

Replacing Whole-Class-Novels with Choice Novels Builds Lifelong Readers in High Schools

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to effectively argue for the replacement of whole-class-novel-studies with choice-novel-studies. Based on existing research, national surveys, and testimonies of expert-teachers, it is clear that teachers must radically change how they foster reading in their classrooms if they truly want to craft lifelong, engaged, readers. At the moment, 42% of adult Canadians are low-level readers and the number of engaged student readers is declining: students today are even less engaged readers than the generation before them. The current practice of teaching whole-class-novels is killing students' love of reading. Teachers must relinquish their roles as 'experts' who teach particular novels and instead embrace the role of facilitators who encourage students' sense of agency by allowing students to select their own novels and support aesthetic reading in their classrooms, since this process causes students to become better, more engaged, readers. Students' reading levels are excellent predictors of their future income levels and social class; therefore, students' valuing of reading and their reading practices are of the utmost importance. While there are challenges embedded in this approach, these can be overcome. Ample evidence in the Saskatchewan ELA 20 curriculum supports the statement that the Ministry of Education is in agreement with choice-novel-studies in schools.



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## Replacing Whole-Class-Novels with Choice Novels Builds Lifelong Readers in High Schools

The Summer Literacy Institute in Saskatoon features Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher, high school English teachers who are well known for their advocacy surrounding choice reading in high schools. The conference advertises that teachers will have an opportunity to reflect upon how they have crafted literacy experiences for students and, one presumes, reconsider their approaches. In preparation for that conference and this paper I have read extensively about ‘the class novel’ in contrast with ‘choice reading’ and have come to the conclusion that the whole-class novel study has got to go. If I, as a teacher, want to foster life-long readers in my classroom then I must do something radically different because keeping up the status quo is killing students’ love of reading. And that is dangerous, because reading is closely correlated to people’s economic success. The majority of Canadians are not daily, engaged, readers, but teachers can help change that: research shows that choice reading in schools is effective in helping to craft lifelong readers. Though it is not blatantly advertised, the Saskatchewan English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum supports such an approach. There are plenty of case studies and testimonies that offer teachers a framework for how they can put the research into practice. Ultimately, I believe ELA teachers must let go of their roles as experts who teach the class novels and become *facilitators* who guide students through independent choice reading if teachers truly want to empower students and foster students in becoming lifelong readers.

### **The Problem with the Whole-Class-Novel-Study**

The majority of high school teachers regularly teach class-sets of “one-size-fits-all” (Fisher & Ivey, 2007, p. 494) novels. The privileging of academic *canonical* texts, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in their classrooms really limits what can be taught (Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Atwell (2007) argued that “I could no more pick *the* book that would invite a whole class to

make friends with reading than I could decide who my students should grow up and marry” (p. 27). Fisher and Ivey (2007) wonder why teachers are so determined to include whole-class-novels in their instruction; a common sentiment from teachers is that, class sets of novels are taught “because they are ‘good for students’” (p. 495) but Fisher & Ivey refute that stating that “students still struggling to read do not get better at reading from tackling difficult books” (p. 495) and imply that the notion that one novel can possibly fit all students is an irrational one. In truth, the result of teaching the whole class novel is that “students are reading less and are less motivated, less engaged, and less likely to read in the future” (Fisher & Ivey, 2007, p. 494). Forced to read books they are not interested in or find too difficult, “They figure out exactly how many pages they can skim on the bus ride to school or the trustworthiness of the Wikipedia page for the day’s required chapters” (Morgan & Wagner, 2003, p. 659). Kittle (2013) agrees, writing that “if school reading is only like boot camp, we lose readers. And I’m not just talking about dropouts. I’m talking about thousands of kids who survive English class with SparkNotes and skim the surface of their content classes, reading next to nothing that is assigned to them in four years” (p. 2). Teachers often assign chapter questions, quizzes, and tests to ensure that students are held accountable for reading the novel in question, which further alienates students from reading (Fisher & Ivey, 2007). By teaching whole-class-novel-studies, teachers are turning kids off of reading and churning out worse readers.

At the heart of the assigned whole-class-novel-study is the lack of student agency regarding what is studied: students typically have little choice in what books their classes study. Atwell (2016) wrote that:

When Goodlad asked kids in grades six through eight about the choices they made during their school day, two-thirds reported they had no say ever, about anything. When asked

to name subjects they characterized as interesting or favorites, English was at the bottom of the list....The big picture revealed young adolescents disenfranchised from their own learning, discouraged – if not prevented – from assuming agency, and more likely to view school as a place to satisfy social needs than to identify and meet intellectual ones (p. 10).

Most people thrive when they have some control over their environments. Divorced from those students' experiences by time, many teachers forget what it is like to feel powerless in a classroom. Imagine being one of those students and ask yourself: "Would I learn best in a class where I had no say over what we studied?" I argue that the answer is "no". A class that has room for students to make some choices for themselves would likely be the preferable, more engaging, one. When students are "instructed in a whole-group setting with texts chosen *for* them rather than *by* them" (Morgan & Wagner, 2003, 660) teachers disenfranchise those students from their learning.

The whole-class-novel-study kills reading because instead of supporting students so that they may experience aesthetic reading (when one reads for the sheer pleasure of it and experiences a sense of *flow* during that reading experience) teachers focus on teaching content and assessing whether or not students have read *the book*. Gallagher (2003) asks readers to consider how they would feel if, sitting down on a beach with a delicious book in hand, ready to devour it, their English teacher spotted them, said what a good book it was that they were reading, and told them s/he was going to interrupt them every 30 minutes to make sure they understood the book by having them answer chapter questions, and told them that at the end of the novel there would be an exam on how well they read the book. The book and the whole reading experience would surely lose its appeal, Gallagher argues, and destroy the readers' appetite for reading. Wilhelm and Smith (2002) explain that, "Aesthetic reading, the kind that

most teachers (us included) want to cultivate, is a . . . nebulous thing. The focus in aesthetic reading is not what can be learned but what is experienced” (p. 40). Books naturally sell themselves when students read books that are personally interesting to them and are at their reading levels. In order to grow stronger, better, readers, teachers must support choice novel studies in their classes and stop requiring students to complete busy-work that proves they have read the books.

Too often teachers view their roles as classroom experts versus classroom facilitators; as a result, “Instead of leading students to independence, we make them dependent on us.” (Kittle, 2013, p. xv). It is fairly common that, “Students don’t read assignments in social studies or science, because they know the teacher will go over the material in class.” (Kittle, 2013, p. 98). Fisher and Ivey (2007) point out that, “Teachers using a single book with a group of students often revert to lecturing and assigning independent reading. From the perspective of the students, the teacher knows everything (from the ‘correct’ symbolism to the appropriate predications), and students have permission to remain passive” (p. 496). Atwell (2007) writes that when her students graduate from her middle school classroom they “matriculate to a range of different high schools – local publics, local independents, and private boarding schools. Wherever they end up, most of them put pleasure reading on *pause* for four years, because they want to pass high school English” (p. 107). How ironic. It is time that teachers release control of the whole-class-novel and facilitate students’ choice reading.

### **Defining *Literacy and Reading Levels* and Exploring the National Average**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts” (UNESCO, 2004,

13). In Canada, the first study that measured the degree of literacy of Canadians was conducted in 1987 and the results showed that roughly 24% of Canadians were illiterate. Subsequent multi-language surveys in 1994 and 2003 also produced similar statistics (Historic Canada, 2013).

A 1989 Statistics Canada survey grouped readers into one of five literacy levels, which are the five categories that are still used today to measure and discuss Canadians' literacy. The levels are as follows:

**Level 1** Canadians at this level have difficulty dealing with printed materials and have few basic skills for decoding or working with text. They most likely identify themselves as people who cannot read.

**Level 2** Canadians at this level can use printed materials only for limited purposes such as finding a familiar word in a simple text that is clearly laid out. They would likely recognize themselves as having difficulties with common reading materials.

**Level 3** Canadians at this level can use reading materials in a variety of situations provided the tasks involved are not too complex. While these people generally do not see themselves as having major reading difficulties, they tend to avoid situations requiring reading. This level is considered by many countries to be the minimum for successful participation in society.

**Level 4 or 5** Canadians at this level have strong literacy skills. This is a large and diverse group that exhibits a wide range of reading skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials. These people can meet most reading demands and handle new reading challenges. (Historic Canada, 2013, para. 4-7)

Figure 1 (next page) depicts the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey's (IALLS, 2003) findings regarding current Canadians' reading levels: "42% of the adult population in Canada is

working at less than Level 3. Nine million adults have skills at Levels 1 and 2. The number rises to twelve million if seniors are included. Over seven million adult Canadians working at Levels 1 and 2 don't identify literacy as an issue. This can impact their motivation to improve their skills and this has a negative impact on the Canadian economy" (Harwood, 2012, p. 120). In fact, "Literacy problems cost Canadians \$10 billion per year"

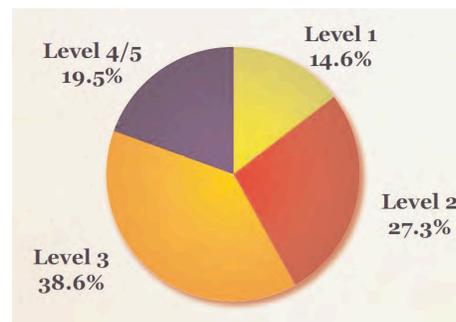


Figure 1. The Big Picture, CLLN, 2012

(Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, IODE, n.d., para. 7). Diakiw (2014) notes that the authors of one study concluded that "Reading level at age seven was linked to social class even 35 years on. Children with higher reading and math skills ended up having higher incomes, better housing and more professional roles in adulthood" (para. 5). With such a powerful correlation between higher reading levels and people leading better quality lives, Canadians' literacy levels are extremely troubling. Even more alarming is that research indicates that today's students are even less engaged readers than the adults in this study were when they were students, which means Canadians' literacy levels are on a downward trend and not forecasted to get better anytime soon.

### **The Majority of North American Students are not Engaged Readers**

In the United States, reading scores are considered to be one of the key indicators of success (or lack thereof). Case in point: "The state of Arizona forecasts the number of future prison cells needed based on Grade 4 state reading scores" (Diakiw, 2014, para. 4). Diakiw (2014) argues that, "Perhaps [Canadians] should examine what [Americans] know that we may not. Increasingly, new research across many countries is showing that the best predictor of future education achievement and life success is reading ability – or, more significantly, being an

*engaged* reader” (para. 4). Before proselytizing that Canada is not the United States, consider the fact that studies have shown strong parallels between Canadian kids’ reading and American kids’ reading. The Kids & Family Reading Report: Canadian Edition (2017), commissioned by Scholastic Canada, states that only, “One-third of [Canadian] kids (34%) are frequent readers, reading books for fun 5–7 days per week. Girls (38%) are more likely than boys (30%) to be frequent readers” (p. 4). Canadian readers are on par with American readers, then, since the National Endowment for the Arts (2007) states that, “Less than one-third of 13-year-olds are daily readers” (p. 7). Revisiting Diakiw’s (2014) article, he cites that “85 percent of [people entering Canadian correctional facilities] are functionally illiterate” (para. 6) and states that “Literacy is the key to economic and social power, regardless of socio-economic class” (para. 7).

If being an engaged reader is highly connected to one’s quality of life, then Canadians should be alarmed that the number of students who are considered to be ‘engaged readers’ is falling. Kittle (2013) says that, “Even in Ontario, Canada, according to the province’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO, 2011), pleasure reading has declined: ‘Since 1998/99, the percentage of students in grade 3 who report they like to read has declined by almost a third, from 76% in 98/99 to 50% in 2010/11’” (3). Not just wanting to take Kittle’s word for it, I headed off to investigate the most recent EQAO (2016) report myself: what I found concurred with her findings. The report states that 53% of Grade 3 girls answered that they like to read “most of the time” (10) while boys responded that the same held true for them just 42% of the time. By grade six, 54% of girls responded that they still liked to read “most of the time” (11) whereas only 38% of boys answered the same.

The million-dollar question, then, is how to create lifelong engaged readers? Arguably, the answer lies in providing students in schools with choice reading opportunities:

There is some evidence to support the idea that giving students control over what they read would encourage them to read. First of all, students themselves say that they would read more if provided with more choice and control over reading materials (Healy, 2008; Moorman, 2009; Stallings, 2011; Webber, 2004). . . . a kind of cascading effect was observed in which choice and interest seemed to bolster motivation, which encouraged reading, which in turn seemed to bolster self-confidence in general, which again gave students the confidence to engage with different kinds of materials (Murphy, 2013, 38-41).

Einstein is often attributed with defining insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. If the illiteracy rate in Canada has not changed much since 1989, and students are now less engaged readers than their parents before them, the time has come to break with tradition and try something new: choice novel studies in class as opposed to the whole-class-novel.

### **Guided Choice Reading Novel Studies Are the Solution**

Morgan and Wagner (2013) explain that, “Choice allows for student control (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and is an important factor in motivating engagement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). With choice come opportunities for students to be in the ‘flow’ of their reading experiences, to be fully engaged in the task at hand when reading a text with the right skill and challenge level (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)” (p. 660). Most teachers would agree that they hope that their students become engaged and lifelong readers. Atwell (2007), a strong advocate of choice reading and guru for the reading workshop approach, says it is the teachers,

who figure out how to invite and support frequent, engaged, voluminous experiences with books [who] get to witness [that] dream come true: struggling readers turn into successful

ones, strong readers stretch beyond the constraints of the syllabus, and all students begin to feel the same passion for books and reading that drew their teachers to the profession in the first place (p. 112).

Frank Smith (2004), an expert on how people learn to read, writes that, “Reading is the most natural activity in the world” (p. 2) and that “Children learn to read by reading” (169). Choice reading, then, naturally builds strong readers who naturally advance to higher reading levels.

Choice reading does not mean abandoning all structure and simply being content that students have books in their hands. Though their approaches differ slightly, expert teachers who have used this method agree that a structured, guided, approach to choice-reading is necessary. Similarities in their approaches are: the existence of extensive classroom libraries so that books are at students’ fingertips, daily book-talks (book in hand, teachers talk about what it’s about, why they like it, and often read a passage from the book), time set aside for daily silent reading, one-on-one reading conferences where teachers learn about students’ reading abilities and interests and push students to challenge themselves, modeling of reading strategies, next reading lists, and the expectation that students write in depth in their reader’s notebooks using examples from their books to support their writing (Kittle, 2013; Gallagher, 2003; Atwell, 2007).

The teacher experts also agree on what not to do: they stress NOT to interfere with students’ flow reading. Doing so teaches students,

[T]hat the point of reading stories was to swallow [their] opinions and articulate [their] connections....a reader could become as proficient as hell....but *never enter the reading zone* – never become immersed in a great story, experience the life of a character, escape from his or her own life, dream, laugh, despair, celebrate, understand, wonder, or fall in love (p. 54).

In other words, students who are asked to interrupt their flow reading experiences arguably get turned off of reading. This is tricky for most teachers, who feel a fairly constant urge to feed students', parents', and administrators' appetites for *grades* and who no doubt want to have some kind of data that proves that all this *reading time* they're assigning is measurably impacting students positively and not proof of teachers' slacking off. Instead more formative types of assessment are recommended: through reading conferences and students' notebook writings. Atwell (2007) writes that teachers can glean, "Are they understanding what they're reading? Happy with it? In the reading zone? In need of advice or information from me?" (91).

Smith (2004) says that as readers' reading levels increase they naturally seek out more challenging literature. Kittle (2013) echoes this saying that, "Wise teachers can place literature within reach of any student" (p. xv) but she cautions that "without the stamina to read long and well, students will abandon it" (p. xv). For those who still do not know if choice-reading is the way to go, Atwell (2007) has this to say:

A plea to my colleagues who are teaching in high schools. Please, for the sake of kids and books –and everything we know from NAEP and SAAT scores, PISA results, you name it, about the highest achieving students – consider bucking the secondary English status quo. Every measure that looks at pleasure reading and its effects on student performance on standardized tests of reading ability – *and science and math* – tells us that the major predictor of academic success is the amount of time that a student spends reading. In fact, the top 5 percent of U.S. students read up to 144 times more than the kids in the bottom 5 percent (p. 107).

The research is in: “offering student choice, time, and good books led to increased student engagements, a deeper sense of identity, a developed sense of agency, and higher state test scores” (Ivey and Johnston, 2011, in Morgan and Wagner, 2013, p. 660).

### **Applying Research to Practice – Two Case Studies**

#### **Case Study #1: Choice Novel Study Unit Results in Higher Student Engagement**

In Morgan & Wagner’s article, Chris, a high school teacher, conducted a novel study unit where students were permitted to select their own books. How, Chris wondered, would supporting students in choice reading versus explicitly teaching them a novel affect their engagement? Chris’s high school had,

1,181 students across the following ethnic identities: 92.8% Caucasian; 2.1% African American; 2% Hispanic; less than 2% Asian/Pacific Islander; and less than 2% multiracial. ...Chris’s two classes of 57 sophomores were almost split evenly by gender (28 males, 29 females). In Chris’s class, 14 students had Individualized Education Plans (IEP) for English, with accommodations based on their reading abilities. Ten students were reading at least one grade below level. Accommodations ranged from extended time on assigned reading to test readers. Within this mix were eight students who took Honors English freshman year but decided not to remain on the honors track and several others who could have been on the honors track. The remaining students represented a wide range of abilities (Morgan & Wagner, 2013, p. 661).

Instead of handouts, students were told they would have one-on-one conferences to discuss the book. Thirty minutes of reading each night would be their only homework. Students were expected to respond in their reading journals. Students’ responses were overwhelmingly positive, but many initially believed such a unit was too good to be true since the focus was

“more [on] the reading than on the assessments, caus[ing] them to search for a hidden trap” (Morgan & Wagner, 2013, p. 661). Chris taught short mini-lessons on “Point of View, Conflict, Plot, Direct/Indirect Characterization, Mood/Tone, Flashback/Foreshadow, Irony” (Morgan & Wagner, 2013, p. 662) and asked students to make connections between these and what they were reading in their journals. In place of quizzes and tests, Chris conferred with his students, noting what concepts students were having difficulty with on a charted piece of paper. Feeling that this took too much time, he eventually developed a code for quickly jotting down how students were grappling with the material: “5 – Competent answers that reveal thorough reading and connection of the concept; 3 – Surface-level comprehension of the text and attempted connection of the concept; 1 – Poorly supported answers and lack of connection of the concept; 0-Demonstrates lack of reading and connection of the concept” (Morgan & Wagner, 2013, pp. 663-664). Often students tended to summarize their books instead of applying the concepts in question, so Chris used questions such as, ““What words can you find that the author uses to show us mood of the piece?” or ‘Can you describe a passage or plot element that helped set the tone of the piece?’ . . . ‘Does it help the book’s purpose or hurt it?’” (Morgan & Wagner, 2013, p. 663). Reflecting upon the conferencing process, Chris wrote that:

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

to give them choice, while also giving them the attention they deserved.” (Chris in Morgan & Wagner, 2013, p. 664).

Chris discovered ‘fake’ readers (kids who were pretending to read their books but weren’t actually doing so) in conferencing and in all cases, found their “reluctance a matter of the wrong book selection” (p. 664). Over the course of the unit Chris’s students read 81 books, with almost half of his students reading more than one book; something that likely would not have happened had they all been reading a whole-class-novel.

### **Case Study #2: Choice Reading Correlates to Higher Reading Levels**

In the 2013-2014 year, a fairly new ELA teacher, Katie Dickerson, decided to try and incorporate more independent choice reading into her classes. Interested in how it would impact students’ reading levels and engagement, she writes that she sampled approximately twenty percent of her students in each of her 11<sup>th</sup> grade classes. She purposefully sampled:

students who performed well in my class and appeared to read with ease....students who struggled in my class and had an aversion to reading....[and] students in between. The population I sampled ranged in independent reading level from fourth grade to eleventh grade, with an average reading level of seventh grade for my non-honors class and ninth grade for my honors class. I used this information to help find suitable books for my classroom library (Dickerson, 2015, para. 8.).

Dickerson (2015) had students track their reading progress, which consisted of “date, minutes read, and number of pages read” (para. 10) and she had five rules for her program: “A book is a book; I read, too; we talk about our books; we write about our books; we are free to ditch our books” (para. 11). Dickerson collected data by requiring students to keep this information in their readers’ notebooks. By the end of the year, Dickerson retested her sample students’ reading

levels (with the exception of two students who were no longer at the school), and discovered “Students showed varying levels of improvement, an increase of between one and three grade levels” (para. 15) noting a correlation existed but that it cannot be proved that the choice reading directly caused the students’ reading improvement.

Dickerson tweaked her reading program and implemented it again in the 2014-15 year. At the end of the term, Dickerson (2015) surveyed her students to get their feedback regarding choice reading. She notes that her approach, which required students to engage in sustained silent reading (SSR) three days a week for ten minutes, “achieved moderate success” (para. 17), since “49.7% of students said I should implement it every day” (para. 17); 77.08% of students acknowledged that “I have read more this year in English than in any other English class” (para. 18) and that “The students who completed the survey also attributed a number of new or strengthened skills to their increased reading: a better vocabulary (76%), the ability to focus (59%), the idea that their problems aren’t as great as they thought they were (50%), increased responsibility (61%), and the ability to better understand others (65%)” (para. 20) In retrospect, Dickerson (2015) reflects that even without standardized test data she can:

see the value of choice reading and independent reading on my students’ faces every day.

I can hear their disappointment if we have to read for a shorter amount of time than they had expected. I can tell that they are grateful for their autonomy in the way that interact with me. But in our data-driven profession, how do I prove it? (para. 25).

Similar to Chris, Dickerson (2015) also comments that “one of my favorite things about Reading Zone...is the connections that it allows me to build with students” (para. 30).

Chris, teacher experts, and researchers in this field would most definitely agree with Dickerson when she writes:

If we are to get students invested in their own learning, we need to change the way we teach. If we are to help our city become more literate overall, we need to change the way we approach reading. If we are to educate for character and growth and success, we need to stop seeing our students as a standardized other, one on which we need to impose a certain kind of knowledge (para. 42).

In other words, teachers must relinquish control of the whole-class-novel and instead facilitate students' choice-novel reading so that students develop agency, naturally grow as readers through the act of reading itself, and are more likely to become lifelong readers.

### **Critiquing the Choice Novel Study**

Despite the benefits, there are many possible criticisms of a choice reading approach. First, one critique of this method is the necessity of the classroom library (Kittle, 2013; Gallagher, 2003; Atwell, 2007). A beautiful idea, one argues, but how do teachers acquire a classroom library since books are fairly expensive and most school divisions will not install one in a teacher's classroom? Teachers can apply for grants, ask for donations, or pay out of pocket but grants are few and far between, donations are often random, and paying out of pocket can be quite costly.

Second, time is another enemy of this approach: students must have time to read in class. Gallagher (2003) makes the analogy that a basketball coach would not send players off to practice on their own before a big game, but that teachers do this all the time with students: "We tell them that lots of reading is good for them and that they should go home and do lots of it. Some do, but the ones who need it most often do not" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 7). Offering students ten minutes per class to read independently when classes are often only 60 minutes in length means that students are choice reading for over 16 percent of their class's term; however, it does

seem like a short amount of reading time in one sitting - I wonder if students can really enter a flow reading experience in such a short amount of time? Replacing the class novel study would probably free up about three additional weeks of class time to engage in more aesthetic reading and writing activities surrounding the novel(s), but would that amount of time be enough to create lifelong engaged readers? It is questionable.

Third, Gallagher writes that, "I learned some time ago that if I want to develop a love of recreational reading in my students, I have to resist the urge to grade everything they read" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 9). The urge to grade and collect student data is strong and, for teachers, letting go of some of that grading so that students can actually improve as readers feels counter-intuitive. Perhaps teachers fear that such an approach makes their necessity redundant, but such is not the case.

Fourth, all the teacher experts stress the importance of conferring with students to help assist students in selecting interesting and challenging books to read (Kittle, 2013; Gallagher, 2003; Atwell, 2007). Gallagher (2003) and Dickerson (2015) both note that it is important that teachers model reading, but teachers cannot confer and model aesthetic reading at the same time so they may feel conflicted and overwhelmed by such an approach, which seemingly requires a certain ability to *read* one's class in order to customize whether one will confer or model on a day-by-day basis. In addition, modeling reading strategies requires a certain level of vulnerability from teachers. Kittle (2013) says "I talk and write in front of my class" so that they understand her thought process when it comes to her making sense of what she reads (and how she writes). Such an approach, then, is likely not for everyone.

A fifth and final critique of this method is that all the experts say that eventually all students in their classes grow to love reading and read voluminously. From personal experience

I know that cell phones can often be hidden behind books and socializing with one's neighbour is extremely tempting. Attaining such a consistently high level of student engagement in reading seems unlikely.

There are always excuses people can find to defend why they are not willing to try something new. Dickerson (2015) offers this sage advice: "Don't be afraid to try something new because it might not work out the way you want it to. Don't worry that something may impede on your pre-planned curriculum and stop you from covering everything you are supposed to teach. Don't be afraid to give up some of the control you have over your class and put it in the hands of your students" (para. 39). Her words inspire me to view the obstacles embedded in the choice reading approach as challenges and embrace choice reading in contrast to the whole-class novel study.

### **The Saskatchewan Curriculum: Supportive of the Choice Novel Study**

One of the easiest ways to include choice-reading in class time is to make time for daily independent reading, "Yet this piece of the curriculum is often dropped after the primary grades" (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, 16). Kittle (2013) says most of her "colleagues say, 'Not my job. I have curriculum to cover.' I say, if not you, who?" (p. 7). Saskatchewan English teachers have a curriculum that fully supports the use of choice reading, yet one wonders how many actually make time for it in their classes, especially at the high school level.

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education states that teachers must teach one teacher-guided novel study (TGS) and one independent novel study (IS) in each high school English Language Arts (ELA) course. A "TGS refers to a selection that is studied in some detail for a specific purpose and involves explicit instruction. An [IS] refers to a selection intended for application of previously learned strategies and/or for personal enjoyment" (Ministry of

Education, 2012, p. 28). Every teacher I know uses one class novel for the TGS, yet nowhere in the curriculum does it dictate that teachers must use the same novel with the entire class. In fact, the curriculum states that in regards to the novel study, “For instructional, assessment, and evaluation purposes, teachers should choose resources and selections from the respective English language arts core and additional resources or alternative resources that have not been suggested at other grade levels and that pose comparable challenge to the students” (p. 28). Simply translated, teachers may choose to teach novels from the list the Ministry has provided, but if they find alternative books (provided they are not designated for other grades) then teachers may choose other novels better suited to the students in their classes.

The choice-novel-study approach is also supported by the curriculum’s “What ELA Is and What It Is Not” page (see Table 1). All of the “it is” lists have been articulated by researchers as what choice-novel-studies provide students while most of the “it is not” lists are representative of what teachers tend to do with whole-class-novel studies.

What ELA Is	What ELA Is Not
Teaching and learning for “deep understanding” (using compelling questions, creating a climate of inquiry).	Asking and answering solely teacher-directed questions.
Making meaning of ideas or information received.	Answering knowledge/comprehension questions, individually, after reading print texts.
Using a variety of strategies (e.g., before, during, and after) depending upon the task.	Following only teacher-directed skills and strategies, and spending time on isolated skill and drill activities.
Reflecting on own learning and literacy.	Assuming that the responsibility for learning and literacy lies with the teacher.

Table 1. Ministry of Education, 2012, p 8.

The Saskatchewan high school ELA curriculum courses are meant to be taught thematically. Through visual, oral, and written texts, the curriculum explores “big ideas.... teaches students through powerful cognitive and communication strategies.... [and] encourages

student inquiry, social responsibility and personal agency, and self-reflection” (ELA 20, 2012, 9). Having students read choice novels does all of the above. Indeed, the Ministry of Education state that the “‘Big Ideas’ and Questions for deeper understanding are used to initiate and guide the inquiry and give students direction for developing deep understandings about a topic or issue under study. Developing questions that are evoked by student interests has the potential for rich and deep learning” (ELA 20, 2012, 11). Choice novels do this in a way that the whole-class-novel cannot. Through choice novels students use inquiry to explore big ideas, develop agency, and in their readers’ notebooks have space to self-reflect. Lastly, the Ministry of Education (2012) states that, “Students must. . . read a range of. . . literary texts [and] use language in ‘aesthetic, imaginative, and engaging ways to entertain and move, reflect and express emotions, and shape and explore cultural values and identity [emphasis mine]’” (p. 27). Choice reading is meant to be aesthetic. The Saskatchewan curriculum clearly supports TGS choice-reading studies.

### **Conclusion**

Canadian teachers who want to foster lifelong readers in their classes should consider replacing the whole-class-novel-study with choice reading studies. The Saskatchewan ELA curriculum supports such an approach, so excuses that teachers have a curriculum to cover, thereby negating choice reading in their classrooms, are invalid. Case studies support the correlation between choice-reading and higher levels of student engagement and reading levels. Indeed, academic researchers and expert teachers agree: the best way to craft lifelong readers is to provide students with aesthetic reading experiences at their respective reading levels and feed them a steady diet of good books. Students who are allowed to have agency will naturally seek to challenge themselves and increase their skills as readers. Studies regarding Canadian readers

are alarming: 42% of adult Canadians are level 1 and 2 readers (they are fairly illiterate) and students today are less engaged readers than those in previous generations. With reading being one of the key determinants of health, low engagement should be considered an epidemic. Teachers at all grade levels must stop the insanity of teaching the whole-class-novel and do something radical: they should embrace the choice-novel study in their classrooms. Teachers may have many excuses as to why the choice-novel study is not for them; they need to reflect on where their current practice has historically gotten students and question whether our society can afford the status quo.

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