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# Reviving Reading Through Student Choice in the High School English Classroom

MAURA GEOGHEGAN  
Bridgewater State University

## Introduction

“Does this spark joy?” (Kondo “6 Rules of Tidying”). After the release of the Netflix series, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019), this became a commonly referenced question as many tried to use Marie Kondo’s method to tidy their physical spaces. Although typically used for the purpose of home organization, this question should also be applied to the texts and the methods used to teach literature in the high school English curriculum. Do the texts used spark joy for students? Are the methods used to teach these texts effectively engaging students?

According to prior research, the answer to both of these questions seems to be no. Data from the National Endowment for the Arts has shown that “less than one-third of 13-year-olds are daily readers” (Mor-

gan and Wagner 660) as “a ‘calamitous, universal falling off of reading occurs for many students at around age 13 and often continues through the rest of these students’ lives” (Gallagher 37). By the time students have reached the high school level, they are often already frustrated by and disinterested in reading, as research conducted over the past two decades has consistently found that “motivation for literacy and other academic subjects declines at middle grade levels” (Guthrie et al. 440). Once they reach high school, most students seem to become less engaged readers as the joy and motivation to read have been stripped away by years of standardized testing as well as being told what to read. Students who become disengaged and discouraged by reading often turn to websites such as *SparkNotes* or *Shmoop* to replace reading. Although these websites can offer some helpful resources for struggling readers, they should not be replacing reading. Offering students choice in the literature they read, along with a method for receiving their feedback, should be implemented in the high school English curriculum in order to increase students’ motivation to read.

Literature selection and the use of literature in high school English classrooms have been topics I’ve been interested in researching over the past three years. In 2018, I conducted research analyzing the factors that influence the literature selection in a high school English language arts (ELA) curriculum. This research was conducted by surveying and interviewing high school English teachers from Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. The most influential factor cited by teachers in their process of selecting literature was the thoughts and feelings of students. Of the 212 public, private, and charter high school English

teachers surveyed, “79.2% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that students’ thoughts and feelings are factors that are considered when selecting literature” (Geoghegan 38). An official poll conducted by the National Reading Research Center (NRCC) also found that even when given a list of 99 options, teachers selected creating interest in reading as their top priority (Guthrie et al. 439). However, when I discussed this factor further with the nine teachers I interviewed, only one teacher had any way of receiving formal feedback on the thoughts and feelings of his students. But even this feedback was limited as he only solicited feedback from his AP literature students.

In a time when reading engagement is declining, teachers need to be seeking out the thoughts and feelings of their students in combination with their efforts to increase opportunities for student choice. My research seeks to fill part of this gap with a survey completed by current high school English students. In this anonymous survey, 375 students responded to 7 multiple choice and 2 short-answer questions that addressed their reading habits, their feelings about reading, and their thoughts about two possible models for providing choice reading in the high school English classroom. I also hope that my research can shed new light on the benefits of offering students choice at the high school level, since most research on this topic has been conducted at the middle school level and “few studies [have explored] the role of choice within a high school setting” (Morgan and Wagner 660).

### Choice Reading Formats

There are a variety of ways in which students can be given a choice in the books they are reading,

but I will be focusing on two specific formats. The first choice reading scenario that I am analyzing and seeking student feedback on is Christopher Wagner’s format, which allows students to choose any book to read. Wagner, a high school teacher in Ohio, wanted to address the disengagement he had noticed in his students by moving away from the “‘traditional’ high school mindset” which “focuses on teaching particular books rather than particular ways to think about texts” and begin to shift this mindset by implementing a three-week choice reading unit that pulls from Nancy Atwell’s “Reading Workshop format” (Morgan and Wagner 660-61). Wagner’s choice reading unit allowed students to choose any book(s) to read over this three-week period. Class time was structured to open with a mini-lesson on a topic addressed in the standards, such as point of view or tone, which students would then apply to their own books. Wagner would then assess the students’ understanding of these concepts through journal entries and reading conferences. This model was only one unit in Wagner’s curriculum since he believed students should still “read some canonical literature, but he did not want that to be *all* they read” (Morgan and Wagner 665). I agree with Wagner that a balance should still exist in order to engage students and help them find joy in reading, as well as to challenge students and guide them through more complex works.

The second choice reading scenario more purposefully combines the use of classic texts with contemporary novels. After or while reading a whole-class novel, students get the opportunity to select a contemporary text to read from a pre-selected list that connects to the class novel through an element such as theme, conflict, or character. Variations of this for-

mat were discussed by Barry Gilmore as well as Berit Gordon. Gilmore suggests four ways in which choice reading can be incorporated into the high school English curriculum and his first suggestion is to “pair a nontraditional text with a traditional one” by linking “high-interest books thematically or by subject area with a required classic” (49). This suggestion is expanded on by Berit Gordon in her book, *No More Fake Reading*, which discusses the benefits of this format and provides strategies for implementing a blend of choice reading with classic literature. Both Gilmore and Gordon see the value of providing students with choice, while also providing a balance of high-interest, contemporary texts, alongside challenging, classic texts in order to engage readers while strengthening their critical thinking skills. Both formats offer English teachers an opportunity to incorporate more opportunities for student choice while still balancing traditional curriculum and the state standards.

### Opposing Viewpoints

Even though research has shown the benefits offered by choice reading, there are some teachers and scholars who are skeptical and have argued that students should not get to choose what they read (Geoghegan 38-41; Prose; Stotsky). Critics of offering students choice fear that rigor and literary merit will be lost if they concede this autonomy to students. Sandra Stotsky, professor emerita in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, is one such critic, who feels that providing students with choice in order to engage them in reading overshadows the academic purpose of an English class (*The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum*).

Stotsky is primarily concerned with teachers’ ability to maintain academic rigor, but she fails to note that contemporary books can be just as rigorous and hold as much merit as the classics (Gallo 36). Stotsky’s argument also implies that engagement and academic rigor are unrelated concepts that English teachers must pick and choose from. However, effective English teachers understand that students need to feel engaged and motivated first in order to perform at a higher academic level.

Stotsky is also concerned that choice reading will lead to a lack of uniformity within the high school English curriculum. The implementation of choice reading creates a “highly individualistic literature curriculum,” according to Stotsky, that is insufficient in providing students with a common educational foundation that she believes a strong, American citizen should have (“Whose Literature?” 56). Although this is a valid concern, it is more important that students are being exposed to a variety of perspectives, so that they are better prepared to interact with others in the diverse world in which we are currently living. Through the implementation of choice reading units, students will be able to not only read a text they have chosen and will enjoy, but they will also practice having conversations with their peers in which they will offer and build upon each other’s different experiences and perspectives. Teaching all American students the exact same book is limiting and does not reflect real-life reading habits.

Francine Prose expresses similar concerns as she argues that more of a focus should be placed on complex, classic literature because she sees this as the only way for students to be exposed to great literature,

expand their vocabularies, improve their comprehension, and deepen their levels of critical thinking (183). Prose presents an interesting argument for the monopoly of classic literature at the high school level, but she takes an elitist stance in which she does not appear to care about the diverse needs and abilities of all students. According to her, all teenagers should be capable of reading and appreciating complex literature and only by reading the classics will they find a love for literature (184). She assumes that all students can fit this mold, that all students care deeply about reading classic literature, and that contemporary texts are not as complex or valuable as more traditional choices. However, in order to engage students in reading while still challenging them, there does need to be a balance between guiding students through these complex, canonical works while also offering students choice in their reading to help them develop a greater appreciation and motivation for reading.

The debate between the use of classic and contemporary texts in the high school English curriculum is one that I will touch upon briefly here simply to state that I am not arguing for the removal of the classics from the high school English curriculum. Instead, I am arguing for more opportunities for choice to be provided to students in the books they are reading, which often coincides with the inclusion of more contemporary texts. In my research, several scholars discuss the use of classic and contemporary texts within their own arguments about choice reading, but I did not come across any scholars that argued for an abandonment of the classics. Instead, many agree that there should be a balance between classic and contemporary texts (Gallo; Gilmore; Gordon; Morgan and Wagner). Sev-

eral students also expressed this desire for a balance between choice texts and whole-class novels in their survey responses. Students shared that they would still like to have opportunities to read a whole-class novel so they can have class discussions and work with their peers on a common book, but they also want to have opportunities to choose what they read since this would “make English more enjoyable and engaging for many students.” Students and scholars may have differing opinions on how this balance could be achieved, but they can agree on one thing: choice reading should be incorporated more often.

Providing students with the freedom to choose their own books has been shown to yield noticeably positive results (Allred and Cena; Gilmore; Gordon; Morgan and Wagner). A prominent example of these positive results can be seen in the data collected by Johnny B. Allred and Michael E. Cena. Allred and Cena conducted research in two 11th-grade English language arts (ELA) classrooms “in a western U.S. public high school” (29). Allred and Cena collected data using field notes, daily student-participant quick writes, anecdotal summaries of daily classroom interactions, and pre- and post-reading motivational surveys during an 18-day unit in which students were given the opportunity to choose a book to read and then discuss it with peers, who were reading a similar genre, in literature circles (29-30). At the conclusion of Allred’s and Cena’s research study, they found that the average score for students rating of reading value and reading self-concept on the motivational survey posttest “was higher at the end of the study... than at the beginning... [and] the difference between means was statistically significant” (31).

Choice reading has been shown to increase student engagement, help students further develop a sense of identity, improve self-regulation, inspire intrinsic motivation, expand students’ vocabulary and improve performance on standardized tests (Gallagher 40; Morgan and Wagner 660, 666). There are a wide variety of ways in which teachers can implement choice reading to obtain similar positive results, but as mentioned earlier, I will be focusing on Wagner’s, Gilmore’s, and Gordon’s choice reading formats.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used through the distribution of the survey. This combined research method was used because the multiple-choice questions on the survey provided more quantitative, statistical data, while other questions on the survey were open-ended, so students had the opportunity to share their own thoughts and feelings from which I could obtain qualitative data. I chose to conduct my research in this way since a survey was the easiest way in which to receive input from a larger number of students. This also allowed me to analyze and compare both my quantitative and qualitative data with similar data from previous research studies.

The survey was created using Google Forms and questions were focused on students’ habits, thoughts, and feelings on reading. Students were asked a variety of multiple-choice and open-response questions. The questions included in my survey can be found in Appendix A. Students completed the survey anonymously and questions about student demographics or identifying factors were excluded to maintain anonymity. Before distributing my survey, I obtained

permission from my department head, and I then sent the survey link to colleagues in my department. It was optional for teachers to share this survey with their students, but I was able to receive 375 student survey responses. Although this research was limited in scope, it could be easily replicated at other high schools across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts or the country to see if other high school students have similar or differing responses.

The survey was completed by students from Shrewsbury High School (SHS) in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. General demographic information about the 9th- through 12th-grade students who took this survey was found on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) school profile website. According to the Shrewsbury High School profile, there were 1,873 students enrolled at the time, and of these students, 873 identified as male, 998 identified as female, and two identified as nonbinary. The SHS student population was also comprised of the following races and ethnicities: 56.2% White, 27.2% Asian, 8.8% Hispanic, 3.7% Multi-race/non-Hispanic, 3.6% African American, and 0.4% Native American (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education).

### **Findings**

In order to contribute new information to the research regarding different reading and choice formats, I surveyed 375 current high school students to get their anonymous, honest feedback on these formats along with their thoughts on reading in general. As highlighted earlier, one of the biggest challenges high school English teachers face when it comes to reading



is the fact that many students have developed a strong distaste for reading by the time they enter the ninth grade. This sentiment was reflected in students' survey responses. Out of the 375 students I surveyed, 71.7% of students shared that when they realized they no longer enjoyed reading, it was at some point between the fourth and eighth grade. A total of 20.4% of students said they did not enjoy reading at all, which does not seem like a significant percentage at first. However, when this is combined with the fact that 51.2% of students said they enjoy reading only when they get to choose their book, this shows that the majority of high school students no longer enjoy reading because they either have not been given the support in finding a book they enjoy, or they have only been reading books they have been assigned for class.

Besides the variety of multiple-choice questions regarding their reading habits and preferences, students were also asked to read two scenarios and then explain whether they would or would not like an English class formatted in that way. Students responded much more favorably to the first scenario, inspired by Wagner's format, which gave them the freedom to read any book of their choice, as opposed to the second scenario, inspired by Gilmore's and Gordon's format, in which students would choose a book from a pre-selected list that connects to a previous or upcoming whole-class novel in some way. In response to the first scenario, 254 students (67.5%) expressed definitive interest, 76 students (20.3%) were uncertain whether they would enjoy this format, and 45 students (12%) stated that they would not enjoy this format. In response to the second scenario, only 161 students (42.8%) expressed definitive interest, 56 students (14.9%) were

uncertain whether they would enjoy this format, and 158 students (42%) stated that they would not enjoy this format. Since the first scenario provided students with more choice, I anticipated they would prefer this format, but I was surprised by how many more students were opposed to the second scenario.

Although students were able to find some positive aspects to the second scenario, they were overwhelmingly in favor of the first scenario. Several benefits were highlighted by students, but they were primarily drawn to the first scenario since this offered them the most choice. One student shared that this scenario would be the most beneficial, since it will not only increase students' motivation to read, but it will also "help kids grow more and learn better because they are getting a one-on-one experience [with] the teacher." Choice reading would not only help to improve students' confidence in their reading ability, but it would also help to improve their academic performance as one student stated that they "perform better academically when [they're] interested in the subject they're studying" and "would look forward to [their] English homework instead of dreading it." If English teachers want students to feel motivated to read and excited about their learning like they claim they do, then choice reading should be incorporated into the curriculum.

Although students favored the first scenario, there were still several students who expressed concerns and highlighted possible issues with this format. Students were concerned that this scenario would make it difficult to have common discussions and for students to receive help from their teacher or classmates if they were reading different books. It may be challenging

for teachers to have an in-depth understanding of each student's book if students are given complete freedom of choice, but it is still possible to have whole-class discussions on literary elements such as theme, character, and tone, among many others. These discussions would help students understand how to respectfully and productively contribute to a conversation of differing perspectives and build on one another's ideas. These discussions may also help spark an interest in a new book as one student shared that they would enjoy this format most since "I would have the opportunity to learn about new books that other kids read in class and that would increase my interest in reading."

### Implications

Even though Wagner's research, which inspired the first scenario, was conducted once with one class of students, over a brief three-week period, he was still able to find many positive results which current high school students were able to highlight in their survey responses. Over this three-week period, Wagner's students read 81 books total, and students "finished the unit with 46 As, 9 Bs, and 2 Cs" which was based on "journals, conferences, and an assessment that checked their ability to apply the concepts" (Morgan and Wagner 665). Wagner was able to teach in a way that allowed him to cover literary elements addressed in the standards, better work with and assess students as individual learners through one-on-one conferences, and witness "students becoming more engaged with their reading" (Morgan and Wagner 666).

In comparison to the first scenario inspired by Wagner, the second scenario inspired by Gilmore and Gordon was received less favorably, but it did still

have a good amount of student interest. Students were primarily opposed to this scenario because of the limitation of choice and the requirement to read a classic, whole-class novel. Those who preferred this format liked the opportunity for choice, the possibility to still have class discussions, and the ability to work with their peers on the class novel. Even though students responded differently to each scenario, they agreed that they would like some form of choice in the books they read. However, implementing choice reading into the high school English curriculum is not always viewed favorably by teachers.

Hesitation to implement a choice reading unit often stems from concerns that are similar to those expressed by critics such as Stotsky and Prose. Many wonder how students will be challenged in their reading if they are not focused on reading the classics. Two high school English teachers who I had interviewed in a previous research study voiced this concern. They cited "literary merit" as their primary factor when choosing texts for their curriculum since books such as *Moby Dick* may not be a student's first choice, but "they're going to read it because they need to [and] it has a tremendous amount of literary merit" (Geoghegan 39). I agree that literary merit should be valued in texts chosen for the high school English curriculum, and teachers should be given autonomy to make these choices as professionals. However, this viewpoint is narrow-minded since it implies that contemporary texts are too simple; the curriculum would be "dumbed down" as a result of including them; and if given the opportunity to choose, students would never be interested in reading the classics when this is not always the case ("Whose Literature?" 55). Solely requiring

students to read challenging books, such as the classics, for the entirety of their high school career leads to frustration for the students and is an ineffective strategy for building students' confidence and motivation to read (Ivey and Fisher 11-12). Providing students with choice can help to build their confidence and increase their motivation to read. Although these criticisms of contemporary texts are narrow-minded, I do agree that it is still important for students to be challenged in order to grow as readers and learners. Because of this, students should either be working from reading a choice novel to a more challenging whole-class novel, or their next choice reading book should be slightly more challenging to take their reading to the next level.

### Conclusion

As teachers, scholars, and researchers continue to research and analyze different methods of implementing choice reading at the high school level, it is important to involve students in the conversation by soliciting their feedback. What this research has highlighted for me as an English teacher is that students are not asked for their input about their reading as often as they should be. I was impressed by the intuition and thoughtfulness shown by students in their survey responses and feel that both students and teachers would benefit from increased opportunities for student feedback. If they are the audience that is being served, then it is crucial that their feedback is received, analyzed and acted upon. In their survey responses, several students expressed their gratitude for having an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings. Incorporating more opportunities for students to reflect on their learning, practice metacognition and have their voices heard as

valuable members of the high school community will ideally result in positive changes that will help inform teaching practices and student learning.

In order to engage students in reading and help foster empathy and strong critical thinking skills, high school English teachers should be implementing choice reading at some point within their curriculum. When given more choice, students respond more positively, feel motivated to read and are more likely to engage in class discussions and activities (Allred and Cena; Gilmore; Gordon; Morgan and Wagner). English teachers do not have to abandon the classics in order to accomplish this as they can still provide a balance between student choice and whole-class novels through Gilmore and Gordon's second scenario. As was shown by Wagner's research and the survey responses from current high school students, students respond more positively to increased opportunities for choice. When students feel involved in their learning, their engagement and motivation increase. This involvement can be achieved through both choice reading and regular student surveys, but we cannot continue to expect students to develop a love for reading or feel motivated to read if they are continuously force-fed books. In order to effectively engage students, they should also be involved in this conversation around implementing choice in the high school English classroom by seeking their feedback through formats such as surveys or written responses. Rekindling the spark of joy in reading is unlikely to happen unless more opportunities for choice reading are implemented in high school English classrooms.

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### About the Author

**Maura Geoghegan** received her Bachelor of Arts in English and Secondary Education from Assumption College (now Assumption University) in the spring of 2019. Maura is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) English and Secondary Education at Bridgewater State University. Her paper was completed in the fall 2020 under the mentorship of Dr. Kimberly Davis for her Introduction to Graduate Studies in English course. Maura also presented this paper virtually at the Master's in English Regional Conference (MERC) in January 2021. Maura teaches 9th- and 10th-grade English at Shrewsbury High School, Shrewsbury Public Schools.

## Appendix A

### Survey Questions

1. What level of English are you currently enrolled in?
  - A. A level
  - B. B level
  - C. Honors
  - D. AP
  - E. Other:
2. Do you enjoy reading?
  - A. Yes, I like reading!
  - B. Yes, but only when I get to choose what I read.
  - C. No, I don't like reading.
3. If you selected no to the question above, at which grade level did you realize you didn't enjoy reading?
  - A. 4th grade
  - B. 5th grade
  - C. 6th grade
  - D. 7th grade
  - E. 8th grade
  - F. 9th grade
  - G. Other:

**(Scenario #1)** Read the following scenario for an English class format: Scenario #1: "Imagine an English class where you get to pick what you read. It doesn't matter if you want to read *Harry Potter* or an autobiography on your favorite athlete. YOU get to pick. You'd still have to learn concepts like point of view, but instead of basing them on a book we read as a class, they will apply to your book. Instead of handouts, you will

have a one-on-one conference with [your teacher] to discuss your book. Your only homework every night would be to read for 30 minutes and you would read in class." (Morgan and Wagner 661)

4. Would you like an English class formatted like this? Why or why not?

**(Scenario #2)** Read the following scenario for an English class format: Scenario #2: You will read a classic novel together with your whole class. Following this unit, you would then get to choose a contemporary book of your choice from a pre-selected list that connects with themes, characters, conflict, etc. to the whole-class novel. You would then connect these concepts and themes from your modern, choice novel to the classic, whole-class novel.

5. Would you like an English class formatted like this? Why or why not?
6. Which format of reading would you prefer in your English class?
  - A. Students read the same novel as the whole class.
  - B. Students get to choose a novel to read from a pre-selected list.
  - C. Students get to choose any novel to read.
  - D. Students choose a modern novel to read that is paired with excerpts from an older text (Example: Students read *The Sun is Also a Star* by Nicola Yoon with excerpts from *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare).

7. Please select any of the following formats or scenarios you have already experienced in your high school English class(es)
  - A. I was able to choose any book I wanted to read.
  - B. I was able to choose a book to read from a pre-selected list or for a specific theme/topic.
  - C. I have worked in a book club/lit circle format where we all read the same book that we were able to choose.
  - D. I have worked in a book club/lit circle format where we all read the same book that the rest of the class was reading.
  - E. I have worked in a book club/lit circle format where we were all reading different books that we got to choose.
  - F. I have never been given the opportunity to choose a book to read for an English class.
  - G. I have never been asked to work in a book club/lit circle format for an English class.

8. What genre(s) do you enjoy reading? (Select all that apply):
  - A. Fiction
  - B. Nonfiction
  - C. Biography/Autobiography/Memoir
  - D. Historical Fiction
  - E. Fantasy
  - F. Science Fiction
  - G. Poetry/Novels in Verse
  - H. Graphic Novels
  - I. Mystery/Thrillers
  - J. Horror
  - K. Romance
  - L. Young Adult (YA)
  - M. Classics
  - N. Other:
9. Do you know how to find a book that you'd like to read?
  - A. Yes, I know how to find a book I would enjoy reading or I know how to ask for help from my teacher or a librarian.
  - B. No, I have no idea where I would start to look for a book I would enjoy reading.
10. Optional: Use the space below to add any final thoughts or comments on any of the above questions.