Reading Between the Lines: Motivation Lessons Learned from the Forest of Reading in Ontario

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Readers’ choice programs have the potential to spark a lifelong love of reading. However, the motivation for student participation in these programs and their impact on student reading are understudied. This mixed method study combines interviews and questionnaires to illustrate the factors at play in a large Canadian readers’ choice program, the Forest of Reading. Our findings highlight the role of library-based programs in building intrinsic motivation through love of reading, the role of extrinsic motivation in building autonomous motivation, and the extent to which large readers’ choice programs promote student reading.

Introduction

Exemplary school libraries have a positive impact on student achievement and on learning. School libraries contribute to literacy development, particularly the ability to develop a love of reading in students (Maliszewski, 2011). Students with a qualified teacher-librarian in their schools are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards reading (Klinger, Lee, Stephenson, Deluca, & Luu, 2009; Lee & Klinger, 2011). Cultivating a positive attitude toward reading is vital, because a motivated reader reads and achieves more (Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2006) and is more likely to overcome barriers to literacy (Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSecker, 2000; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Highly motivated readers are enthusiastic, interested, involved, curious, and they persist, stay in school longer, learn more, and feel better about themselves (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). These findings are international in scope (as seen through Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] results) and extend beyond the school years (Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2007; OECD, 1997).

How schools and school libraries develop reading habits in their students vary by school, district, and province/state. One method is a readers’ choice awards program. In Ontario, the Ontario Library Association has the Forest of Reading, which is Canada’s largest recreational reading program, which offers eight reading options that encourage a love of reading in people of all ages (Ontario Library Association, 2017). School and public libraries are encouraged to run the Forest of Reading program in whatever way they choose. After reading at least half of the nominated titles in a category, students are eligible to vote for their favorite title. Site program coordinators at local, registered, participating school and public libraries submit the votes electronically to the
Ontario Library Association. The winners of these awards are announced at an event called the Festival of Trees, Canada’s largest literary event for kids (Ontario Library Association, 2017). There are dozens of other readers’ choice awards programs in North America (e.g., B.C. Chocolate Lily Young Readers’ Choice Awards, 2017; Canadian Children’s Book Centre, 2017). The aim of many of these programs, just like the Forest of Reading, is to foster a love of reading in young people by providing them with choice and voice (Ontario Library Association, 2017; The Willow Awards, 2017). However, there are few research studies to corroborate the academic and/or attitudinal benefits of these award programs to promote reading.

Review of the Literature

Reading Incentives and Motivation

There are many ways to refer to the tools used by schools and school libraries to promote reading. These terms include but are not limited to reading incentive programs (Fawson, Reutzel, Read, Smith, & Moore, 2009; Small et al., 2009), summer reading programs (Lu & Gordon, 2008), recreational reading programs (Ontario Library Association, 2017), and specific examples such as book clubs (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009).

There are also many terms used in literacy promotion research that are similar to motivation, such as engagement (e.g., Asselin, 2004; Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2007; Gambrell, 2011; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and interest (e.g., Flowerday, Schraw, & Stevens, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2006). Engagement and interest are easier for educational professionals and stakeholders to observe in students and in some cases measure (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). These terms describe visible manifestations of motivation. Motivation itself is not always obvious but deeply impacts the decisions and behaviors of readers. Studying engagement and interest is easier and offers glimpses into the decision-making process and how incentives affect the process. Studying the motivations that shape the efficacy of incentives to read is a more difficult but worthwhile endeavor.

Despite the proliferation of terms, the “professional literature provides limited systemic evaluation of reading incentives” (Kohn, 1993; McQuillan, 1997) and “investigations of reading incentive programs should be extended in order to obtain more insight into how these efforts impact students’ literacy engagement”. There are only a few research studies on reading incentive programs (Bang-Jensen, 2010; Fawson et al., 2009; Lu & Gordon, 2008; Small et al., 2009).

In Fawson and Moore’s (1999) study, administrators, teachers and parents were surveyed about the number of reading incentive programs used, the purpose for using these programs, the criteria used for tracking satisfactory participation in the reading incentive programs, and the perceived impact. 100% of the administrators, 87% of the teachers, and 85% of the parents who responded to the questionnaire stated that encouraging a positive attitude toward reading was one of the main goals. The types of reading initiatives used were not clarified in the study and described as “varied.” Tracking tools included the number of minutes read, number of books read, number of pages read, number of days read or, rarely, the genres of the books read. The students or readers themselves were also conspicuously absent from the commentary. The researchers concluded that some of the reading incentive programs used by these schools were actually contrary to principles of motivation theory and literacy engagement (Fawson & Moore, 1999).

Small et al. (2009) mentioned several of these “forced reading incentive programs” by name, such as Accelerated Learning and Taming My Learning. She is highly critical of these extrinsic rewards-based programs, because they force students to select books from a narrow list, and then
test them on the facts of the book. Small et al. (2009) showed that the testing and the unrelated rewards given for achievement on these tests had little or no long-term impact on lifelong reading while also being costly to implement. A better alternative to these types of programs are social interactions, like those created in the Forest of Reading that directly feature books (e.g. book club discussions and author book talks) which increase students’ intrinsic and internal motivation to read (Manning, 2005; Small et al., 2009; Williams, Hedrick, & Tuschlnski, 2008).

**Social influences and reading incentive programs.** There are more studies on the social influences affecting motivation than on the impact of reading incentive programs. Thirty years ago, researchers noted that middle school aged students relied on peer recommendations for book selections and opportunities should be provided in school to share what they are reading with their fellow students (Hawkins, Wendelin & Zinck, 1983). Although peers are important, the social relationship with the teacher can also impact motivation (Mohr, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), as well as family members, especially mothers (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Mohr, 2006). Peer collaboration should extend from sharing books to other reading activities that encourage and develop reading motivation (Guthrie et al., 2006). Gambrell (2011) and Marinak & Gambrell (2010) found that students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to interact socially with others about the texts they are reading. This supports the conclusion that motivation and social interaction are foundational for reading (Bang-Jensen, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Guthrie et al., 2000). It is important to create a positive tone, as researchers suggest that a possible factor in students’ decreased reading motivation may be negative peer relationships (Gee, 2000; Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). Tools and techniques that harness the positive power of social influence should be selected carefully to enhance the efficacy of reading programs.

**Library contributions to reading incentive programs and book clubs.** One such technique is an independent book club, which was the focus of Whittingham and Huffman’s (2009) research. Attitudinal surveys conducted afterwards with the middle school students indicated that exposure to book clubs had positive effects on students with a resistant attitude to reading. Viewed as a social event, the book club built feelings of competency, acceptance, and motivation (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). This study used ten questions with a Likert-type response scale and was based on the International Reading Association’s Position Statement on Adolescent Literacy (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). This study also positioned the school library as an important feature of the book club model. School libraries are the source of the reading materials that all students would need to access, pointing to a consensus in the literature that has strong implications on collection development for libraries (e.g., Gambrell, 2011; Lee & Klinger, 2011; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). A strong and diverse school library collection is important to school libraries and student engagement (Maliszewski, 2011). Being able to provide the types of books that students request is key to engaging them in reading promotion efforts.

**Readers’ choice awards as reading incentive programs.** The closest example to the Forest of Reading in the research was the study on the children’s choice award program in Vermont, USA. Bang-Jensen (2010) found that the children’s choice booklists provided a high quality, supportive, and compelling array of books to choose from. The one limitation with Bang-Jensen’s study of reading incentive programs is the small sample size; only twelve interviews were conducted. Despite the small size, there were several helpful findings from this study for reading incentive programs using The Dorothy Canfield Fisher Book Award. The Dorothy Canfield Fisher Book Award, similar to the Forest of Reading, has programs for various ages from kindergarten to Grade 12 (Vermont Department of Libraries, 2017). Youth participants in the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Book
Award program can choose which of the nominated titles to read. This element of choice is important to developing independence, high motivation and performance in reading (Bang-Jensen, 2010; Flowerday et al., 2004; Lu & Gordon, 2008; Mohr, 2006).

One helpful aspect of a readers’ choice awards program is the creation of what Reynolds and Bai (2013) call “bounded choice” and Johnson and Blair (2003) call a “text set.” Too much choice can be overwhelming to students, especially those who are reluctant or struggling readers (Lu & Gordon, 2008; Mohr, 2006). This can even be a problem for classroom teachers, who may be overwhelmed by the large quantity of books published yearly (Bang-Jensen, 2010). By providing a set number of choices with a variety of topics and genres, students can still benefit from making their own reading decisions and experience success without relying on Lexile levels, which reduce a book to a readability rating (Bang-Jensen 2010).

Of significance in Bang-Jensen’s (2010) research is the clear role for school libraries as advocates of choice. School library professionals can get involved with readers’ choice award programs, as Bang-Jensen recommends. Other tools include book talks with the librarian or school library Battle of the Books competitions and the use of multiple motivation strategies because what is motivating for one student may inhibit motivation in another (Asselin, 2004; Becker, McElvany, & Kortenbruck, 2010; Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). Even distributing books not included in the program as rewards is a possibility (Gambrell, 2011). The key to promoting reading using rewards is to give rewards that are closely related to reading.

The relationship between rewards and reading motivation. There are some rewards that can contribute positively to motivation, specifically those that hold close proximity to the actual goal (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Gambrell, 2011; Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). For reading promotion, this means that students who are given a book and students who receive no reward are more motivated to engage in subsequent reading than students who receive a token, which is a less proximal reward (Marinak, 2013; Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). Students are more motivated to read when the classroom incentive reflects the value and importance of reading (Gambrell, 2011), a finding long corroborated in the motivation literature (e.g., Deci, 1971; Kruglanski, 1978; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The Ontario Library Association Forest of Reading’s official celebration, the Festival of Trees, uses proximal rewards such as free books and autographs from authors as part of the event.

Self Determination Theory

As posited by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a macro-theory of human motivation and fulfillment, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation exist on a continuum from external to internal, with extrinsic motivation being external or internal, while intrinsic motivation only exists internally (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2003, 2017). Extrinsic motivation is the motivation to do something for reasons other than the task itself, whereas intrinsic motivation is doing things for the sake of the activity. There are, however, multiple types of extrinsic motivation, which are more accurately depicted as a continuum, such as purely external motivators like someone telling you to read and you really do not want to or doing it to receive candy. These motivations are indirectly connected to the task itself and are hypothesized to be less influential than more internal extrinsic motivations (Kruglanski, Friedman, & Zeevi, 1971; Ryan & Deci, 2017) In contrast, more internal examples of extrinsic motivation would be attending the Festival of Trees because there are authors there, not for the reading, but because you want to meet a celebrity. Once again, both examples are extrinsic because you are not there because you love to read.
Internal motivations are theorized to be more self-determining than extrinsic motivations; they make the individual feel more agentic, vital, and connected to the world. The strongest motivators are often more internal, comprising internal extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation (Becker et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Indeed, another way to conceive motivations according to SDT is to state that external motivation is controlled by forces outside the task, while autonomous motivations are more internalized and self-determining – a desirable outcome for stoking lifelong motivation to read.

**Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the reported motivations of students in a large Canadian readers’ choice program, the Forest of Reading, designed to promote reading among school aged children. These programs are on the frontline of efforts to improve the literacy skills and lifelong reading habits of students. The reported motivations of students in the program are key to informing future efforts to cultivate a passion for reading and develop literacy. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What can be learned from the reported motivations and perceptions of students who participate in readers’ choice programs to inform future reading promotion efforts?
2. To what extent do readers’ choice programs contribute to students’ motivations to read?

**Methodology**

This study used a convergent mixed methods approach (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005) that integrated three distinct but related data sources:

1. Audio-recorded interviews with students in the Forest of Reading (n= 25).
2. The administration of a mixed questionnaire featuring both qualitative and quantitative questions that were completed by grades 7-8 students at the 2013 Festival of Trees in Toronto (n=159).
3. A one-item questionnaire embedded on the 2017 voting ballot of the various readers’ choice programs within the umbrella of the Forest of Reading (n= 53,560).

**Phase 1: Festival of Trees Interviews and Questionnaire**

**Participants.** 25 elementary students from two schools were interviewed in 2011 following a semi-structured protocol that asked probing questions about their motivations for participating in the program. These answers helped to shape the questionnaire. Questionnaire participants were 159 middle school-aged children from across Ontario ranging from Grades 7- 8. Participants attending the Toronto event came with their schools to attend the readers’ choice awards. 68.8% of those surveyed were female, while just over half, 51.6% were attending the Festival of Trees for the first time. The survey was completed on paper and then entered into an Excel spreadsheet that included both written and numerical responses to the questionnaire items.

**Data Collection.** A mixed methods questionnaire was administered at the Toronto Festival of Trees celebration. The questionnaire asked both Likert-like items (Allen & Seaman, 2007) as well as open-ended questions. 159 students filled in the mixed method instrument at the Festival of Trees in 2013.

**Phase 2: Forest of Reading Ballot Question**
Participants. The respondents of the ballot question were the school-aged children from Kindergarten through Grade 12 who attended Ontario schools that voted in the 2017 Forest of Reading program. 53,560 students answered the question on the ballot compared to the 186,880 who cast votes in the program during the 2016-2017 school year, representing a response rate of 28.7%.

Data Collection. Following the completion of Phase 1, one optionally-completed Likert-item was added to the 2017 voting ballot for the Forest of Reading readers’ choice awards. The question asked students to report whether they liked reading more because of their participation in the Forest of Reading.

Data Analysis

The results of the two phases were combined to discover the motivations of participants in readers’ choice programs as well as to understand the extent to which readers’ choice programs contribute to student reading motivation. Quantitative data from both the Festival questionnaire and the Likert-item from the voting ballot were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.24) to run parametric statistical tests where data normality could be assumed and non-parametric analyses when they could not be assumed. The transcripts of the 2011 interviews and the open-ended responses of the Festival questionnaire were quantized (words to numbers), showing the relative frequency of different types of motivation (Sandelowski, Volis, & Knafl, 2009). In addition, these transcripts and responses were thematically analyzed to provide narrative insight and quotations to corroborate the descriptive statistics (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008).

Results

The results of the descriptive and statistical quantitative analyses as well as the qualitative analyses of the ballot questions, the festival questionnaire, and the interviews are integrated and are structured and organized in relation to each question.

RQ1. What can be learned from the reported motivations and perceptions of students who participate in readers’ choice programs, to inform future reading promotion efforts?

There were no significant differences by gender in terms of reported affinity for reading, nor in first time attendance. Of the 159 students present at the 2013 Festival of Trees that took the survey, 58.5% considered themselves to be avid readers, which indicated that the festival attracted students with a high affinity for reading, whereas only 2.5% of attendees considered themselves reluctant readers (See Table 1).

| Table 1: Self-reported affinity for reading |
|--------------------------------------------|
| Response  | Frequency | Percent |
| I do not read for fun- I am a reluctant reader | 4 | 2.5 |
| I sometime read for fun                  | 21 | 13.2 |
| I read for fun                          | 41 | 25.8 |
| I often read for fun- I am an avid reader | 93 | 58.5 |
| Total                                    | 159 | 100 |

The clear majority of students either enjoyed or very much enjoyed the different activities offered at the Festival of Trees with no significant difference by gender, first time attendance, or self-reported reading affinity (See Table 2).
Table 2: Enjoyment of the Festival activities

| Percent Response          | Author Activities | Games | Arts and Crafts | Harbourfront | Reading Activities | Book Store |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-------|-----------------|--------------|--------------------|------------|
| not enjoyable             | 1.5               | 0     | 2.9             | 1.4          | 2.4                | 2.3        |
| somewhat enjoyable        | 2.2               | 3.3   | 7.7             | 1.4          | 6.1                | 2.3        |
| neither enjoyable or      | 13.3              | 12.2  | 11.5            | 11           | 17.1               | 23         |
| unenjoyable               |                   |       |                 |              |                    |            |
| enjoyable                 | 38.5              | 41.5  | 32.7            | 30.1         | 32.9               | 43.7       |
| very enjoyable            | 44.4              | 43.1  | 45.2            | 56.2         | 41.5               | 28.7       |

94.8% of participants reported enjoying the Festival of Trees, with almost three-quarters (72.1%) saying that they found their participation to be very enjoyable (See Table 3).

Table 3: Overall Participant Expression of Enjoyment

| How enjoyable was your experience overall? | %  |
|------------------------------------------|----|
| not enjoyable                            | 0.6|
| somewhat enjoyable                       | 0  |
| neither enjoyable or unenjoyable         | 4.6|
| enjoyable                                | 22.7|
| very enjoyable                           | 72.1|

There were no significant differences by gender, first time attendance, or reported affinity for reading. Once the responses to the questionnaires, open-ended questions and the interviews were quantized, motivational trends in student reported reasons became clear (See Table 4).

Table 4: What brought you here to the Festival of Trees?

| Type of Motivation                        | Frequency | Stated Reason                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| External Extrinsic Motivation (controlled motivation) | 26%       | • School<br>• I had to<br>• My teacher made me<br>• To miss school             |
| Internal Extrinsic Motivation (blend of autonomous and controlled) | 31%       | • I wanted to meet the amazing authors who wrote the books I got to read<br>• I thought it'd be a fun time and was a great chance to meet some great authors<br>• To miss school + to meet authors |
| Intrinsic Motivation (autonomous)        | 43%       | • I love to read and I love seeing all the authors<br>• I love reading and some of my favourite authors were part of the ceremony<br>• Having fun<br>• All the years that I came. It was very fun! |

About a quarter of students (26%) reported being at the Festival of Trees purely because of controlled, external motivation such as their teacher made them or that they would get to miss school if they agreed to go. One interviewed participant plainly stated that the goal was “to miss school and not have homework.” These motivations are not from any special desire to be present, but rather in avoidance of less pleasant alternatives. A larger segment, 31%, reported the motivation for going as being for a mix of internal and external motivation, such as wanting to meet the authors or wanting to miss school to see the awards. A surveyed participant stated that they wanted “to meet authors and witness the [awards] ceremony.” These students came because they saw that there was
something that they wanted at the Festival of Trees. The largest group, 43%, reported that the motivation for coming to the Festival of Trees was that they found the Festival to be fun or that they were present because they identify as loving the act of reading. One participant stated “I LOVE READING (all caps in original).” These students wanted to be at the Festival for its own merits and were therefore autonomously motivated, making their motivations more self-determined and agentic. Similarly, using the lens of external and internal motivation, it became clear that there were three common types of motivation among students at the festival (See Table 5).

Table 5: What did students report enjoying?

| What sort of thing?         | Commonality of Motivation Type | Stated Reason                                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| External Extrinsic          | 9%                             | • I liked the Free ice cream                       |
|                             |                                 | • we got free stuff                               |
|                             |                                 | • I liked the free stuff                          |
|                             |                                 | • Getting free prizes                             |
| Internal Extrinsic          | 55%                            | • To find out who won the red maple award         |
|                             |                                 | • So many activities                              |
|                             |                                 | • Meeting the authors                             |
|                             |                                 | • I got to meet authors who I voted for           |
|                             |                                 | • I liked the games                               |
| Intrinsic (Internal)        | 36%                            | • I love how fun it is. I was never bored!        |
|                             |                                 | • Everything was fun                              |
|                             |                                 | • I had a lot of fun, met authors and learned new things |
|                             |                                 | • I liked the workshops because I learned a lot   |
|                             |                                 | • Loved choosing the authors                      |

The smallest proportion of the reported motivations, 9%, was external extrinsic inducements, including the free ice cream and free tokens. This view can be represented by the honest statement of one participant who “heard about the food.” These rewards had little to do with reading. The largest proportion was the internal extrinsic motivation, namely being present for who won awards, meeting the authors, and participating in the reading games. Participants exhibiting this type of motivation could include those who articulated that they wanted “to get autographs of authors.” A final category, comprising intrinsic motivation, such as a participant who stated that “I thought it would be fun” represented 36% of participants. These participants reported most enjoying how fun the event and program was and how much they learned because they attended. A majority of students reported enjoying seeing the outcome of their choices and commented that they were happy to have a say in choosing the winners, pointing to a sense of investment from their input. Participants articulated this view directly with phrases such as “I loved the book and wanted to see if the book would win” and analogous statements of investment in their personal favourites. A slight majority of students, 51% did not report having any suggestions for improvement (See Table 6).

Table 6: What did students not enjoy?

| Topic                  | Percentage | Quotes                                               |
|------------------------|------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Liked everything as is | 51%        | • I wouldn’t change anything                         |
|                        |            | • I did not dislike anything from the Festival of Trees |
|                        |            | • Nothing because it’s really fun                    |
| Had critique           | 49%        |                                                      |
However, of those that did, 49%, their critique could be divided into broad categories: organizing (32%) and layout (17%). The crowds, in particular, drew the ire of some students. Another was that the authors were all having their workshops at the same time; the students reported that it might pay dividends to stagger them to make them more accessible.

**RQ2. To what extent do readers’ choice programs contribute to students’ motivation to read?**

The questionnaires at the Festival of Trees as well as the ballot question from the Forest of Reading asked students analogous questions about their belief about the program’s impact on their reading. The overwhelming consensus from students was that the program has a positive impact. Students, despite their young age, were well-aware of the educational intent as summarized by a grade 4 interview participant who stated, “The Festival of Trees was basically education but hidden behind a veil of fun. I like that.” Students were overwhelmingly positive, despite their awareness of the education embedded in the activities and fun.

**Reported Impact on Student’s Reading**

**Positively Impactful**- Participating students were overwhelmingly happy with the Festival of Trees and 88.7% reported it contributed positively to their reading with statements “it inspires me to read more”, while 1.9% reported a negative effect on their reading with statements like “it didn’t” (See Table 7).

| Table 7: Student’s opinion on impact of the Festival of Trees on their reading. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ratings                             | %     |
| very negative impact                | 0.6   |
| some negative impact                | 1.3   |
| neither negative or positive        | 9.4   |
| some positive impact                | 32.1  |
| very positive impact                | 56.6  |

In the case of the ballot question, a vast majority of students across the province reported that they believed that they liked reading more because of the Forest of Reading (See Table 8).
Table 8: Forest of Reading Wide - Student reported data

| Program            | Total Participants | Voting Participants | Response Rate | Yes  | No   | No Change |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------|------|------|-----------|
| Blue Spruce        | 128582             | 37023               | 28.79%        | 27235| 3315 | 6473      |
| Silver Birch Express | 18792             | 5636                | 29.99%        | 3757 | 394  | 1485      |
| Silver Birch Fiction | 16399             | 4865                | 29.67%        | 3296 | 236  | 1333      |
| Silver Birch Non-fiction | 9807             | 2261                | 23.05%        | 1440 | 153  | 668       |
| Red Maple          | 8875               | 2526                | 28.46%        | 1498 | 168  | 860       |
| Red Maple Non-Fiction | 2528             | 543                 | 21.48%        | 308  | 33   | 202       |
| White Pine         | 1897               | 706                 | 37.22%        | 378  | 38   | 290       |

A majority of students throughout all the age groups believed that the Forest of Reading positively impacted their reading. This positivity is, however, marked by a noticeable decrease in positivity as the students got older. The Forest of Reading’s positive impact transcends the individual programs (which are named after different trees: Blue Spruce, Silver Birch, Red Maple, and White Pine) (See Table 9).

Table 9: Reported Impact of Forest of Reading Program on Student Reported Reading Motivation

| Program            | Positive | No Change | Negative |
|--------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Blue Spruce        | 74%      | 17%       | 9%       |
| Silver Birch Express | 67%      | 26%       | 7%       |
| Silver Birch Fiction | 68%      | 27%       | 5%       |
| Silver Birch Non-fiction | 64%      | 30%       | 7%       |
| Red Maple          | 59%      | 34%       | 7%       |
| Red Maple Non-Fiction | 57%      | 37%       | 6%       |
| White Pine         | 54%      | 41%       | 5%       |

This consistency across different contexts supports the notion that age of the participants itself contributes to the decrease of the efficacy of readers’ choice program.

Discussion

Self-reported Affinity for Reading

58.5% of Festival attendees reported themselves to be avid readers, in contrast to the much lower expected proportion of avid readers from other samples of school-aged children found elsewhere by Marinak & Gambrell (2010). This would support the idea that the Festival and other readers’ choice programs, by extension, attract a highly confident class of reader as opposed to a more representative sample. This relatively avid population that attended may not be the only population that could benefit from being at the event. The statistical tests throughout the results showed that the events were well received by participants with their reading affinity bearing little impact on their enjoyment. Students who did not report being avid readers enjoyed the activities as much as the self-reported avid readers. This finding supports the notion that all types of readers can be brought to events to enjoy and benefit from the activities. Teachers might be selecting their best readers to come to the festival, when they could instead bring the students that need more support to foster
lifelong reading habits. Students who do not find reading fun, had they been brought, could reasonably been motivated to read for many of the same incentives.

**Importance of Author and Award Activities**

Participants noted in their questionnaires and interviews how much the author activities were important to them. Many called the author events, which included book signing, speeches, and workshops, their highlight and primary reason for going to the event. Based on the findings of this study, awards activities and the inclusion of authors should be a priority for event organizers and librarians seeking to add efficacy to their outreach programs, as students very much want to meet and interact with authors. Students also praised the ability to vote and be the arbiters in deciding which author wins in the readers’ choice awards program. They made particular reference to their attraction to contributing to the decision and described feeling empowered that their choices had impact. This attraction was articulated by participants as being included, considered, and invested in the outcomes of their reading.

Students reported that they were motivated to read so that they could make informed decisions with respondents as young as grade 2 commenting that “It’s not the adults who choose the winner. The kids in this program get to have a voice.” Students found this and other ways to demonstrate that they felt increased autonomous motivation with their reading and reading choices because of this program. Autonomous motivation to read has been credited elsewhere in the literature as being a potent force for developing literacy (e.g., Becker, McElvany, & Kortenbruck, 2010; Carter, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Klinger, Rogers, Anderson, Poth, & Caiman, 2006). The ability of readers’ choice programs to stoke autonomous motivation is a hopeful finding that should inspire other initiatives to make use of student choice, as well as author-involved activities in literacy promotion endeavors.

**What Brought Students to the Festival of Trees?**

The largest segment of students came to the Festival because they wanted to. However, 57% of attendees only come to the festival because it offers some kind of inducement. Without, these inducements, these students probably would not have come in the first place. For the Forest of Reading and other reading interventions to have the broadest possible impact, there must be something that draws in students. The potency of the most powerful intervention is greatly limited if hardly anyone is willing to participate.

As effectively shown by Kohn (1993) and McQuillan (1997), purely external motivators, incentives, and inducements, like candy, money, or non-related tokens are not enough to sustain the motivation to perform a task like reading long term. An effective strategy leveraging the attractive portions of fun events like the Festival of Trees is to offer opportunities for social interaction focused on reading. This will help students develop positive associations with reading, such as autonomy and choice afforded to them through these programs to make enjoyment of reading a more likely outcome. In this way, the extrinsic motivators that drew students to the program, can be thought of as providing the opportunity to develop more internal motivations which yield better long term outcomes (e.g., Areepattamannil, Freeman, & Klinger, 2011; Deci, 1971; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Effective reading programs, specifically readers’ choice programs, can propel the improvement of literacy by developing young reluctant readers’ motivations to select and read books.
**Impact on Student Enjoyment and Reading**

As shown previously, one of the main strengths of readers’ choice programs and literacy promotion festivals is that students are having fun. One of the measures of enjoyment was the reported perception of impact that a program had on student reading. Many participants reported enjoying themselves in the program and at the festival. A majority of students similarly reported that they felt that the program had positively impacted their reading. This trend held all the way through the different age groups and sub-programs throughout the Forest of Reading. Of note is that the proportion of students who perceived no change in their reading as a result of the Forest of Reading increased with age, while participants who reported positive impact on their reading from the program decreased to a narrow majority from a decisive majority with increasing age. There is therefore some evidence that readers’ choice programs do indeed have diminishing returns as students age. A source for optimism is that there were no significant differences in the impact of the Forest of Reading in different locations, meaning that the program had the same positive effect throughout Ontario. That the program had similar effect in urban and remote rural locations is a sign that readers’ choice programs have an important role to play in helping students to enjoy reading and promote literacy. This limitation and others are explored below.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Although our study had a very large number of participants, the data sources are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. The interviews and questionnaires from the 2013 Festival of Trees data pool and the 2017 ballot responses from the Forest of Reading had different participants. Additionally, the intentions of teachers in bringing students to the festival are unknown. Therefore, questions remain regarding the types of students who participate in the program and if the festival attendees are a representative sample. To counteract the potential selectivity, which may exclude certain types of students on grounds of geographic isolation because of Ontario’s vast size, the Ontario Library Association has established the Forest Fund, which aims to pay for students with no local regional celebration to attend the Toronto Festival of Trees, as well as subsidize the shipping costs to get the program’s books into students’ hands. We have also revised and re-administered the 2013 survey in 2018 at all three official Festival of Tree celebration sites (in Toronto, London, and Waterloo). The data from this survey has yet to be analyzed.

A longitudinal design that gathers the pertinent demographics to draw conclusions on sample representativeness and in-depth analyses on the stakeholders of the program is in the works for 2018 and beyond. Future research should consider self-reporting by students, teachers, teacher-librarians, and administrators to illustrate a more complete picture. Additionally, linking school participation in library outreach, reading incentive, and reading promotion efforts with the results of standardized testing could lay to rest the question of whether these programs enhance literacy in the age of large-scale testing. The results of this study are promising testaments to the ability of school libraries to enhance student literacy by building motivation, providing resources, and facilitating centers for literacy promotions for students of all ages.

**Conclusions**

1. Students reported appreciating the autonomy that they felt when they voted and saw their choices have impact. The ability to vote on which author wrote the best book in a variety of
categories gives students a very rare opportunity to have a voice in their early schooling and this opportunity was deeply appreciated as the single most common reason to participate in this literacy promotion initiative.

2. Student first time attendance, gender, or self-reported reading efficacy seemed to have very little effect on their enjoyment of the festival.

3. Careful consideration of the layout and the timing of events is necessary. Some students will be unsatisfied if multiple sessions that they want to see are running at the same time. Readers’ choice award event organizers should consider having multiple offerings of a given event.

4. Students overwhelmingly enjoy hands-on activities or interacting with authors.

5. Not all students at these festivals wanted to be there but most reported enjoying it once they were there.

6. Most of the students at the festival would not consider themselves at-risk readers, indicating that teachers may be bringing their best readers as opposed to the students who most need to be there.

7. Readers’ choice programs provide a catalyst for building autonomous reading motivation in participating students.

8. Participating students are there with a variety of motivations and the important thing is to build a love for reading to have a real impact.

**Ethics Statement:** This study was conducted in rigorous compliance with the ethical procedures of the Ontario Library Association and the Forest of Reading Program. All participation in every phase was entirely voluntary and participants were informed they could abstain from participating at any point (Basit, 2010). School boards and individual schools opted-in to participate in the Forest of Reading program, giving informed consent for the purposes of research as well as individual students gave verbal assent to be enrolled in any phase of the study including the questionnaire and interviews. All student and school information has had potential identifiers removed and the identity of participants was protected as confidential.

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