I have attempted to limit the personal bias of wanting the intervention to succeed by also including data from those respondents who did not appear to enjoy their book.

Ethical considerations

Before beginning the research, ethical approval was granted by the Central University Research Ethics Community using Form CUREC 1A. As my participants were 11-12 years of age, they were defined as 'people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question' (CUREC, 2017); the university's Approved Procedures of Children in Schools and Teachers (Sections 15 and 25) were followed.

Following Article 3 of the United Nations Rights of the Child (BERA, 2011) the aim of the research was to improve my practice and thereby to improve my pupils' educational experiences. Following Article 12, where 'children should (. . .) be facilitated to give fully informed consent' (BERA, 2011: 6), I gave the option for pupils to add names to questionnaires. Though this may have inhibited honesty, it allowed me to pursue responses and assess progress of individuals.

Within the school, permission was sought from the Head teacher and Head of English before beginning the intervention. The process of the research was explained to all pupils. Although the fact that the intervention became a compulsory part of normal lessons for one term denied those in the research groups the right to withdraw, this was within CUREC's guidelines: pupils 'are research participants only because they are normal participants in the context' (CUREC, 2017: 1). In addition, those who took part in interviews were free to leave at any

point. Anonymity of pupils, colleagues and the school has been preserved throughout this dissertation with pseudonyms.

Consulting pupils about their perceptions of learning can powerfully improve relationships between pupils and teachers and can lead to increased engagement (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Throughout my research, pupils I had previously identified as disengaged in reading were keen to let me know their improved motivations. However positive these outcomes, ethical issues of identity, power and positionality still had to be accounted for (Brooks *et al*., 2014). Indeed, these tensions were arguably exacerbated because I was the pupils' teacher as well as their researcher (Zeni, 1998). In this role, I held more power than my pupils and there was a potential that they would not be honest for fear of causing offence or repercussions. To mitigate this, I explained before, and continually during, the project that I wanted pupils to be honest and that they would not get into trouble for anything they said; 'I just want to know what you think' was my repeated mantra. Using the written questionnaire initially, which somewhat distanced pupils from their responses, encouraged them to be more honest. This allowed interview discussions – which potentially addressed pupils' lack of enjoyment – to be based on responses pupils had already committed to; it was harder for any intimidation they might feel at talking to me to quell opinions they might want to share. No pupils asked to be withdrawn from the interview process, although if they had they would have been allowed to do so; this was explained to all at the beginning. Although this may have limited the richness of my data collection, it would not have affected it significantly. All pupils agreed to complete the post-intervention questionnaire and by interviewing different pupils throughout the intervention, I was able to gain a broader, if not deeper, understanding of their changing engagement.

I was mindful of a not dissimilar power relationship with my colleague, Miss Morris. Although we held equal levels of seniority and responsibility, there was a danger she would not be honest with me when sharing her reflections of successes and limitations of the project, so as not to cause offence. By collaborating with her from the start, however, and by offering guidance on how lessons might run without being prescriptive, I gained her 'buy-in' to the project. The ownership she felt, then, meant if we disagreed she could pursue her own teaching style and if concluding that her pupils were no more engaged at the end of the intervention, she would be free to say so, this not being a direct criticism of me.

Findings

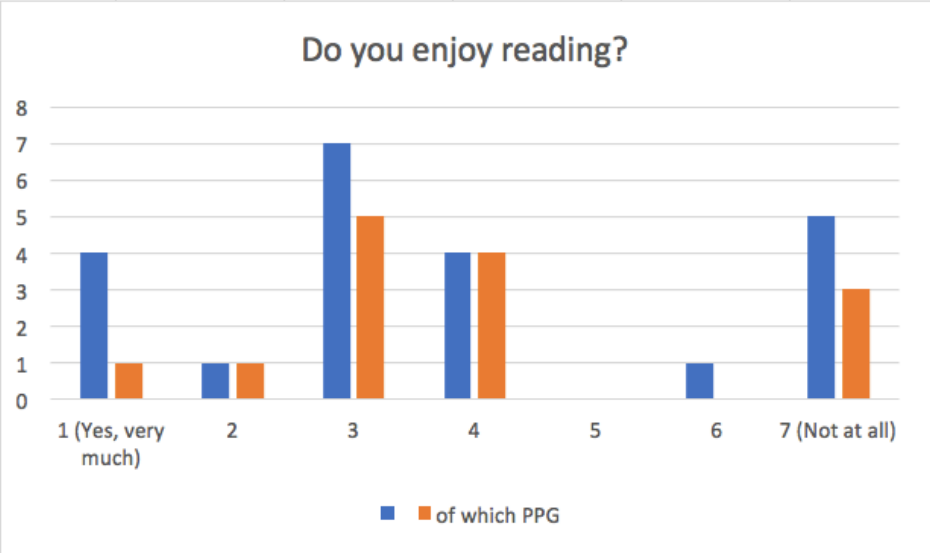
All research was conducted with an overview of the broad research question: 'Can pupil choice over English curriculum content improve pupils' sense that the subject is 'for them'?' Within this, findings are presented in relation to each sub-research question and focus on my own research group unless otherwise stated. Quotations from pupils' written questionnaires have had spelling and grammar amended for clarity.

Pupil characteristics and reading ages are given in Appendix 7. Of note to begin with is that fourteen of twenty-two pupils in my class were PPG and twenty initially had a reading age below their chronological age. This initial finding confirmed the need to identify and address potential disengagement, given the long-term achievement trends of these two pupil groups (Strand, 2014) and trends in reading engagement (Clark and Teravainen, 2017).

Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of my low-attaining, high-poverty pupils towards reading, both in-school and independently?'

To pursue this I compared findings between the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires.

Table 1: Pre-intervention questionnaire (Q1)

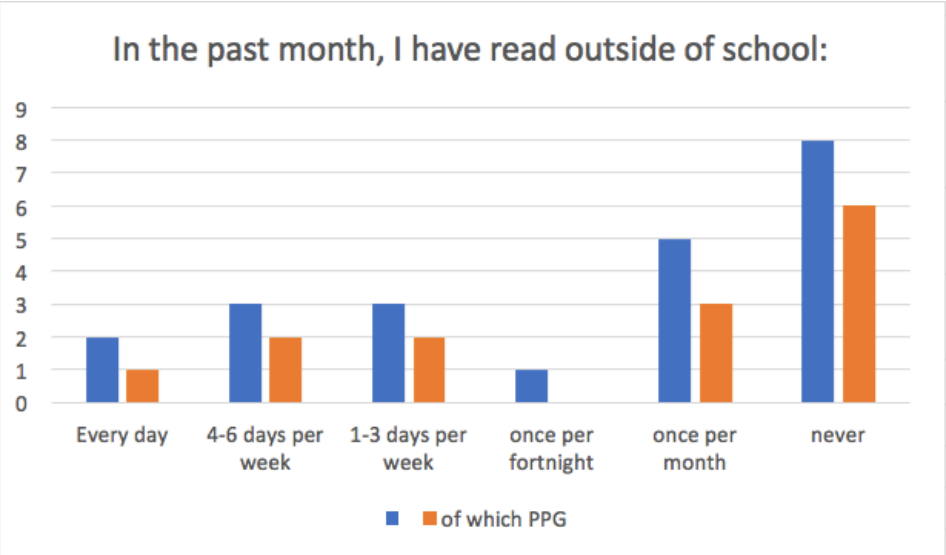


In the pre-intervention questionnaire, twelve pupils enjoyed reading (with only four stating they enjoyed it 'very much'); six did not (five of these 'not at all') while four were ambivalent (Table 1). Significantly, most pupils who enjoyed reading 'very much' were non-PPG whilst most who did not enjoy it 'at all' were PPG, a finding aligning with national surveys from 2005 to 2016 (Clark and Teravainen, 2017). Of the four classes who took the pre-intervention questionnaire, my research group was the most negative about reading; the total number who rated themselves as '7' in my class matched the total number who rated themselves as such in the three other classes.

Pupils may be 'the best sources of information about themselves' (Docherty and Sandelowski, 1999: 177), although I wanted to find further evidence of their enjoyment of reading beyond their own perceptions by posing further questions about reading behaviours. Question three asked 'would you ask for a book for a present?' Seven pupils stated they would, five were unsure and ten would not. Eight of those who would not were PPG. I asked pupils how frequently they had read outside of school in the past month. Reading homework is not explicitly set or monitored in my school, so this was a reliable indicator of how

engaged pupils were in reading independently. Over half (fourteen of twenty-two) read once per fortnight or less with, worryingly, eight not reading at all (Table 2). Six of these eight were PPG pupils.

Table 2: Pre-intervention questionnaire (Q5)

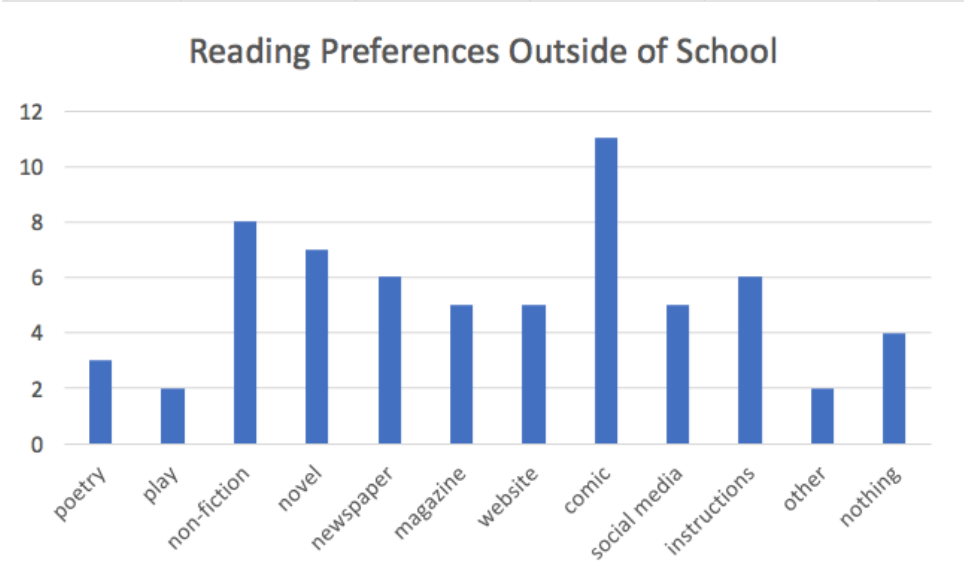


Thus far, my pupils did not appear to have positive attitudes to reading: few wanted to be bought a book, few read independently and many did not read at all. Some results in answer to my first research question, moreover, were seemingly contradictory, a finding made evident in both questionnaires. In the pre-intervention questionnaire, in answer to the question 'do you enjoy reading?', where '1' signified 'yes, very much' and '7' 'not at all', James rated himself as '7' yet would 'always' ask for a book for a present. Sam rated himself as '2' yet had read outside of school just once in the past month. Tristan would sometimes ask for a book for a present but had 'never' read independently in the past month. Ten pupils stated that they were already reading more compared to primary school yet six of them claimed to 'never' read outside of school. The post-intervention questionnaire revealed some similar results. Tom, Tristan and Kiera all claimed to enjoy their book yet nevertheless described themselves as non-readers. Molly enjoyed her book 'cos it was interesting' yet said 'I read nothing at home cos I don't like reading'.

These responses led to discussions during interviews about what pupils were reading. James wrote on his questionnaire that he 'never' read outside of school, yet revealed in an interview that he frequently enjoyed reading *Guinness World Records* books and spoke passionately about having read an article on bulging eyes. Tristan and Connor shared this taste and both described reading Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, despite earlier claiming that they rarely or never read. The implications of these seemingly contradictory results are discussed in the next section. Moreover, I wanted to understand reading choices pupils made independently as a counterpoint to the reading prioritised in school.

In the pre-intervention questionnaire, pupils were asked to select their preferred reading from a list (Table 3).

Table 3: Pre-intervention questionnaire (Q7)



What my pupils most liked to read – comics and non-fiction – were rarely taught in school, a finding chiming with other studies (Worthy *et al*, 1999). This discrepancy may have affected pupils' responses when they claimed not to read independently but in reality did so.

To further my understanding of pupils' home reading habits, I asked them in an interview to describe the occasions they would typically read. James, Connor and Tristan, respectively, said:

> 'I read when I've got somewhere comfy to sit like in my room or when I'm in the mood'
> 'I'll read when I'm bored and when I've got nothing else to do'
> 'If my phone or my X-box get taken off me then I'll read to have something to do'.

These responses revealed that pupils were not always reading at home merely because their parents told them to or because it was homework; they were (to a limited extent) self-motivated rather than reliant on external stimuli. These kinds of behaviours, however, were rarely evidenced during lessons.

In my observations of pupils' independent reading at the start of lessons, there was a concern that many did not appear to know how to read a book independently, at least a book they were being asked to read in school. In answer to the question 'When we read independently at the start of English lessons, I usually…', six pupils stated that they would 'sit quietly and pretend to read'. Five of these were PPG pupils. If stuck reading a book they were not enjoying, five pupils said they would still pretend to read it, three would pretend to enjoy it and four would skip bits to get to a better chapter. Only three pupils had a strong idea of what they were going to read next while nine had no idea; of these nine, six were PPG pupils.

Pupils' attitudes to reading are influenced by their access to social capital (Savage *et al*., 2015), therefore pupils were asked to tick from a list all the people they spoke to about their reading. Parents were most popular, with nine respondents declaring they spoke to them, followed by friends (seven) and form tutor (six). Only five said they would speak to me about their reading. Four pupils had just one person they could speak to about their reading while eight did not speak to anyone at all. The imbalance between PPG and non-PPG pupils was particularly striking here. On average, non-PPG pupils spoke to three different people about their reading while PPG pupils spoke to just one. Fifteen pupils (nine of which were PPG) were not a member of the local library and the same number 'never' borrowed books from the school library. Of this number ten were PPG, meaning those pupils were disproportionately represented for the class.

Research Question 2: What impact does pupil choice over curriculum content have on pupils' engagement, confidence and sense of inclusion in the English classroom?'

I assessed this by comparing findings from the pre-intervention questionnaire with findings from group interviews and the post-intervention questionnaire.

At the end of the project, twenty of twenty-two pupils enjoyed the novel they had studied. Of the two that did not, both were PPG. A positive impact can clearly be seen thus: six pupils initially expressed a dislike for reading while this later became two; the number of pupils who enjoyed reading grew from twelve to twenty; ambivalence to reading (perhaps a truer marker of disengagement than dislike) disappeared.

While engagement may be gauged by enjoyment, it was important to research changes in reading behaviours. Many pupils also felt the project had made them better independent readers who read more at home. Sixteen pupils (of which ten were PPG) felt they were better independent readers while eight (of which six were PPG) read more frequently at home. Five read their own book at home while three wanted to continue with their chosen novel from lessons, without direction or instruction from me to do so.

Many responses from those that were reading more were simply overwhelmingly positive. Sophie, Emily and Ashley, respectively, wrote:

> 'it made me feel relaxed and I had something to do'
> 'I have been reading more. I think this is because I have been excited about reading'
> 'I read more at home because I was enjoying the book and I was determined to see what it was like'.

I was concerned about those reading less. One, James, used to read frequently with his father. At the start of the project he had chosen *Broccoli Boy* (a novel by the same author as his chosen book in school) to read at home; at the end, his father had moved out following a separation with his mother and he was consequently reading much less. Other reasons pupils gave for not reading were distractions, such as football or games consoles. Two pupils persisted that they still did not like reading enough to read independently. In an interview, Kane revealed he felt reading was more for 'kids and adults' and that he read less at secondary school because he was learning more and therefore had less time to read.

I was interested in the progress in engagement particular pupils had made as a result of the project. Five pupils particularly enjoyed their book but had expressed an ambivalence or dislike for reading at the start of the project. Molly initially rated her enjoyment of reading as

'6' but at the end, stated: '[I enjoyed] the book I was reading. (. . .) The project would have helped my reading because I used to read nothing'. Olly originally rated his enjoyment of reading as '7' but later commented: 'I look forward to English more than I did before (. . .) it was fun (. . .) I can read by myself more confidently'. Kiera also rated her enjoyment of reading as '7' before the intervention. I observed her as she read the final pages of *Millions* during a silent reading session, completely absorbed. As she closed the book the silence was broken as she loudly exclaimed 'Oh my God, that was such a good book'. In her questionnaire, she commented:

> 'I would like to read a David Walliams book next because it is a comedy and the book I read before helped me with what type I should choose'.

James had rated his enjoyment as '7' yet enjoyed *Millions* because 'it was very funny' and Josh, who was at first an undecided '4' read *Artemis Fowl* and said in his post-intervention questionnaire: 'I like reading now (. . .) I can read better and [I would like to read] the rest of the series'. These successes, small-scale though they are, are significant, for they show the impact of the intervention on pupils' attitudes.

For pupils who enjoyed their books, comments ranged from liking particular characters or elements of the plot, to making more evaluative comments about the novel's genre. Comments from Sophie (*Clover Moon*), Danny (*Artemis Fowl*), Blake (*Millions*) and Sam (*Black Book of Secrets*), respectively, included:

> 'it had cliff-hangers and was full of action'
> 'it was a very adventurous book with fantasy'
> 'I did enjoy my book because I enjoy books that are about comedy'
> 'I enjoyed it because I liked the mystery and spooky atmosphere to it'.

In an interview, Sam said he chose his novel because 'it seems like the sort of book Michael Morpurgo would write', revealing a growing awareness of the kinds of books he knew he enjoyed.

Other pupils focused on more specific elements of plot or character; Logan (*Artemis Fowl*), Emily and Rachel (*Clover Moon*) and Ebony (*Millions*), respectively, enjoyed:

> 'the many mythical creatures'
> 'I liked when Clover went to a home but she had a better time than [in] the other house'
> 'I liked it because Clover had really expressed how she felt throughout it'
> 'it said about how Damian found the money. At first he thought it was luck but then it turned bad'.

Though not perhaps ready to identify preferred genres, these pupils nevertheless understood in some detail what they did enjoy in their reading.

Increased enjoyment and engagement in reading was also evident in the fact that pupils spoke to more people about their reading and had a better idea of what they would read next. Eleven pupils (of whom eight were PPG) had more conversations about their reading throughout the project. Predominantly, this was with parents or family, teachers and friends. Sophie began talking to her mother about her reading while Kiera, who had previously spoken to nobody, now passed on her enjoyment to her younger sister: 'I only have conversations with my sister because she likes to read to help her understand more about English so I read with her sometimes'.

Before the intervention, only three pupils had a strong idea of what they would read next while nine had absolutely no idea. At the end, fifteen pupils (of which nine were PPG) could state their next book choice. Seven stated a specific book title, which either included one of

the other novels from the shortlist or a popular book such as Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*; five had a clear idea of the genre (action, fantasy, comedy or horror); three named authors including David Walliams and Roald Dahl.

While these results were very encouraging as regards pupils' independent reading, RQ2 also focused on the sense of inclusion in the English classroom. Fourteen pupils looked forward to English lessons more as a result of the intervention. Three pupils explicitly stated they were more enthusiastic because the element of choice allowed them to read something they enjoyed. Rachel, Ashley, Emily and Danny, respectively, wrote:

> 'I think I liked my lessons more because I got to read the last book that she wrote'
> 'it made me look [forward] more to English lessons since I could read a book I liked for 20 minutes'
> '[I was more enthusiastic] because I liked reading Clover Moon'
> 'the book made me feel intense like I wanted to find out more. Each chapter was like a different episode'.

Pupils felt more enthusiastic to attend English lessons because they felt greater control over lesson content; they were more engaged. Sophie appeared to experience a greater link between home and school reading, stating: 'I looked forward to English more and it helped me read more at home'. Tristan, meanwhile, simply found the lessons more enjoyable, saying: 'you get to do lots of fun lessons'.

In addition, pupils looked forward to lessons more because they felt they were learning more. Tom, Emily, Ebony and Blake, respectively, explained:

> 'I found a lot of interesting words that I never knew about'
> 'it helped me understand English much more'
> 'it made me feel [I] want to learn more'
> 'it mostly helped me with my English skills'.

Whether pupils were genuinely learning more or whether they merely felt they were learning more are different questions. However, the enhanced sense of confidence with English lessons evident in these responses is palpable. This is important, since increased confidence leads to increased engagement and thence to deeper learning.

Despite these obvious benefits of pupil choice, it is important to acknowledge the limitations. Many pupils expressed somewhat contradictory messages about their reading habits. Tom, for example, wrote: 'it felt like you couldn't put [the book] down' yet added 'I'm not much of a big reader'. Tristan claimed to enjoy his book 'because there was so much to it and it was so descriptive' but stated he had been reading less at home 'because I don't like reading'. Kiera described her book as 'really good' yet added 'reading gets me really bored and tired'.

A contradiction was again evident in responses such as Kane's who stated in an interview: 'I sort of didn't like my book because I thought there would be more action. To be honest I'm not into books'. He did, however, state that he preferred reading non-fiction and towards the end of the intervention, asked to bring his own reading from home, a non-fiction book on football.

Conversely, Olly expressed a preference for 'school reading' over home. At the end of the project, he stated: 'I have been reading about the same because at home I don't like reading because the books in school are more interesting'. In an interview, it became clear he found it hard to choose a book independently and preferred the encouragement associated with reading books together as a whole class. Olly was uncertain as to why he did not ask me for guidance about choosing a book, suggesting that because I did not ask him, he did not take the initiative.

In summary, almost all pupils enjoyed reading the book they had chosen while over half looked forward to English lessons more. Many felt they had learned more and felt more confident in lessons. This enhanced sense of inclusion in the English classroom was complemented by better independent reading habits. Most pupils felt the intervention had made them better independent readers while over two thirds knew what sort of book to read next. Half of the class had more conversations with others about their reading while a third were reading more at home. A small number continued not to read independently, exposing some discrepancies between understanding of home and school reading.

Teaching practice

The majority of pupils felt the project had made them better independent readers and some could describe the independent reading skills they had developed. Emily and Danny, for example, said:

> '[I am a better independent reader] because I can understand more words now'
> '[it has helped me] understand harder words'.

Others picked up on the idea of visualising or of practising a skill. Ewan, Rachel and Tristan wrote:

> 'I enjoyed imagining it in my brain'
> 'I enjoyed it when we would imagine pictures and how they made us feel'
> '[I am a better independent reader] because I've been practising'.

Silent reading at the start of lessons continued during the term following the intervention. While I listened to Tristan read his book he asked 'Are we still doing that visualising thing?',

revealing some of the longer-lasting impacts of teaching discrete reading skills. Most other pupils focused on their improved confidence as a result of independence. Olly, Ashley and Tom, respectively, wrote:

> 'I can read by myself more confidently'
> 'It helped me read without asking questions'
> 'I have become a better independent reader because I read all by myself'.

By giving pupils the tools to become competent independent readers, they felt not only enhanced confidence and engagement, but also demonstrated a growing awareness of the cognitive skills required for reading.

Control class

At the end of the term, I did not formally assess reading engagement for my control group. The qualitative methodology used, combined with the large number of pupils involved and the fact the intervention lasted for one whole term meant a high number of variables, making direct comparison difficult. What observations I did make from the control group thus remain anecdotal and of limited value. However, a term of studying *The Black Book of Secrets* did not lead to any noticeable improvements in reading engagement: the same pupils still did or did not enjoy and participate in classroom reading. When I asked pupils to bring their own book for independent reading at the start of lessons, the same ones did so as had done before while others still looked to the classroom bookshelf to divert them for 20 minutes. No pupils asked to take their books home.

Summary of findings

In summary, pupils had complex attitudes towards reading. They enjoyed it but the reading choices they made independently were rarely taught in schools. Consequently, they tended to report reading rarely or never on questionnaires and viewed themselves as 'non-readers', although interviews revealed evidence of some reading habits. The majority of my pupils felt more empowered by having made a choice; their confidence and enthusiasm increased, as did their preference for reading independently and discussing their reading.

Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of my low-attaining, high-poverty pupils towards reading, both in-school and independently?

The findings in response to this question held a fundamental contradiction: some pupils expressed a dislike for reading but this did not necessarily mean they disliked all reading. Indeed, many held a disparity between 'home' and 'school' reading. Before the intervention, while ten pupils claimed to be ambivalent or to dislike reading, only four had read nothing outside of school in the preceding month. When pupils such as Kane said they were 'not into books' yet enjoyed reading non-fiction, they revealed the effects of the intrinsic prejudice in reading prioritised by schools which have been shown to neglect or even discourage the reading of non-fiction (Moss and Hendershot, 2002). This exposed a lack of awareness about the transferability of reading skills, regardless of the text type. Some books – principally fiction – are held to be 'appropriate' reading while alternatives – comics and non-fiction, among others – are not (Worthy *et al*., 1999). This, in essence, is Bintz's (1993) distinction between home and school reading, a distinction drawn from Bernstein's (1977b) observation that:

> For the working-class, work and play are very strongly classified and framed; for certain sub-groups of the middle class, work and play are weakly classified and weakly framed. (. . .) Work carries what is often called "intrinsic" satisfactions, and therefore is not confined to *one* context (Bernstein, 1977b: 513).

In other words, where the middle class might more easily carry work into the home environment, so that home and work activities symbiotically complement one another, the working class more sharply divide the two spheres such that there is less transferability of

skills between the two. Pupils who read widely outside of school, such as the eleven pupils in my class who regularly read comics, yet who perceive that such reading is not valued in school, sharply divide 'school reading' ('work') from 'home reading' ('play'). That their teachers consequently perceive them not to be active and engaged readers leads them to accept reading identities assigned to them by peers and teachers (Hall, 2016).

Pitcher *et al*. (2007) used the term 'multiliteracies' (p. 391) to moderate the problems of this assumed identity and describe the widespread literacy practices of pupils beyond simply a school context; multiliteracies were evident amongst my pupils. Apparently contradictory responses from pupils who read texts such as *Guinness World Records* books yet who claimed they did not read, or those who described themselves as not enjoying reading yet who would always ask for a book for a present revealed this. These contradictions show, however, that pupils' attitudes to reading are complex and cannot be simplified into viewing the pupil as engaged or disengaged, for what constitutes 'reading' is itself open to debate. In interviews, it became clear that several pupils understood 'reading' to mean school work or school-assigned texts; only through discussion did pupils eventually reveal wider literacy habits. To make assumptions of disengagement based on how far pupils engage with a school text choice – a very narrow understanding of what 'reading' is and can be – is to assign a sometimes misplaced reading identity to pupils which can become all too-easily accepted.

Ferdman (1990) suggests that literacy is a cultural practice closely tied to notions of cultural identity. Where a diversion is perceived between the literacy of the school and the home, the pupil must choose only one identity, for to resist risks creating ongoing conflict about what it means to be a reader. Though he is describing ethnic cultural differences, Alvermann and Heron (2001) pursue this idea by contrasting adolescent culture with that of mainstream

schooling and argue that any resulting identity (such as weak or disengaged reader) is culturally constructed. Moreover, accepting an identity removes motivational agency from the pupil and leads teachers to view the pupil in a 'respondent' paradigm of motivation (Hruby *et al*., 2016) where at most what is expected is that pupils *respond* to the text and interaction with it becomes superfluous since the process of reading merely consolidates an already-held belief in engagement and ability.

The reasons for this acceptance and the assumed identity of an engaged or disengaged reader can be further understood through the concept of sociolinguistic codes which focus on 'the social structuring of meanings and (. . .) their diverse but related contextual linguistic realisations' (Bernstein, 1977a: 474). Moje *et al*. (2008) describe literacy as a practice

> that requires making sense of a variety of codes (. . .) Having access to socially constructed and conventionalized codes is central to being part of a community and means having access to certain kinds of power; it also allows people to adopt the self (or identity) they feel is appropriate or demanded by a particular relationship, space, or time (Moje *et al*., 2008: 109).

Their argument is that literacy is not merely about the decoding of words and comprehension of texts, despite what reductive assessment criteria from examination boards might suggest. Rather, literacy is the ability to use these skills to engage in a particular community. De Castell and Luke (1983) go a stage further, writing that 'being "literate" has always referred to having mastery over the processes by means of which culturally significant information is coded' (p. 373). The fact that not all information is 'culturally significant' to all subsets of society (whether ethnic or class-based) means impressions of ability and engagement become closely tied to identity. An intrinsic problem raised by my data is that my pupils exist in two culturally-constructed communities: home and school. This leads to a complex, but

also at times confused, identity of reading engagement. It is complex because pupils may read independently but may not consider this to be 'reading' because it is, in content, format and style, different from the kind of reading encouraged by schools. Pupils may also claim to enjoy reading (twelve of twenty-two before the intervention; twenty after it) but do not always view themselves as readers because they do not frequently 'read' in the way that schools might communicate it; that is, sit in silence, read a novel and answer comprehension and analysis questions on it. This identity becomes confused when pupils try to reconcile the two identities: they like reading but do not read; they do not enjoy reading but love certain kinds of non-fiction. It is not only important for teachers to acknowledge multiliteracies, but also to pay less attention to the teaching of the literacy codes (built into the assumptions that certain kinds of knowledge are 'powerful' (Young, 2010: 5) or 'essential' (National Curriculum, 2014: 6)) and more to raising pupils' awareness that the literacy practices in which they engage outside of school contain transferable skills that can be brought into the classroom. If pupils are encouraged to use and develop these existing skills, confidence and performance in the subject may increase (Ebe, 2012; Cartledge *et al*., 2016).

Access to reading material that was engaging influenced pupil perceptions and reading behaviours. Fifteen of my pupils did not use the local library and most of these (ten) rarely or never read independently. Only one pupil used the school library more than once a month and fifteen never used it. Of these fifteen, nine read rarely or never on their own. These findings aligned with those of Strommen and Fowles Mates (2004) who found that engaged readers were more likely to have families that facilitated library visits. Significantly, PPG pupils in my class were most likely not to use either library. These pupils seemed to lack access to social as well as cultural capital: they visited and used libraries far less often. This has significant implications for my teaching, especially considering that the National Curriculum often assumes shared cultural knowledge (Demie and Lewis, 2010). If PPG pupils (an already

disadvantaged group) are not using libraries and, as my data show, are consequently not reading independently, the achievement gap between them and their peers (Strand, 2015) will only increase unless attempts are made to engage them in reading that they enjoy; this engagement can begin in, but is not limited to, the classroom.

It was important to understand access to books at home. Nine pupils disagreed that 'there are plenty of books at home for me to read', and eight of these read rarely or never outside of school. Six of the nine were PPG pupils, a finding emphasising their disadvantage. This aligns with Merga (2015), who found a correlation between access to books at home and independent reading enjoyment. However, while my PPG pupils overall were most likely not to use either the local or school libraries, they were equally likely to strongly agree or strongly disagree that there were plenty of books available at home. In other words, those that did not use libraries still accessed books at home. This finding is consistent with Worthy *et al*. (1999) who found that most pupils, even economically-disadvantaged ones, read books from home before looking to other sources such as libraries. For the nine pupils in my class who do not have ready access to books at home, it is important to ensure that provision is made within the classroom and means are sought to improve their engagement.

The accessibility of reading material is complemented by the number of people that pupils have available to them with whom to discuss their reading, and findings here again raised the theme of identity. PPG pupils had just one person with whom to discuss their reading compared to three for their wealthier counterparts. As adolescents develop their individual and social identities, guidance from adults (including, but not limited to, teachers) is important. Family support with literacy has been shown to be beneficial, although it has been suggested that the ways and means for this support to be instigated and developed should

begin with the pupil (Wiseman, 2009). If pupils can be encouraged to reduce barriers between home and school, by becoming engaged in reading that is of interest to both these identities, they can begin to make use of the adults in their lives to help shape their own identities linked to literacy. In this manner, it was encouraging to see pupils such as Sophie, Kiera and Emily (all PPG pupils) begin to have more conversations with their families as a result of increased engagement in their reading linked to choice. It was also useful to learn (from pupils such as Olly) what role I could play in using text choice to help pupils develop their own literate identities.

Research Question 2: What impact does pupil choice over curriculum content have on pupils' engagement, confidence and sense of inclusion in the English classroom?

Considering the findings from RQ1, this question might be re-framed in the following way: can pupil choice function as a bridge between pupils' pre-existing desire to read (which might only be expressed outside of school) and reading necessitated by the National Curriculum?

Independent curriculum choice improves pupils' positive feelings about reading and leads to increased motivation (Moss and Hendershot, 2002; Pitcher *et al*, 2007). As a result of my intervention, twenty pupils enjoyed their books; many felt they were better independent readers and were reading more at home. Pupils spoke of increased confidence at having read independently and pride in having completed their books by themselves. Many were able to identify aspects of the plots and genre they enjoyed and fifteen knew what sort of book they would read next. Almost as many were more enthusiastic to attend English lessons. The finding that pupils were engaged by choice is consistent with a range of prior literature

(Oldfather, 1993, 2002; Ivey and Broaddus, 2001; Sanden, 2012 and Pitcher *et al*., 2007), all of which included a high number of respondents in their data sets. A general theme from this literature was that choice was a motivating factor when it included a wide range of resources (Ivey and Broaddus, 2001), moderated by teacher support (Sanden, 2012). This structure, indeed, motivated my own pupils since only one from the 42 pupils in both research groups struggled to make a choice. Significantly too, these investigations all approached the concept of literacy from a sociocultural standpoint where meaning could be co-constructed and where it was acknowledged that pupils often had reading interests beyond those found in the classroom. This, together with my own findings, again raises the idea of identity.

When pupils chose their books, and when they reflected on which book they would read next, they thought and had discussions about the kinds of books they liked. The comments made revealed a development of pupils' self-identities as readers (Phelps, 2006), as they grew to understand the types of books that were 'for them'. As reading self-identity increases, so too does engagement, since pupils are reading a book they have chosen, they feel greater ownership over it and they consequently see more purpose in reading. While some pupils could make comparisons with other authors and judgements about genres, others identified aspects of the plot or character they enjoyed. This was important in developing their reading identity. In their study of reading preferences in primary-age American pupils, Cartledge *et al*. (2016) found that pupils most often enjoyed a text for self-identity or altruistic reasons; they empathised with a character and rooted for them. Self-identity has been described as 'the essence of cultural relevance' (Cartledge *et al*., 2016: 414) and therefore is a prominent factor in reading preference for pupils who are alienated from the cultural location of the National Curriculum. In Cartledge's study, pupils were 5-8 years old, urban, black and low SES; in my study, pupils are 11-12 years old, rural, white and low SES. Despite these differences, many

of my low-attaining and PPG pupils were similarly distanced from the intellectual orientation of the English curriculum in school; that pupils such as Logan, Emily and Rachel felt able to identify with their novel's protagonist and increase their enjoyment of reading in school is significant. The diversity of genres and stories offered in the shortlist encouraged pupils to reflect on the types of books that were 'for them' rather than to accept an imposed interpretation of what they should have been reading.

A stronger sense of reading identity led to greater engagement in reading, a finding similar to that of Gaskins (2008). Choice facilitated discussion about this identity and its mutability between home and school. When Sophie, Ashley and Rachel explained that they looked forward more to English lessons and also read more at home, they were experiencing a greater link between home and school reading, between their home and school reading identities. The two identities did not completely converge for all pupils. Tom, Tristan and Kiera enjoyed their books but still considered themselves 'non-readers'. These pupils seemed caught on the threshold between previously-held reading identities and a new sense of character. By viewing themselves as non-readers, they could disguise a lack of ability, whether perceived or actual (Hall, 2016); by engaging with a text they found enjoyable, they were beginning to find self-expression in literature.

Thus far I have inferred conflicting identities from the discrepancies between questionnaire and interview data. This interpretation has precedent in Alvermann and Heron (2001) and also in Pitcher *et al*. (2007) who theorised about differing definitions of 'reading' among pupils, teachers and researchers. My data suggest that my intervention did little to change this definition as understood by pupils. When I asked what book they would read next, fifteen were able to give a suggestion: all were novels. The remaining seven pupils may have had a

clear idea, but not one understood to be 'approved' of by the school. The implications of this for further practice are discussed in the conclusion.

Two stages of literacy engagement?

Analysis of pupils' responses to having their own choice in the curriculum led me to observe two incremental stages of literacy engagement, both within the power of the school to influence (Wigfield, 2004). The first concerns actively responsive pupils. My pupils were overwhelmingly more enthusiastic to attend English lessons because they were more motivated; they had responded positively to the choices they made, they felt empowered and, crucially, they wanted to read the next part of their novel and *acted* on it. Regardless of the extent of 'home' reading that occurred, pupils were engaged when they wanted to attend lessons and complete the assigned reading. Mason's experience demonstrates this. In an interview he described his reading last year:

> I hardly ever used to read in primary school. We had to do our reading diary but I didn't cos I couldn't ever find a book I liked.

Mason said he did not enjoy any of the reading completed in school this year, he strongly disagreed that there were plenty of books at home for him to read, he never borrowed books from the school library and described himself as 'never' having read outside of school in the past month. At the same time, he claimed to enjoy reading adventure, short stories and science fiction and had read a magazine, comic and instructions independently in the past month: he was a reader unable to bridge the gap between home and school literacy practices. By the end of the intervention, Mason said he had enjoyed his book, could name the author he would read next (Roald Dahl), but still was not reading any more at home. It is unclear whether he still read the texts already of interest to him and merely had not increased his

reading of fiction or was not reading more of anything. Regardless, encouraging him to read a novel independently was of value, given the conclusion that only the independent reading of novels yields academic improvement (Moje *et al*., 2008). Mason was, I concluded, a reader in the initial stage of literacy engagement; he responded positively to his reading but seemed not to have developed his reading identity by bridging the gap between home and school reading.

The second stage involved pupils moving beyond being actively responsive to demonstrating an ownership of the text. These pupils were so engaged in their choice of school reading that they took their books home to complete them. Ashley spoke of being 'determined' to find out what happened and said: 'I have had a lot more [conversations] about the book'. He frequently returned to lessons saying he had read with his mother and discussed the story with her. When he finished *Clover Moon* he steadily completed *Millions* followed by *Journey to the River Sea*, again taking the books home to complete them. One of the conditions Wilhelm and Smith (2014) identify for deep engagement (amongst boys) is a 'focus on the immediate' (p. 274) or 'immersive pleasure' (p. 275). Pupils in the second stage of reading engagement were so engaged in reading that they created an immersive reading experience by taking their books between home and school. This was not only evident in boys. Rachel clearly empathised with the protagonist of *Clover Moon* and often expressed to me how she felt sorry for her and how the book made her feel sad. After she had finished, she engaged in a similar way to Ashley with *Journey to the River Sea*. For these pupils, curriculum choice allowed them to take control of their learning which enhanced their motivation (Wigfield, 2004). This also led me to view them within a 'contingent' paradigm of reading engagement (Hruby *et al*., 2016) where engagement was understood by their ability to 'collaborate, co-construct, [and] explore' meanings (Hruby *et al*., 2016: 617).

By analysing both of these stages, pupil choice can be viewed as a tool which affects engagement. It allows pupils to shift from being passive recipients of knowledge to active respondents to texts, to feeling ownership of reading.

In summary, early adolescence is a time when pupils begin to renegotiate previously-held identities in many aspects of their lives. As they begin secondary school, there is an opportunity to capitalise on this in order to challenge pre-conceived ideas of reading disengagement. When I provided my pupils with a text choice, I bypassed assumptions of 'important' knowledge they had to be learning and gave them more control. Almost all responded positively to this and, through their subsequently changed reading behaviours, showed greater engagement in reading. Many also began to show a willingness to mediate between different reading identities.

Conclusion

Summary of findings and analysis

Finding ways of improving my low-attaining and high-poverty pupils' sense of inclusion in the secondary English classroom is vital because their achievement often lags far behind their peers. Though there is a multiplicity of reasons for this, many beyond the power of a school or teacher to influence, some steps can be taken inside the classroom to enhance the engagement of such pupils.

Dispositions to reading were complex. Before the intervention, most pupils enjoyed reading though rarely did it outside of school and several would simply pretend to read during lessons. Those that did read independently did not always consider their reading choices to be acceptable inside school. Many did not plan their future reading and most did not use either school or public libraries. Despite this apparent paucity of access, many pupils did obtain books from home. On average, pupils spoke to just two other people about their reading. PPG pupils were generally more negative in their approach to reading than non-PPG. They were most likely to enjoy reading 'not at all' or to 'never' ask for a book for a present; they were most likely to 'never' read outside of school and were most likely to pretend to read in lessons; they were most likely to have no idea of what to read next. In addition, PPG pupils were more likely to have fewer people with whom to discuss their reading than non-PPG, were less likely to belong to the local library or to borrow from the school library. While these statistical results may indicate a dearth of literacy habits among PPG pupils, it must be acknowledged that not all such pupils fitted this trend.

Allowing pupils to choose their own texts and use them for study had positive effects both in and outside the classroom. Most pupils enjoyed their chosen text, were more enthusiastic to attend English lessons and felt more confident. The majority described themselves as better independent readers and knew which type of book they would read next. Half of the class reported speaking more with others about their reading while a third read more frequently outside of school. Among the PPG group, pupils were six times more likely to enjoy their book than not and were over twice as likely to consider themselves better independent readers than otherwise. Almost half the group were reading more frequently at home and over half had more discussions about their reading. They were over twice as likely to have planned their future reading than not and over half the group were more enthusiastic to attend lessons.

Limitations

Aside from the limitations of qualitative research discussed in the methodology, further limitations of this research project held two conflicting tensions. Firstly, I wanted to mitigate some of the difficulties of pupils approaching National Curriculum reading by offering text choice, yet I provided a very narrow choice of five novels. One pupil refused to choose a book meaning his responses were ultimately of limited use. Secondly, any conclusions drawn showing the positive effects of text choice need to be placed within the context of normal school practice where, eventually, some text choices need to be made by teachers. This limited the capabilities of the research to focusing on perceptions of engagement about English through *some* reading; wider conclusions could not be drawn.

Implications for further practice

The adaptability of this intervention means it could, without too many modifications, be adapted for use with a KS4 class. From next year, I will take on the role of deputy head of department with responsibility for KS4 and therefore would be in a position to implement this. My school currently uses the AQA GCSE English examination which, for Literature Paper 1 ('Shakespeare and the Nineteenth-century novel') presents seven novel options. Much debate has taken place in recent department meetings about which novel may be most accessible for pupils and which would yield the best results. As a result of this research, I would posit giving pupils the option to choose one. Since the abandonment of the 'two-tier' examination entries, it could be possible for all pupils to do this. Pupils could then form literature circles within a class, reading the novel together and constructing meaning in groups. The aim of the teacher would be to teach the skills of answering the examination questions, to deliver contextual knowledge and to monitor the progress and comprehension of groups accordingly. Though many may need some convincing, Miss Morris has already agreed to pilot this with a low-attaining Year 10 class.

Initial reservations raised by Miss Morris, and at the academic poster conference at which this research was initially shared, concerned what 'content' to teach and how to conduct assessment for learning. One of the challenges in convincing colleagues of the benefits would be reassuring them that it can – and should – be acceptable to devote a series of lessons to teaching reading skills, rather than novel content. Assessment can take place through questioning as usual, with pupils in smaller groups.

Implications for further research

There are limits to assessing engagement solely through the qualitative methods I used (Cohen *et al*., 2011). As my data show, what pupils say about themselves to their teacher and what they genuinely think and do may be two different things. A further way of assessing engagement could have involved the inclusion of a pre- and post-intervention assessment. Rather than using usual KS3 assessment criteria or reading age tests, this assessment could be oral, where pupils would be required to hold a discussion about their chosen text or deliver a presentation to the rest of the class about it. This would allow me to observe individual pupils' contributions and consider the presence of strong opinions, disagreements, emotional reactions and ability to recall characters and events from the text as indicators of engagement. Comparing discussions after the reading of a whole-class text and after the reading completed as part of this intervention would allow me to better understand the effects of text choice.

In addition, it would be profitable to investigate the use of other research models, such as quantitative methods, to enhance my understanding of the fuller effects of pupil choice. Shifting the focus onto cognitive benefits may be one way of doing this. In such a model, pupils could be tested on their ability to recall and comprehend key aspects of the plot after both having and not having choice. Using a simple test such as a cloze exercise would make measuring these results easier, though the simplicity may also be one of its limitations.

Finally, investigating the true depth of pupils' genre interests and how these might be used in the classroom would be beneficial, since it would allow me to trial more innovative ways of teaching reading. If pupils were permitted to bring their own non-fiction, comics or online materials to class, and lessons could be constructed around these which included developing

the skills required by KS3 assessment criteria, both engagement and academic progress could be assessed. Using interviews would allow me to gauge the impact on pupils' perceptions that the subject could be 'for them' and would enable profitable links to be made between home and school literacy practices.

The pupils I investigated are at the beginning of their secondary school careers. So too, this project can be just the beginning of many fruitful conversations with colleagues, innovative practices and further investigations within my school. As the reformed English GCSE continues, it has never been more important to ensure that every pupil is engaged in reading, a goal I intend to pursue.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Year 7 reading ages by socio-economic status in Trelawney College

Category Number	Category	Number of Pupils	%	Of which PPG (Total)	Of which PPG (%)
1	Reading age is over 4 years behind chronological age	9	3.31	7	77.78
2	Reading age is between 3 and 4 years behind chronological	21	7.72	12	57.14
3	Reading age is between 2 and 3 years behind chronological age	28	10.3	14	50
4	Reading age is between 1 and 2 years behind chronological age	25	9.2	11	44
5	Reading age is between 0 and 1 year behind chronological age	35	12.87	14	40
6	Reading age is between 0-1 year above chronological age	47	17.3	14	29.78
7	Reading age is over a year above chronological age	107	39.3	33	30.84
	Total	272	100	105	38.6

Appendix 2: Pre-intervention questionnaire

Reading Questionnaire

Please answer completely honestly.

1. Do you enjoy reading?

Yes, very much — Not at all

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. How much did you read in primary school compared to now?

I used to read less — I used to read more

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. Would you ask for a book for a present?

Yes, always — No, never

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. I think we read books in school because…(please tick all that apply)

- o It helps improve our skills in English
- o It helps improve our skills in **a few** subjects
- o It helps improve our skills in **all** subjects
- o It helps us pass our GCSEs
- o It helps us to get a job
- o It is enjoyable
- o It is an important skill for life
- o Other (please specify……
  ……..).

5. In the past month, I have read outside of school:
   - o Every day
   - o 4-6 days per week
   - o 1-3 days per week
   - o once per fortnight
   - o once a month
   - o Never

6. When I read outside of school, I usually read for the following length of time:
   - o 1 hour or more
   - o 45 mins – 1 hour
   - o 30 – 45 mins
   - o 15 – 30 mins
   - o less than 15 mins
   - o Never

7. In the past month, I have read outside of school: (please tick all that apply)
- Poetry
- A play
- A non-fiction book
- A fiction book (novel)
- A newspaper
- A magazine
- A website
- A comic
- Social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat)
- Instructions
- Other (please give an example……
  ……).
- Nothing

8. When reading fiction, I enjoy reading: (please tick all that apply)
   - Action / Adventure stories
   - Mystery stories
   - Ghost stories
   - Short stories
   - Stories set in an historical time period
   - Science fiction
   - Graphic novels (comics)
   - Romance
   - Stories about animals
   - Stories about real-life people and situations
   - Stories about fantasy / magic
   - Books that are part of a series
   - Stories written by someone famous
   - Other (please specify……
     ……..).

9. Are you a member of the local library?
   - Yes
   - No

10. How often do you borrow books from the school Learning Zone?
    - More than once a week
    - About once a week
    - About once a fortnight
    - About once a month
    - Never

11. There are plenty of books at home for me to read.

Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

12. Who do you talk to about the books you are reading?
    - Parents
    - Older brother
    - Younger brother
    - Older sister
    - Younger sister
    - Other family member
    - Friends
    - English teacher
    - Form tutor
    - Other teachers
    - Librarian
    - Other (please specify……
      ……).
    - Nobody

13. If I am reading a book but not enjoying it, I will usually:
    - Stop reading it fairly quickly
    - Keep trying with it and see if I like it
    - Go back to the beginning and start again
    - Skip bits and get to a better chapter
    - Pretend I am enjoying it
    - Pretend I am still reading it

14. I have enjoyed the reading we have done in English lessons this year.

Yes, all of it						No, none of it
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

15. I know what book I am planning on reading next:

Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

16. When we read independently at the start of English lessons, I usually…(please tick all that apply)

    - Want to read for longer
    - Want to read for less time
    - Sit quietly and pretend to read
    - Bring my own book from home
    - Bring my own book from the library
    - Borrow the same book each lesson from the bookshelf
    - Read a different book each lesson from the bookshelf

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

Appendix 3: Shortlist of books for intervention

Title and author	**Protagonist**	**Genre**	**Synopsis**	**Length**
Artemis Fowl, by Eoin Colfer	12 year-old male, Artemis Fowl; criminal genius; cares for one sick parent.	Science fiction, fantasy	Artemis kidnaps a fairy for ransom to restore the family fortune; war ensues.	277 pages
The Black Book of Secrets, by F.E. Higgins	Ludlow Fitch, male; child pickpocket; abandoned by parents.	Gothic Horror	Ludlow becomes apprenticed to Joe Zabbidou, a man who allows villagers to pawn their secrets.	304 pages
Clover Moon, by Jacqueline Wilson	12 year-old female, Clover Moon; eldest of 6 siblings.	Historical	Clover flees her abusive step-mother and role as young carer to seek her fortune.	383 pages
Journey to the River Sea, by Eva Ibbotson	12 year-old female, Maia; orphaned.	Adventure	Maia is sent from London to the Amazon to live with distant relatives; adventure follows.	320 pages
Millions, by Frank Cottrell Boyce	10 year-old male, Damian; has lost his mother; appears to have Autism.	Comedy	Damian finds £229,370 just 17 days before currency changes to Euros; he searches for the best way to spend it.	250 pages

Appendix 4: Typical lesson outline during intervention

Tasks were shared with pupils using the following PowerPoint presentation. Visualising strategies used on Slide 3 were adapted from Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2013). This slide was also given to pupils as a checklist on which to record strategies they had used. Slides 4-8 were used as for a 'read aloud' (Kelley and Clausen-Grace, 2013: 16) where I modelled the thought process for visualising the start of Dickens' *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 2010). Slide 9 was a prompt for pupils to record their reading strategies and they demonstrated this following instructions on Slide 10.

Slide 1

23rd January, 2017

Group Reading

LO: to apply active reading strategies to our own books.

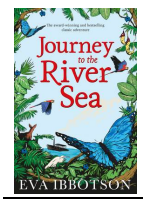


Key words:
Summarise
Visualise
Predict

Slide 2

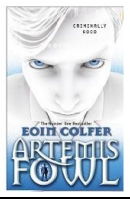
Task 1: Design your bookmark

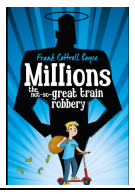
- Remember this will be **your** book until Easter.
- Design something that represents you and / or the novel you have chosen.











Slide 3

Visualising

I visualise…

- To help me predict what I will read in the text
- To help me clarify something in the text
- The characters / objects / creatures in the text
- The events in the text
- The setting in the text
- The text by using my senses (seeing, smelling, tasking, hearing or feelings)
- By imagining a physical reaction (hot, cold, thirsty, etc)
- By imagining an emotional reaction (happy, sad, excited, etc)
- By using illustrations from the text

Slide 4

Visualising: how do we visualise?

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

Slide 5

Visualising: how do we visualise?

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wo[illegible]iles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad i[illegible] identity of things, seems to me to have been ga[illegible]rable raw afternoon towards evening. At such[illegible]ut for certain that this bleak place overgr[illegible]was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip[illegible], and also Georgiana wife of the above, wer[illegible] dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

What would a marsh feel like to walk through?

Slide 6

Visualising: how do we visualise?

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain [illegible]place overgrown with nettles was the chur[illegible]Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Ge[illegible]e above, were dead and buried; and that Alexa[illegible]ew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant ch[illegible]said, were also dead and buried; and that [illegible]ness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mou[illegible]s and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

Picture this scene. How hot/cold is the character?

Slide 7

Visualising: how do we visualise?

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

Why is the churchyard overgrown with nettles?

Slide 8

Visualising: how do we visualise?

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

What colour could the river be?

Slide 9

Time for you to read

- Keep a tally of the visualising strategies you have used.
- 2 mins – discuss with your partner the strategies you have used.
- Feedback to the whole class.

Slide 10

What have you visualised today?

- Draw the characters **or** the setting of what you have read today.
- Extension: label it with quotations from the text.

Slide 11

Reading Journal

23/1/17

Pages 1-9

Really enjoyed the character of Damian because he seems unusual and quite interesting. Not sure why the book is called Millions yet.

Slide 12

Plenary

- One visualising strategy I have used well today is…
- I still need to work on…

Appendix 5: Post-intervention questionnaire

Reading Questionnaire (2)

Last term, you chose your own book from a list of 5 to study. Please answer these questions completely honestly and in as much detail as you can.

1. Did you enjoy your book? Why?

2. Do you feel you had enough help choosing a book? What further guidance, if any, would you like next time?

3. Did the project affect how much you looked forward to English lessons? Please explain your answer.

4. Since the project, have you been reading at home more, less or about the same? Why do you think this might be?

5. While doing the project, did you have more, fewer or about the same number of conversations with teachers, family and friends about your reading? Please give an example if you can.

6. Do you know what sort of book you would like to read next? In what ways do you think the project may have helped, if at all?

7. Do you think the project has helped you to become a better independent reader? In what ways?

8. What did you enjoy about last term's project?

9. Is there anything you did not enjoy?

Appendix 6: Initial questions used in semi-structured group interviews

1. What was the last book you read?
2. What made you choose that book?
3. Where do you usually read at home?
4. What kind of books do you usually enjoy?
5. How do you decide which book to read next?
6. Would you describe yourself as someone who enjoys reading?
7. What have you liked about the reading so far this year?
8. What have you enjoyed about the book you chose this term?
9. Would you recommend your book to a friend? Why?
10. What have you found hard about this term's work?
11. What does a good independent reader look like?
12. Do you prefer reading in groups, as a whole class or on your own?

Appendix 7: Pupil characteristics in 7J5

Name	M/F	SEN	PP	Chronological age (Test 1)	Reading Age Test 1	Chronological age (Test 2)	Reading Age Test 2	Chosen Book
Sam	M		Y	12/0	10/9	12/4	11/6	Black Book of Secrets
Ebony	F	K		11/10	9/10	12/2	8/9	Millions
James	M	K		11/9	9/0	12/1	9/0	Millions
Danny	M			11/9	8/8	12/1	10/3	Artemis Fowl
Logan	M	K	Y	11/3	7/8	11/7	8/8	Artemis Fowl
Tom	M			11/8	11/6	12/0	9/0	Clover Moon
Rachel	F		Y	12/1	11/10	12/4	10/3	Clover Moon
Joel	M		Y	12/0	11/10	12/4	11/6	Black Book of Secrets
Connor	M		Y	11/1	9/0	11/5	9/6	Journey to the River Sea
Mason	M		Y	12/1	8/0	12/4	8/8	Black Book of Secrets
Blake	M			11/6	10/9	11/9	11/6	Millions
Ewan	M			11/7	13/6	11/10	Test not completed	Millions
Kane	M		Y	12/0	9/6	12/4	10/3	Millions
Ashley	M		Y	11/10	11/6	12/2	9/6	Clover Moon
Tristan	M		Y	11/11	8/8	12/3	10/9	Millions
Emily	F		Y	11/3	8/3	11/7	9/6	Clover Moon
Josh	M		Y	12/0	8/0	12/4	9/6	Artemis Fowl
Molly	F			11/1	9/6	11/5	9/6	Artemis Fowl
Sophie	F		Y	11/3	10/9	11/7	11/11	Clover Moon
Olly	M			11/9	12/3	12/1	Test not completed	Millions
Jordan	M	E	Y	11/7	9/0	11/10	Test not completed	Millions
Kiera	F		Y	11/2	10/3	11/5	12/5	Millions