

When Learning Feels Meaningful:
A Study of Personal Relevance as Autonomy-Supportive Practice

Lillian L. Rinkle

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Coley Lehman, Chair

Carolyn Wahl

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Abstract

In this action research project, I aimed to understand how integrating personal relevance into 10th grade English language arts instruction influenced student motivation, engagement, and perceptions of course relevance. Guided by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2008), the study explored relevance as an autonomy-supportive practice that may help students internalize the value of learning. Participants for this study included 18 10th grade students in a mid-sized suburban Oregon high school. Data were collected from student surveys, student work, participation trackers, reflection journals, lesson plans, and supervisor observation feedback across two literature units. Findings suggested that personally relevant connections were associated with increased participation, stronger investment in literary discussion and analysis, and deeper emotional and interpretive thinking. The study highlighted relevance as a meaningful tool for supporting student engagement.

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Chapter 1. Philosophy of Education

Growing up, I was the student who genuinely enjoyed going to school. Waking up early never really bothered me, snow days were my worst enemy, and the first day of school was better than Christmas. I played school with my Barbies and eventually replaced those Barbies with my siblings once they could talk. This was not simply a love for school, though; I truly loved learning new things. I attribute much of this to my parents, who showed me that education was a privilege that should not be taken for granted. As a child, I watched them work their way through college. I remember, at six, the night classes that kept my mom out late, which she had to balance with working and raising two young children. Later at 15, I remember her sitting at the kitchen table long after dinner, surrounded by books and papers after all four of us kids had gone to bed. This is the woman who inspires me. Watching her dedication shaped the way I approached school, and she made me see that education is something to enjoy and take pride in. Looking back, I realize that this early experience with education as being something meaningful has influenced how I view and understand learning. It helped me understand that students' relationships to education and learning are often formed by the values modeled at home and in their communities and that motivation often grows when learning is perceived as purposeful and not just something you have to do.

In elementary school, my favorite day of the week was library day. Library day meant seeing Mrs. Knox, who would teach us Spanish and read the newest book she bought while we sat on the carpet. Most importantly, library day meant checking out two new books, and checking out new books meant taking home two more worlds to get lost in for the next week. The *Eyewitness Books* made me feel like I could be anything: archaeologist, doctor, astronomer, marine biologist. The list goes on and on. My favorite series, though, was Katherine Lasky's

diaries. The *Dear America* and the *Royal Diaries* series transported me to key moments in history. I could read about the life of a little girl in the Great Depression or the life of young Marie Antoinette. These books made faraway people and places come alive, and they taught me that curiosity could take me anywhere.

The excitement I felt when opening a new book was the same feeling I chased in every subject. I loved that learning, no matter the topic, could introduce me to something I had not known before. In Mrs. Lamoreaux's fourth-grade social studies, we learned about Native Americans. We were assigned a project to research the history of a local Indigenous tribe and then present what we learned to the class. I remember sitting at the family computer completely absorbed, wishing I could hear their stories firsthand. In Ms. Lieberg's seventh-grade language arts class, we learned Latin and Greek roots and suffixes, and I was fascinated by how so many English words could be broken down to dissect their meanings. In Mr. Crocker's chemistry class, we conducted experiments to calculate calories and painstakingly titrated solutions. Each subject offered a different way to think, question, and create, and I enjoyed discovering those new perspectives. This helped me realize that engagement comes from being invited to think in new ways.

I was also naturally drawn to helping other students. Whether the desire to become a teacher was the cause or result of that, I am not sure. What I do know is that I wanted others to feel the same enjoyment I felt. When I offered my help to other students, it became clear that not everyone experienced school the way I did. I had classmates who did not like being in class—or at school in general—and who were okay with simply not doing their schoolwork. As a child, this bewildered me. How could someone not want to learn? While present-me understands this now, eight-year-old-me was at a loss for words.

In high school, I wanted to take whatever classes I could and be involved in all of the activities offered. And once again, I struggled to understand why other students did not jump at the opportunity to be so involved in their education. I had classmates who groaned the infamous “When will I ever use this again?” and complained about how high school was only useful for people who wanted to go to college. I went to a small school in a rural farming community where most people entered the workforce immediately after high school. For many of my peers, school was a step toward adulthood, not a place for exploration and growth; hard labor and “grit” were valued far more than academic achievement.

Since I was so drawn to school, it was easy for me to see why something was important to learn; it was all relevant to me because I enjoyed learning. I was motivated by a sense of progress and the feeling that my effort mattered. My classmates, however, were more focused on getting through school so they could start working. Looking back, I understand that their frustration with school came from a lack of connection between what they were learning and their lived experiences and aspirations rather than from a lack of interest in learning itself. They wanted learning to feel useful in a tangible way. This has allowed me to understand that a student’s motivation is something that can, and should, be developed and nurtured with the help of their educators.

I see my former classmates in the students I work with today, asking about when they will ever need to read or write poems outside of their English classes. The honest answer is likely never. But I believe school should be a place where students come to see value in learning for learning’s sake. As an educator, I know how important it is to help students find that value for themselves, and my job is to help them see how what they are learning connects to their lives and ambitions so that they know why it matters. Given these experiences, I am researching how

students develop more internalized motivation, guided by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's (2008) Self-Determination Theory. I will be focusing on the idea that relevance serves as an autonomy-supportive practice within the SDT framework.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2008), examines how a person's psychological needs influence their motivation. Rather than focusing on the quantity of motivation, SDT explores its quality, distinguishing between motivation that is self-determined and motivation that is externally controlled (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

According to SDT, all humans share three innate psychological needs that drive motivation and well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Autonomy, as defined in SDT, is about having a sense of choice and ownership. Autonomy is fostered in the classroom when teachers provide meaningful choices, respect student voice, and explain the relevance behind tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Competence involves feeling capable and effective; it grows through successfully facing challenges, receiving constructive feedback, and having opportunities to demonstrate mastery. When teachers design scaffolded lessons and celebrate growth, students experience greater competence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Relatedness is the need to feel connected, valued, and cared for. One's sense of relatedness strengthens motivation and persistence, making classroom relationships essential to student engagement. Ryan and Deci (2020) emphasize that these needs operate in a dynamic relationship. When learners feel competent but controlled, their motivation diminishes; when they feel autonomous but unsupported, they are also less likely to sustain motivation. Only environments that simultaneously nurture all three needs produce sustainable intrinsic motivation.

A key principle of SDT is the taxonomy of motivation, which explains how external motivation can become internalized. Ryan and Deci (2020) describe motivation as ranging from amotivation to intrinsic motivation, with multiple subtypes of extrinsic motivation in between. Amotivation refers to a lack of intention to act and is a result of low perceived competence, lack of value, lack of relevance in regard to an activity, or a combination of the three. On the other end of the continuum, intrinsic motivation occurs when a person does an activity out of their own interest and enjoyment. When a person is intrinsically motivated, they feel they have autonomy over the task, they are capable of completing the task, and they have a strong sense of belonging. Extrinsic motivation refers to “behaviors done for reasons other than their inherent satisfactions” (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 2). Ryan and Deci (2020) identify four types of extrinsic motivation, each increasing in degree of internalization:

- External regulation: behavior controlled by external rewards or punishments.
- Introjected regulation: “extrinsic motivation that has been partially internalized” (p. 2); behavior controlled by internal pressure, such as guilt or pride.
- Identified regulation: recognizing the personal importance of the task.
- Integrated regulation: aligning the task with one’s identity and values.

This continuum illustrates how students move from compliance toward self-determination and shows that not all extrinsic motivation is bad, rather it varies in degree of autonomy. Teachers can help students internalize the value of learning by connecting skills and activities to personally meaningful goals, thus supporting movement along the continuum toward more autonomous forms of motivation.

According to SDT, the three basic psychological needs are universal and consistent for all humans. However, Ryan and Deci (2008) assert that there are individual differences, which are a

result of the basic needs being supported or thwarted, that affect one's general motivation. The first individual difference is causality orientation. Ryan and Deci (2008) state that causality orientations "refer to (a) the way people orient to the environment concerning information related to the initiation and regulation of behavior, and thus (b) the extent to which they are self-determined in general, across situations and domains" (p. 183). These are general tendencies in how people regulate behavior across various contexts. Furthermore, Ryan and Deci (2008) identify three orientations: autonomous, controlled, and impersonal. Autonomous orientation develops when all three needs have been consistently supported. Controlled orientation develops when the competence and relatedness needs have been supported but autonomy is consistently thwarted. Impersonal orientation results from all three needs consistently being thwarted. These orientations explain why students respond differently to the same learning environment.

A second individual difference is aspirations and life goals, which are labeled as either intrinsic aspirations (e.g., personal growth, relationships, etc.) or extrinsic aspirations (e.g., fame, wealth, appearance, etc.) (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Like causality orientations, aspirations and life goals are dependent on whether one's basic needs have been supported or thwarted. Having one's needs consistently thwarted might result in a tendency to set extrinsic goals, while having one's needs consistently supported might result in a tendency to set intrinsic goals (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

My own educational history reflects the very dynamics SDT describes. As a student, I was intrinsically motivated; the act of learning felt meaningful and joyful. My motivation stemmed from curiosity and personal connection rather than rewards, so my need for autonomy was met. In contrast, the disengagement I saw in my classmates and continue to see in many of my students may be a result of controlling learning environments suppressing their motivation. I

have worked with students who complete assignments to get an A; they are motivated by external validation. I have also worked with students who shut down because they do not see the value or relevance of what they are learning. Both mirror a controlled orientation in which the student does not have complete autonomy. Recognizing this through the lens of SDT helps me see disengagement as a sign of unmet needs rather than defiance.

My action research project will explore how relevance can help students internalize their motivation by seeing the value of what they are learning in class. SDT will guide how I construct learning experiences that make academic content personally relevant by connecting texts, themes, discussions, and writing tasks to students' lived experiences and social contexts in order to support their autonomy. Since SDT explains motivation as a process of internalization, it provides a way to explore how relevance may help students move from completing assignments because they are required to do so toward engaging in learning because they understand its value. This framework is especially useful for my focus because relevance may function as an autonomy-supportive practice: when students can connect English content to their lived experiences, identities, interests, and goals, they may be more likely to experience ownership over their learning. Ultimately, SDT allows me to investigate how relevance facilitates the internalization of motivation.

Connection to InTASC Standards

My action research project, guided by SDT, focuses on how relevance can help students internalize their motivation for learning. According to SDT, motivation develops along a continuum from externally to internally regulated as learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. My goal is to design lessons that support this internalization process. This focus aligns closely with InTASC Standard 1: Learner Development, Standard 3: Learning

Environments, and Standard 7: Planning for Instruction (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013).

Standard 1 focuses on understanding how learners grow and develop and how learning occurs over time. Standard 1d states, “The teacher understands how learning occurs—how learners construct knowledge, acquire skills, and develop disciplined thinking processes—and knows how to use instructional strategies which promote student learning” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 16). This standard is consistent with SDT’s emphasis on motivation as a process influenced by learning environments. Within SDT, motivation evolves as students interact with environments that either support or thwart their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In my action research project, this standard is reflected in my focus on how relevance supports students’ construction of meaning and value in learning tasks. Students may be more likely to internalize the purpose of what they are learning rather than engage in tasks solely for external outcomes when they are invited to connect academic content to their prior knowledge, lived experiences, and personal goals. Designing learning experiences with relevance in mind allows students to actively construct their own understanding and develop more autonomous forms of motivation.

Standard 3 focuses on creating a positive environment that is conducive to students’ engagement and motivation. Standard 3i specifically states, “The teacher understands the relationship between motivation and engagement and knows how to design learning experiences using strategies that build learner self-direction and ownership of learning” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 21). This standard aligns directly with SDT’s principle that autonomy and relatedness must be simultaneously supported for motivation to become intrinsically regulated. To achieve this standard, I must create a classroom climate in which

students feel respected, trusted, and empowered to make meaningful choices. I will emphasize that learning is a process that students engage in for their own growth and understanding. Through incorporating relational and autonomy-supportive practices, my hope is that students will begin to internalize academic behaviors because the learning feels purposeful and connected to who they are.

Standard 7 focuses on how the teacher incorporates intentional supports for students as they plan instruction. Standard 7a states, “The teacher individually and collaboratively selects and creates learning experiences that are appropriate for curriculum goals and content standards, and are relevant to learners” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 34). SDT explains that relevance plays a role in the internalization process by helping students see the connection between learning and their own lives. I will intentionally design lessons that connect objectives to students’ identities, experiences, and ambitions. Planning with relevance in mind reframes academic goals to allow students to attach their own meaning. I will communicate why a concept or skill matters, give students some choice in how they apply it, and integrate topics that reflect their communities and interests to communicate that their learning has an authentic purpose.

In an English language arts classroom, meeting these standards through the lens of SDT involves instructional practices that emphasize relevance, student agency, and collaborative meaning-making so that learners can begin to internalize motivation for engaging in literary analysis. This will be done through the use of open-ended essential questions that connect literary analysis to students’ lived experiences and current social contexts, supporting Standard 1d by positioning learning as a process through which students construct understanding and value. These questions support autonomy because they invite students to make personal meaning from academic content. Framing instruction around these questions also aligns my planning

decisions with Standard 7a, as lessons will be intentionally designed to be relevant to learners while inviting them to personally invest in disciplinary inquiry. Structured choice in assessment formats, such as choice between one-pagers, written essays, and presentations, supports Standard 3i by promoting student self-direction and ownership, further supporting students' sense of autonomy. Finally, collaborative learning structures, such as small-group discussions, align with Standard 3i by promoting engagement through peer interaction and positioning students as active contributors to meaning-making, which supports relatedness by allowing students to build meaning with peers.

Summary

My research centers on understanding how relevance can help students internalize their motivation for learning by connecting academic content to their lived experiences. Guided by Richard Ryan's and Edward Deci's (2008) Self-Determination Theory, I will explore how classroom environments that support students' autonomy can move their motivation from externally to internally regulated. Rather than viewing motivation as something students either have or lack, I will approach it as something that students develop when they perceive learning as relevant and connected to their lived experiences.

My own educational experiences have helped shape this perspective. As a child, I loved learning for its own sake. Many of my classmates, however, were motivated only when they saw direct utility in what they were learning. Looking back, I see how these differences in motivation reflect the principles of SDT: my needs for autonomy and competence were supported while others' may have been thwarted by environments that felt controlling or irrelevant. In my classroom today, I see similar patterns in my students, and their disengagement often reflects a lack of perceived relevance rather than disinterest. These experiences have led me to want to

design learning experiences that help students connect their education to themselves and the world around them. This focus aligns with InTASC Standards 1, 3, and 7, which emphasize learner growth and development, engaging environments, and planning relevant instruction. Chapter 2 builds on this foundation by examining scholarship on motivation, relevance, and autonomy-supportive teaching.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

I am seeking to better understand how students' perceptions of content relevance contribute to their engagement and motivation to invest in learning. To explore this issue, I reviewed a wide range of literature, including experimental studies, classroom vignettes, theoretical reviews, and curriculum design that examined how relevance and interest as autonomy-supportive practices shape motivation across a variety of educational contexts. To locate these articles, I conducted my literature search in the EBSCO Education Full Text database to ensure that the results were all relevant to education. I selected search terms that reflected the core constructs of my research questions and the guiding theoretical framework. Search terms included a combination of "student motivation," "student engagement," "relevance," "personal relevance," "student relevance," "content relevance," "self-determination theory," "autonomy," "secondary English," "language arts," and "ELA." I located articles by utilizing database filters and following citation lists from key authors. This process allowed me to build a comprehensive and theoretically grounded foundation for understanding how relevance-based instructional practices might support motivation in my future classroom and in my action research project.

Annotated Bibliography

Alamri et al. (2020) explored how personalized learning designed around learner choice, interest-based content, flexible pathways, and individualized assessment impacts graduate students' psychological need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation in an online course. They compared student experiences in a traditional one-size-fits-all online course to those in a redesigned version that incorporated personalized learning principles in a Learning Design and Technology graduate program for people who work in "higher education, K-12 education,

corporate training, and consultancy” (Alamri et al., 2020, p. 328). The authors examined learners’ perceived autonomy, competence, relatedness, and motivation through interviews and course reflections. Their findings were analyzed through the lens of self-determination theory. The authors concluded that personalized learning principles significantly increased students’ feelings of autonomy and competence and their intrinsic motivation, while the traditional course relied heavily on instructor facilitation to compensate for the lack of relevance. They further found that personalized learning improved perceived engagement, relevance, and deeper learning, though neither course adequately supported students’ sense of relatedness. Alamri et al. argued that integrating personalized learning features into online instruction can better align coursework with learners’ needs and interests, leading to more positive motivational learning outcomes.

This article deepened my understanding of how instructional design can facilitate students’ internalization of motivation by demonstrating that providing meaningful choices and relevant content significantly increases learners’ sense of autonomy and competence. The study supports my research focus by showing that personalization and choice can work together to support autonomy and competence, helping students internalize the value of learning. A major strength of the article is its use of self-determination theory as both a design framework and an analytical lens, as well as its comparison across instructional models, which enabled the authors to isolate the role of personalized learning in supporting autonomy and competence. Thinking critically about this article, I would suggest that future research investigate how educators can foster relatedness through personalized learning, as relatedness is essential for fully internalizing motivation. The study acknowledged limited peer interaction in both courses, raising important

questions about how collaboration and peer interaction can be integrated within a learning context that is designed to be unique for each individual.

Using Priniski et al.'s (2018) framework of personal relevance, Guo and Fryer (2025) examined how three types of personal relevance (personal association, personal usefulness, and relevance as identification) predicted middle school students' situational interest in a math lesson. Guo and Fryer (2025) conducted a 10-week longitudinal study with 435 Chinese students in their first year of middle school, using self-report surveys administered across three lessons on linear equations to measure perceived relevance and situational interest. Their findings were analyzed through a lens grounded in self-related information processing, the four-phase model of interest development, and the relevance continuum. The authors concluded that all three forms of personal relevance significantly and positively predicted students' interest in math lessons, with personal usefulness emerging as the strongest predictor. They further argued that situational interest built across lessons contributed to long-term domain interest, suggesting that fostering different types of relevance in instructional design can meaningfully support students' engagement and motivational development.

This article shaped my understanding of relevance as a motivational construct. Unlike studies that examine relevance through isolated interventions, Guo and Fryer (2025) demonstrated how relevance contributes to students' motivation during their regular lessons. Although this study was not framed primarily through SDT, its findings support my understanding of internalization because students' interest increased when they perceived learning as personally useful or connected to their identities, both of which align with SDT's emphasis on autonomy and self-endorsed value. A notable strength of this article is its longitudinal design, which enabled the authors to demonstrate how situational interest builds

over time to contribute to broader domain interest. However, the article could have been strengthened by including more qualitative insights to illustrate how students experienced each type of relevance (e.g., how it was personally useful), particularly since these categories may differ across learners.

Hands (2024) investigated whether a utility-value writing intervention could increase students' interest and performance in an introductory community college chemistry course. Hands conducted two semester-long studies of 70 Fundamentals of Chemistry students at Community College of Baltimore County to understand whether having students generate personal or career-based connections to chemistry concepts would enhance their interest and task value. The study is grounded in expectancy-value theory with a particular focus on utility-value. Hands found that students who generated personal relevance connections showed increases in task value and personal meaningfulness over the semester, as well as slightly higher course grades, with particularly strong positive effects for underrepresented minority students. The study concluded that allowing students to identify their own relevance connections, rather than relying on instructor-selected contexts, can improve motivation and engagement, reduce achievement gaps, and may serve as a broadly applicable instructional strategy across disciplines.

This article expanded my understanding of how relevance-building strategies can be implemented in educational settings by demonstrating that student-generated relevance enhances motivation. The findings indicated that personal relevance is more effective when constructed by students rather than imposed by instructors, highlighting that authenticity is essential for engagement. This finding connects directly to SDT because students were invited to construct meaning from the course content for themselves, supporting their need for autonomy by

providing them with ownership over their learning. A key strength of this article is its attention to demographic differences, which revealed particularly positive effects for underrepresented minority students. Observing these benefits also led me to recognize that increasing perceived relevance can serve as a tool for improving equity rather than just instructional strategies. The article could have been improved by including more qualitative data, such as sample student responses or excerpts from their connection essays, to illustrate the types of connections students made and why some may have found the intervention more meaningful than others. Without these examples, the findings rely entirely on survey data, which limits the understanding of the depth, authenticity, and variation in students' personal connections. This study connects directly to my own research as I asked students to make personal and real-world connections in their literary analysis. Hands' (2024) findings support my instructional choice to have students generate their own connections rather than simply receive teacher-provided explanations of why the content matters. In my own research, I am interested in whether these student-generated connections help students see English content as more relevant and increase their motivation to engage with reading and writing tasks.

Johansen et al. (2023) investigated whether making a statistics assignment more personally relevant would increase higher education STEM students' motivation, vitality, effort, and emotional affect while completing the task. The authors conducted a randomized classroom experiment with 67 undergraduate STEM students, comparing a control group that completed a generic statistics task to an experimental group that completed a statistics task using real climate data from Greenland framed as a meaningful, real-world problem; the authors measured outcomes using pre- and post-test questionnaires and structural equation modeling. Their findings were analyzed through the lens of self-determination theory, focusing on how relevance

supports autonomous motivation and internalization processes. The authors concluded that students who received the more personally relevant assignment reported significantly higher intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, effort, vitality, and perceived value than those in the control group, and that the control group experienced increased negative affect during the activity. They argued that making assignments more relevant meaningfully supports autonomous motivation and internalization by helping students see academic tasks as valuable rather than merely required, ultimately improving student functioning and well-being in STEM learning contexts.

This article influenced my understanding of relevance by demonstrating how minimal instructional adjustments, such as altering the context of an assignment, can yield immediate and measurable improvements in students' motivation and emotional experience. Johansen et al. illustrated that relevance can be incorporated in small, strategic ways to increase student engagement. One of the strengths of this article is its randomized experimental design, which enabled the authors to draw stronger conclusions about the causal role of relevance by ensuring differences in motivation, vitality, and effort can be attributed to the task relevance manipulation. However, the study's small sample size of only 67 participants limits its statistical power and generalizability. Additionally, because motivation and affect were measured only immediately before and after the single task, I would suggest that future research should both increase the sample size and explore the long-term effects of integrating these relevance-based activities.

Lee et al. (2020) described the development and initial implementation of the first four-year high school interdisciplinary English language arts (ELA) curriculum built around esports, designed to increase student literacy and engagement by leveraging interest-driven learning; the authors believed that esports would offer a highly motivating, interest-driven

context that can support literacy, STEM, CTE, and SEL, particularly for students who are disengaged in traditional ELA environments. The authors' design process involved teachers, researchers, esports experts, students, and district leaders; they drew on workshops, field observations, and focus groups to guide their revisions of the curriculum. Drawing on the Connected Learning model, the curriculum leveraged students' interests (esports), supportive relationships, and real academic and career opportunities to promote deeper engagement with reading, writing, critical thinking, and collaboration. Early implementation suggested high levels of student interest and buy-in, especially among students historically disengaged in traditional English classes; however, teachers described implementation in the first year as challenging and disorienting. Despite this, the curriculum gained traction as multiple public and private schools began to pilot the program and adapt it within their own schedules and pathways.

This article shaped my understanding of how relevance can be leveraged in English language arts instruction by providing a model for integrating academic skills into authentic contexts. A key strength of this article is its innovative approach to integrating student interests and interdisciplinary connections with standards-aligned instruction. The designers' ongoing collaboration with teachers also strengthened the credibility of their curriculum. However, because the article primarily describes the curriculum design process, it lacks data on the academic and motivational impact of the curriculum. Additionally, the model assumes a level of institutional flexibility, teacher collaboration, and resource availability that may not be feasible for many schools, especially schools constrained by district mandated curricula, strict pacing guides, standardized testing pressures, or limited funding. Implementing an esports curriculum may also heavily depend on teacher expertise or administrative and community perceptions of esports as academically legitimate. While the curriculum demonstrates how student interest can

be embedded structurally, future research should examine its long-term literacy outcomes and its adaptability within more restrictive policy contexts. Considering these contextual restraints is important before this interest-based interdisciplinary design can be broadly replicated.

Madison et al. (2019) examined whether integrating a journalistic learning approach into sixth-grade English language arts and social studies could increase students' motivation to write, build collaboration and self-direction skills, and support positive writing-related experiences. The authors conducted a 36-week mixed-methods pilot study with 53 sixth-grade students in a rural U.S. school in which the classroom teacher and a recent journalism graduate jointly led weekly journalistic learning sessions. The researchers collected quantitative survey data across two time points and qualitative focus group interviews to evaluate students' experiences with journalistic writing, interviewing, research, and publication across the entire school year. The authors grounded the intervention in self-determination theory, hypothesizing that journalistic practices like authentic interviews and real audiences would generate more internalized motivation for writing. The authors concluded that journalistic learning provided regular opportunities for collaboration and self-direction, increased students' intrinsic motivation to write, enhanced their critical thinking and metacognition, and strengthened relational support among peers and teachers. They further found that students experienced greater flow, value, and enjoyment in writing tasks with positive effects sustaining or increasing over the school year, suggesting that a journalistic approach can meaningfully improve motivation and engagement in adolescent writing instruction.

This article deepened my understanding of relevance and writing motivation by illustrating how modifying the structure of writing instruction, rather than only the content, can meaningfully impact students' motivation and engagement. The journalistic approach positioned

students as reporters engaging with real questions and audiences instead of solely writing for their teacher. Through an SDT lens, the journalistic approach supported students' autonomy through self-direction, relatedness through collaboration and real audiences, and competence through meaningful writing practice. A strength of the article is its use of both quantitative and qualitative data to examine students' experiences throughout the entire school year. Quantitative measures enabled the authors to track changes in motivation and engagement over time, while the qualitative data provided insight into students' perceptions and sense of personal relevance. However, the sample size and demographics limit the generalizability of its findings. Additionally, the influence of the journalism graduate as a classroom guest was not considered. Thinking critically about the article, I would suggest that future research investigate the impact of a journalistic learning approach on student motivation and engagement without recruiting non-teachers to work directly with students. Researchers might collaborate with journalism experts to train classroom teachers instead of recruiting them to help in the classroom.

Priniski et al. (2018) explored the need for a unified conceptual framework in educational motivation research, synthesizing fragmented terminology constructs across multiple motivation theories. The authors conducted a comprehensive theoretical review of research on relevance and analyzed constructs, intervention approaches, and empirical findings across expectancy-value theory, the four-phase model of interest development, and self-determination theory. The authors proposed a new theoretical framework to address this lack of unity: the relevance continuum. They defined relevance as "a personally meaningful connection to the individual" (Priniski et al., 2018, p. 12) and categorized it into personal association, personal usefulness, and identification. The authors concluded that adopting this continuum could clarify how different interventions operate, prevent misuse of terms, and provide coherence across motivational theories. They

further argued that the framework has significant implications for designing future research and for helping educators recognize and promote meaningful types of relevance to improve student motivation and engagement.

This article was very impactful on my understanding of relevance because it provided clear conceptual language for discussing relevance. Before reading this article, relevance as a theoretical concept felt inconsistent, but this framework clarified how these ideas connect along a single continuum. The strengths of this article lie in its synthesis of existing research and its ability to weave together individual theories into a cohesive framework for understanding relevance. However, because the piece is primarily theoretical, it assumes that educators can reliably identify and respond to students' positions along the relevance continuum. In practice, teachers working with mandated curriculum pacing guides and high-stakes testing pressures may have limited time or structural flexibility to assess students' perceived relevance or to redesign instruction in response. While the authors' relevance continuum offers conceptual clarity, future research should examine how teachers can utilize it within real classrooms, particularly under accountability pressures that restrict instructional autonomy.

Robertson and Padesky (2019) examined how interest-based instruction can be used to engage students in reading and writing by intentionally integrating their situational and individual interests into curricular planning. The authors draw on a qualitative, practice-based approach using two detailed instructional vignettes, one from a university literacy clinic and one from a fifth-grade language arts classroom, to illustrate how contextualizing learning, building relevance, and incorporating inquiry and project-based learning support motivation and literacy skill development. Their study was grounded in research on interest development, motivation, and culturally relevant pedagogy. The authors found that intentionally incorporating

contextualized learning, relevance, choice, and inquiry increased students' willingness to engage in challenging reading and writing tasks and supported persistence, self-regulation, and deeper comprehension. The authors further argued that interest-based instruction should be a foundational component of curriculum planning, as it allows students to see relevance and value in literacy skills while still meeting rigorous academic standards.

This article was impactful on my understanding of how students' interests may be used in educational settings because it showed how teachers can adapt district-mandated curriculum to include principles of interest-based learning. One strength of the article is its rich qualitative detail, which illustrated how interest-based instruction looks in real classrooms. Through the two vignettes, the authors showed concrete teaching strategies that help students experience reading and writing as purposeful. However, this article assumed a level of curricular flexibility and instructional autonomy that may not be available in classrooms constrained by mandated curriculum or standardized testing pressures. While the authors argued that interest-based instruction can coexist with rigorous standards, they offered limited discussion of how teachers might navigate tensions when student interests diverge from required content or when students struggle to articulate interests at all. The authors also presumed that student interests can be readily identified and leveraged in ways that meaningfully connect to disciplinary goals. This assumption may not hold in classrooms where engagement is already low or where institutional structures restrict instructional adaptation. Further research should examine how interest-based approaches function within more tightly regulated contexts.

Rose and Bowen (2021) examined whether CareerStart, a middle school education intervention that integrates career-relevant lessons into math, ELA, science, and social studies, reduces the likelihood of students dropping out of high school. Rose and Bowen conducted a

randomized controlled trial and analyzed longitudinal administrative data from 3,433 students across 14 middle schools, tracking drop-out outcomes through high school. The authors drew heavily on self-determination theory, theorizing that career-relevant instruction increases identified and integrated motivation, thereby reducing disengagement trajectories that contribute to drop-out. The authors found that attending a CareerStart school reduced the hazard of dropout by 23% compared to control schools and that greater exposure to career-relevant lessons was associated with additional reduction in drop-out risk. They further concluded that the intervention's benefits were strongest for students who remained in the same school, suggesting that consistency and stability amplify motivational effects. Overall, the authors argued that relevance-based interventions in middle school hold promise for mitigating long-term disengagement and improving educational achievement outcomes.

This article influenced my understanding of relevance by demonstrating that relevance-based instruction can produce long-term, measurable effects on students' educational trajectories and is not just a strategy for increasing short-term engagement. A major strength of the article is its experimental design and longitudinal data tracking, which allowed the authors to provide strong evidence that CareerStart reduced drop-out risk rather than merely correlating with it. This study focused exclusively on the lesson plans component of the CareerStart program, although the program also includes other elements such as parent engagement, work exploration, career assessments, and career fairs (Orthner et al., 2010). Rose and Bowen acknowledged the lack of reliable tracking for these additional components. I would suggest that future research examine the effects of these other components on drop-out rates. In addition, I would also suggest further exploration of how the quality of lesson implementation varied across teachers and schools, as quantity alone does not capture the authenticity or meaningfulness of

relevance conveyed. Teachers' beliefs, instructional styles, and understanding of relevance-based pedagogy may have influenced student experiences, yet these factors were not explored.

Ryan and Deci (2020) examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivation through the lens of self-determination theory, summarizing two decades of research to clarify how basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and motivational regulation processes influence student and teacher motivation, engagement, and well-being in educational contexts. The authors conducted a comprehensive theoretical review drawing on empirical studies, meta-analyses, experimental research, and classroom-based interventions across developmental and disciplinary settings. Their analysis is grounded in self-determination theory, focusing on the role of the three basic psychological needs in shaping intrinsic motivation and the internalization of extrinsic motivation through self-determination theory's taxonomy of motivation. Ryan and Deci concluded that autonomous forms of motivation predict enhanced engagement, deeper learning, better performance, and greater psychological wellness while controlled motivation and need-thwarting practices undermine outcomes across cultures and age groups. They further argued that autonomy-supportive teaching, meaningful rationales, and need-supportive school environments foster internalization, whereas policies such as high-stakes testing, performance goals, and grade-focused practices compromise both student and teacher motivation.

This article significantly enhanced my understanding of motivation and self-determination theory by clarifying the distinctions between intrinsic motivation and internalized extrinsic motivation. The authors' explanation of the taxonomy of motivation helped me recognize that students do not need to enjoy every task, but rather they need to perceive value, relevance, and purpose in order to internalize learning in a self-endorsed manner. A

strength of this article is its translation of theoretical concepts into clear instructional practices, with concrete examples of autonomy-supportive teaching that make the theory actionable. However, the article could have included more discussion of how culture and identity intersect with basic psychological needs and internalization, as it provides limited guidance on how cultural values shape students' perceptions of autonomy, competence, or relatedness. Thinking critically about the article, I would suggest that future research examine how rigid curricular and assessment requirements create barriers to autonomy-supportive instruction, given that teachers often must adhere to strict pacing guides, standardized tests, and mandated texts that restrict flexibility.

Vanniarajan (2011) investigated why student motivation and participation vary across different tasks in a mandatory remedial college-level academic writing class. Vanniarajan conducted a qualitative interview study with 20 California State University undergraduate students in a six-week remedial writing course for students who previously failed the university's Writing Skills Test (WST), gathering data through short recorded interviews about students' attitudes toward the course, the WST, and various classroom activities. The findings were analyzed through the situated motivation model of class participation and Schumann's neurobiological model of motivation, which together frame learner motivation as an emotional-cognitive appraisal of tasks, goals, self-beliefs, and the learning environment. The author concluded that students' engagement was shaped by their cognitive and emotional appraisals of tasks, particularly perceptions of relevance, self-efficacy, coping potential, and compatibility with self-image, and that learners actively determined which activities they deemed worthwhile based on how strongly those activities related to their goal of passing the WST. Vanniarajan further argued that motivation in mandatory writing classes is deeply influenced by

emotional factors, test-related pressures, and students' perceived control; they also recommended instructional adjustments, such as interest surveys, explicit teaching of prewriting value, improved peer-editing structures, and alignment between classroom instruction and test demands. Vanniarajan also included multiple suggestions for writing instructors in order to improve student motivation in mandatory writing classes.

This article was impactful on my understanding of relevance and motivation because it illustrated how external pressures can distort students' sense of value. Through SDT, this suggests that relevance must be designed carefully so that it supports students' autonomy rather than reinforcing compliance or pressure. One strength of the article is its use of both the situated motivation model of class participation and Schumann's neurobiological model of motivation to analyze students' cognitive and emotional responses to writing tasks. This dual-theory approach helped explain why students selectively engaged in certain activities and avoided others. Thinking critically about the article, I would suggest further examination of how instructional design might reshape students' appraisals. While the study identified which tasks students valued most, it did not explore how teachers could redesign writing activities to make them feel more purposeful, less anxiety-producing, or more aligned with students' identities beyond making activities like pre-writing and peer editing required to pass the course.

Vansteenkiste et al. (2018) examined how self-relevance and personal meaning contribute to the internalization of learning tasks and how teachers can foster more autonomous, self-endorsed forms of motivation during academic activities that students may perceive as uninteresting. The authors conducted a comprehensive theoretical review synthesizing empirical research, experimental studies, and conceptual scholarship on internalization, autonomy support, rationale provision, psychological needs, and motivation within classroom contexts. Their

analysis was grounded in self-determination theory, particularly the taxonomy of motivation, and emphasized the role of autonomy-supportive practices in promoting identified and integrated motivation; the authors also connected to the utility-value component of the expectancy-value theory and the instrumentality component of future time perspective theory. The authors proposed an emerging rationale provision model that suggests that teacher-provided rationales for academic activities enhance internalization when they are clear; personally meaningful; appeal to intrinsic goals; satisfy students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; and are delivered in an autonomy-supportive manner that acknowledges students' perspectives and avoids controlling language. The authors concluded that teachers can meaningfully motivate students by supporting autonomy and providing personalized rationales that highlight the task's relevance to the learner's own values, goals, and aspirations.

This article influenced my understanding of relevance and motivation by providing guidance on how I can support internalization in my own lessons. The authors offered recommendations for autonomy-supportive practices that can help me when designing the unit for my action research project. A strength of the article is its integration of multiple motivational constructs to create a coherent explanation of how students make sense of learning tasks. The authors demonstrated how each construct contributes to the broader process of internalization, clarifying how strategies for building relevance align within self-determination theory. However, the model also carries some assumptions that complicate implementation. First, the model presumes that rationales will be received as supportive, but in classrooms where trust is still developing or where students have experienced school as coercive, a teacher's rationale may be interpreted as manipulation rather than care, especially if students perceive a mismatch between autonomy-supportive language and the actual non-negotiability of the task. Second, while the

authors note cultural variation, the model could more directly grapple with how “meaningfulness” may be communal, relational, or responsibility-based rather than based on individual goals, and how rationales might need to be co-constructed with students rather than delivered to them. Future research could be stronger if it tests the model under varied relational conditions and examines how students interpret rationales in the moment.

Summary

These studies in this annotated bibliography highlight a consistent and compelling pattern: relevance plays a critical role in supporting motivation, engagement, and internalization in a variety of educational contexts. Across K-12 and higher education, the research demonstrates that when learning feels personally meaningful, connected to students’ interests or goals, or situated within real-world contexts, students report higher autonomy, competence, and intrinsic motivation. Additionally, these studies show that relevance is a multilayered process shaped by personal, situational, and relational factors. The literature suggests that fostering relevance requires more than choosing interesting topics; it requires designing learning experiences that acknowledge students’ perspectives, support autonomy, provide meaningful choices, and build authentic connections between academic tasks and the identities, goals, and experiences of learners. This points to the central implication that when relevance is intentionally supported, it can be a powerful mechanism for promoting engagement and long-term motivation.

Chapter 3. Methods

Action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry conducted by educators to improve their own teaching practices and student learning. Sagor (2000) defines action research as “a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the actions” (p. 3) with the goal of helping practitioners refine or improve their practice. Unlike traditional research, which is typically conducted by external researchers, action research is conducted by the teacher in their own classroom. One of the central benefits of action research is that the results are immediately relevant to classroom practice because the teacher investigates issues that are uniquely relevant to their students and themselves and directly applies their investigation and findings to their instruction.

According to Sagor (2000), action research follows a cyclical seven-step process: selecting a focus, clarifying theories, identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results, and taking informed action (pp. 3-4). To select a focus, teachers must reflect on their classroom experiences and identify opportunities for improvement. Given the busy nature of the profession, a teacher wishing to conduct action research must consider whether the focus is worth the time and will improve the teacher’s or the students’ experiences in the classroom. The next step is to identify a theory related to the focus that will help guide the study. This step helps researchers articulate the assumptions and frameworks that inform their instructional decisions. After identifying the guiding theory, the researcher must narrow the investigation on specific aspects of teaching and learning by developing “a set of personally meaningful research questions to guide the inquiry” (Sagor, 2000, p. 4). Once the researcher has identified their guiding theory and research questions, the next step is to collect valid and reliable data from multiple sources to investigate the research questions. Fortunately, classroom

environments naturally produce many forms of data such as student work, assessments, surveys, and observations. The next step is to analyze the data by identifying patterns and trends. Sagor (2000) suggests two questions that researchers ask themselves when analyzing data: “What is the story told by these data?” and “Why did the story play itself out this way?” (p. 6). The researcher then reports their findings with others, often informally such as within a professional learning community or a faculty meeting, to contribute to collective knowledge about teaching and learning. The final step is to take informed action by using the findings to make instructional adjustments or implement new strategies to improve student learning, which often leads to repeating the action research cycle.

Action research is an appropriate method for my study because it allows me to find ways to improve my instructional practice within my classroom. I aimed to understand how designing instruction that emphasizes personal and real-world relevance influences students’ motivation and engagement in an English language arts class. This inquiry was guided through the lens of self-determination theory, with the integration of relevance being an autonomy-supportive practice, to answer two research questions:

- How does integrating personally relevant connections into English language arts instruction influence students’ motivation to engage with course content?
- How do students perceive the relevance of the instructional activities and texts used in class when personally relevant connections are incorporated?

Participants and Setting

I am a teacher candidate at a high school in a small, suburban Oregon city. For privacy, I will call this school MHS. MHS had roughly 1,870 students at the time of this study. The focus class was an English 10 class made up of 18 10th grade students. Data for this class was taken

from my clinical teacher's Synergy profile for each student. Of the 19 students, 12 identified as male, five identified as female, and one identified as non-binary and used they/them pronouns. Additionally, eight students identified as Hispanic/Latinx, seven identified as white, two identified as multiracial, and one identified as Black/African American. Two students had an IEP, one for specific learning disability and one for other health impairment. There were no students with a 504 plan or who were identified as TAG. Three of these students were identified as emergent bilingual—two being in the post-monitored stage and one in the transitioning monitored stage of the district's English language development program. Eight students experienced barriers to regular attendance. Most did not disclose why they struggled with regular attendance, though some shared barriers such as unreliable transportation, family responsibilities, and mental and physical health challenges.

The school did not keep family income or Title I data for individual students; however, 31% of all students at this school were experiencing poverty. The school also did not keep data on students' or their families' religious affiliations. I never explicitly asked students about their religious beliefs, but many of the students in this class expressed a connection to Christianity, and some expressed that they were not affiliated with any religion. Additionally, the school did not provide teachers with access to students' or their families' immigration statuses beyond whether a student was in the migrant education program. According to the 19 Synergy profiles, none of the students in this course were in the district's migrant education program. I had not heard of any of my students' families being immigrants. However, I also understood that with the political climate and increase in Immigration and Customs Enforcement activity at the time, many students may have been hesitant to share this information. Therefore, the fact that none of

my students shared information about this did not necessarily mean that there was no information to share.

I had been working with these students for roughly seven months, and I was the primary teacher for this class for a little over two months when this study began. One of my greatest strengths with this particular group of students was my ability to build positive relationships both with the class as a whole and with individual students. I believe that my age played a large role in this. As a 23-year-old, I engaged with the same media many of my students enjoyed; additionally, I had two siblings who were still in high school, one of which was also in the 10th grade. These two factors were immensely helpful in being able to relate to my students, build rapport with them, and understand the various struggles of being a teenager. They were also helpful in being able to understand some of the language they used—they thought it was hilarious to hear their teacher use “brainrot.” In my previous work experience in education, I often found my age to be limiting in some ways, particularly in regards to classroom and behavior management. However, that did not prove to be true with this group of students. One of the first things my university supervisor often brought up about my strengths after observations was that it was clear that my students saw me as the teacher.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study came from a 10th grade English class I worked with from September 2025 to June 2026. Most data came from two specific units taught from March 2026 to May 2026, but they were compared to data from units earlier in the school year. Following Sagor’s (2000) recommendations, I collected data from several sources that already existed within the classroom as well as from instruments designed specifically to gather student perceptions. Using multiple sources of evidence allowed for triangulation and increased the credibility of findings. I

collected data from my lesson and unit plans from two separate units. The first focused on theme analysis of two short texts containing themes of power, “The feeling of power” (Asimov, 1958) and an excerpt from a graphic novel adaptation of *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 2021). The second focused on themes of power and on students’ ability to make connections with characters and events in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2021). Unit and lesson plans documented the instructional strategies implemented throughout the study. I gathered student work throughout the units, specifically the summative assessment for the first unit, which required students to analyze the theme of a text and connect that theme to present-day contexts. These artifacts were compared to student assessments from earlier in the year in which students identified the theme or central idea of a text but did not make a real-world connection.

In addition to the unit and lesson plans and student work samples, I also collected informal observations of student engagement during lessons, entries from my reflective journal, and feedback from my clinical teacher and university supervisor observations. Finally, I designed a Likert-scale survey that included questions about students’ perceived engagement and motivation in class as well as how relevant they perceived the content to be. Students took this survey three times: once before the first unit, once after the second unit, and once in the middle of the third unit.

Following data collection, I created an instructional timeline so that I could visually see when each piece of data occurred in relation to the others. Data analysis followed traditional qualitative analysis procedures. Through open coding, I reviewed each data source and assigned each piece of data a label to patterns. I then grouped similar codes into broader categories, which were then organized into themes. I triangulated data across multiple sources to ensure the validity of my findings. Each finding is supported by at least three different data sources, including

student work, participation records, survey responses, lesson plans, and my own reflection journal.

Researcher Positionality

I knew I wanted to become a teacher at a very young age; I loved going to school and learning, and I could not imagine myself doing anything other than that. I decided to pursue a career in teaching because I wanted to help others foster and embrace a desire to learn new things. For me, school never felt like an obligation, but I recognized that that is not true for many students today. I understood that it is important for students to see a connection between themselves—whether that be their interests, their identities, or the world around them—and what they are learning.

I also understand that it is important for me to recognize how my identity and the privileges granted to me on the basis of my identity influence my data collection and analysis. I am a 23-year-old, middle-class, native-English-speaking, white woman. I grew up in a rural, predominantly white town in Oregon and attended a small, under-resourced school. This experience was quite different from my students'. Additionally, while I consider myself to currently be in the middle-class, I would not have considered this to be true while I was growing up. As a young child, my parents did not have stable, well-paying jobs; my dad was a self-employed mechanic, and my mom worked as a gas station attendant while earning her associate degree at the local community college. However, I was fortunate to have parents who were able to take an active role in my education; they read to me every night, they helped me with my homework, and they always made sure they could make it to my parent-teacher conferences. I know this is not true for many students whose families are in similar situations. As both a researcher and an educator, I strive to recognize and counteract the biases that come from my identity and experiences by discussing and reflecting with my clinical teacher, educating

myself about systemic inequalities within the U.S. school system and how to work against them, and learning about each of my students' experiences.

Chapter 4. Findings

Three major themes developed from analyzing the data from these two units. The first theme is that personally relevant connections were associated with increased student participation and engagement. The second is that personally relevant connections were associated with increased student investment in literary discussion and analysis. The third is that personally relevant connections appeared to support deeper emotional and inferential thinking. Each theme is discussed with supportive data.

Increased Participation and Engagement

The first theme that emerged from the data was that personally relevant connections were associated with increased student participation and engagement. Across the mini-unit and, primarily, the *Macbeth* unit, students appeared more willing to participate, volunteer, write, discuss, and remain attentive and engaged with classroom activities when lessons invited them to connect texts to their own lives, interests, prior knowledge, and contemporary social issues. When I planned the mini-unit, I intentionally chose two texts that had strong, clear implications for modern society, “The feeling of power” by Isaac Asimov (1958) and an excerpt from Tim Hamilton’s graphic novel adaptation of *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (2021). *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2021) was a district required text for the second major unit this semester and was read in all of the standard (non-advanced) general education English 10 classes at MHS. The central focus for both of these units was for students to make personal and real-world connections to the texts. To achieve this, I strategically planned the units so that each lesson invited students to make connections between the texts and themselves. These connections ranged from things they personally experienced and things they are interested in to what they see happening in the world around them. Opportunities for connections included pre-read journaling,

table group and whole-class discussions of the texts, reflective journaling after reading, and summative essays at the end of both units. For the mini-unit summative, students analyzed the theme of one of the two texts we read during the unit; students were able to choose which text they wanted to analyze. Students wrote a very short essay, two to three paragraphs, in which they identified a theme of one of the texts, explained how it developed across the text, and then explained how it is relevant in the world today. For the *Macbeth* unit summative, students wrote a three to five paragraph essay in which they wrote an evidence-based summary of a specific moment in the play—this could be one scene or multiple scenes—with textual evidence and inference, explained how they personally connected to that specific moment, and then explained why that connection is significant. Across data from my reflection journal, participation data, and my university supervisor’s observations, these instructional practices frequently coincided with increased participation and engagement.

The first lesson of my mini-unit centered on Isaac Asimov’s (1958) short story “The feeling of power” and themes related to power, technology, and overreliance on machines. This mini-unit, and this text in particular, was meant to bridge the previous unit, which was focused on research and argumentative writing surrounding the common central idea of advancing technology, and the next unit, centered around themes of power in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2021). In the first lesson, I incorporated multiple opportunities for students to connect the text to contemporary societal issues. I began class with a journal prompt: “What happens when most people rely on technology to think or solve problems for them? Is that empowering, limiting, or both? Explain.” Before releasing students to write in their notebooks, we discussed what it means when something is empowering versus limiting. I then encouraged students to draw on what they noticed in their own lives and in the world around them. Before we began reading the short story,

I introduced it by explaining its historical context, focusing primarily on the Cold War.

Unbeknownst to me, the 10th grade social studies class just finished a unit about the Cold War the week prior. In my journal from that lesson, I noted how enthusiastic students were about the fact that this short story was written in response to fears at the beginning of the Cold War:

Students had just taken a test about the Cold War the week before, and many were excited to share what they knew. I have not seen this class as engaged and excited as they were since we talked about rhetorical appeals in the first semester and I told them how they could use their understanding of rhetorical appeals in real life.

As we read the short story, I posed multiple discussion questions prompting students to think about how ideas and events in the story relate to events happening in the world today. In my journal from this lesson, I also noted that “many students were excited to share their thoughts on the discussion questions, and it appeared that everyone participated in table group discussions.” We read about two-thirds of the story in this lesson before we moved on to a mini-lesson about identifying themes. I walked students through the process of determining the theme of a text using two texts students were likely to be familiar with: *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and *Mean girls* (Waters, 2004). For the exit ticket at the end of the lesson, students were asked to construct a possible theme statement for two of four summaries of made up stories that I provided them. I received an exit ticket from 15 of the 16 students present in class. 12 of those students identified accurate themes based on the summaries, two students restated the summaries in their own words, and one student wrote about something entirely different. In my journal, I noted the participation of one specific student whom my CT and I have struggled to get regular, active engagement from since the beginning of the school year. I wrote that this student, “participated the most he has since the school year started...he actively followed along, took

notes, and completed the exit ticket with accurate responses.” The engagement observed during this lesson was further supported by formal observation notes. During the observation of this lesson, my university supervisor noted multiple instances of students volunteering to share responses for the pre-read prompt, participating in table group discussions, and volunteering to share their thoughts during whole-class discussion.

This pattern continued throughout the *Macbeth* unit as well. Lessons in which we read the play began with a pre-read journal prompt related to ideas, themes, and events explored in the scenes for each lesson. Prompts primarily centered around themes of guilt, trust, betrayal, power, manipulation, and the responsibility of authority figures; the prompts also encouraged students to provide examples from their own lives, other media, and the real world to support their responses. The pre-read prompts were designed with a two-fold purpose: to activate students’ prior knowledge and beliefs regarding what happens in the scenes they would be reading and to build a bank of ideas for students to pull from when it came time to writing their essay at the end of the unit. To further support students’ ability to make connections to the play, I planned discussion questions for students to respond to in their table groups and as a class as we read the play. These questions invited students to consider the events and themes of the play in a modern context by having them relate ideas in the play to things they may have seen, heard, or experienced.

During this unit, I collected quantitative data documenting students’ attendance, students who read out loud, and students who participated in discussions for each day we read; we read the play for a total of nine days during this unit. Since students’ comfort with the extent to which they participate varies, what was considered “participation” differed for each student. For all students, this included actively following along in the text and engaging in writing activities; for

most students, participation also included engaging in table group and whole-class discussions. With the exception of a couple days, participation data collected during this unit showed consistently high levels of engagement. However, participation was especially high on April 7 (93.33%), April 14 (86.67%), and April 23 (88.89%). On each of these days, students responded to pre-read prompts in their journals related to the ethics of breaking rules, confronting wrongdoings, and experiencing immense guilt.

During this unit, I had students read for different characters each day. I knew that I would not get enough volunteers to read every day, so I wrote students' names on popsicle sticks and then leveled the sticks using different colors based on students' comfort with reading out loud to ensure that a student who is not very comfortable reading in front of the class was not assigned to read, for instance, Macbeth. During the unit, I documented how many students volunteered to read each day and how many students were assigned to read each day. Similar to participation, volunteers for reading also appeared to increase on days that were especially relevant to students' lives and the real world. On April 7, four out of four students volunteered for reading, and on April 23, six out of six students volunteered to read. A higher percentage of students volunteered to read on April 21 as well, nine out of 12. Participation on this day was a bit lower (82.35%); however, my university supervisor was observing me teaching that day, which may have had an impact on student participation. Additionally, on April 2, we had seven out of 10 students volunteer to read. Participation on this day was the lowest for the entire unit at 68.75%; however, this was also the first day that we read the play, and students were not very comfortable engaging with the language of Shakespeare at that point.

In addition to the participation tracker, I gathered quantitative data via a student survey. I designed a Likert scale survey that asked students questions regarding their motivation, focus,

and enjoyment during English class. Students took the survey three times during this study: at the beginning of the second semester before students began their research papers, at the end of the mini-unit the day before spring break, and at the end of the *Macbeth* unit. The two figures below show the results for two questions on the survey.

I feel focused and involved in English.					
Scale	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Beginning of the semester (17 students)	1 student (5.89%)	7 students (41.17%)	6 students (35.29%)	2 students (11.76%)	1 student (5.88%)
After the mini-unit (15 students)	0 students (0.00%)	8 students (53.33%)		5 students (33.33%)	2 students (13.33%)
After the <i>Macbeth</i> unit (15 students)	2 students (13.33%)	11 students (73.33%)		2 students (13.33%)	0 students (0.00%)

Figure 1. Student Self-Report of Focus and Involvement in English

I feel motivated in English.					
Scale	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Beginning of the semester (17 students)	1 student (5.89%)	8 students (47.53%)	4 students (23.53%)	3 students (17.65%)	1 student (5.89%)
After the mini-unit (15 students)	0 students (0.00%)	6 students (40.00%)		5 students (33.33%)	4 students (26.67%)
After the <i>Macbeth</i> unit (15 students)	1 student (6.67%)	9 students (60.0%)		4 students (26.67%)	1 student (6.67%)

Figure 2. Student Self-Report of Motivation in English

One student was absent for the first survey and three students were absent for the second and third surveys. For the first survey, I included “Neutral” as an option. However, after reviewing survey results, I found that some students answered neutral for each question and, after speaking with those students, this was done to get through the survey quickly. In order to avoid this in the subsequent surveys, I removed “Neutral” from the answer options. I recognize that this does create some limitations with my data, which is why I conducted the survey three times rather than two. The results of this survey show that students had a significant increase in their perception of their focus and involvement in class. At the beginning of the second semester, 47.06% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt focused and involved in English class; this increased to 53.33% after the mini-unit. However, by the end of the *Macbeth* unit, the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed to the statement jumped to 86.67%. Students’ perception of their motivation also increased over the study, though not as much as their focus and involvement. At the beginning of the second semester, 52.94% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt motivated. This decreased slightly to 40.00% at the end of the mini-unit; the mini-unit being taught the week before spring break may have been a contributing factor to this drop. Students’ perception of their motivation increased to 66.67% at the end of the *Macbeth* unit.

The survey data also revealed an interesting distinction between engagement and motivation. While students’ reported motivation fluctuated somewhat throughout the study, students’ reported feelings of focus and involvement increased significantly by the end of the study. Although these survey results do not establish a causal relationship between personally relevant instruction and student motivation, the results mirror patterns documented in my journal, student participation data, and my university supervisor’s observation notes. The data may

suggest that personally relevant instructional activities were particularly associated with students' behavioral and emotional engagement during class, even if their beliefs about their motivation in English remained variable.

Overall, the data suggest that personally relevant connections were associated with increased student engagement, especially in more observable forms such as voluntarily reading and actively participating in discussions. Students appeared more willing to engage with course content when they were invited to connect texts to their own experiences. While the data do not prove that relevance caused the increase in engagement, the consistency across participation data, survey responses, and journal reflections suggests that relevance played an important role in supporting students' involvement during class.

Increased Investment in Literary Discussion and Analysis

The second theme that emerged from the data was that personally relevant connections were associated with increased investment in literary discussion and analysis. Throughout the *Macbeth* unit, students appeared more emotionally and intellectually invested in literary discussions when they were invited to connect themes, conflicts, characters, and events to their own lives, emotions, relationships, and social experiences. Students were invited to discuss the themes prevalent in *Macbeth* through their pre-read journals, discussions during reading, and their written reflections after reading. As students became increasingly emotionally invested in the conflicts and characters within *Macbeth*, participation and discussion involvement also appeared to increase.

For instance, on April 7, students responded to the pre-read prompt, "Is it ever okay to break a rule or do something wrong if it benefits you? Why or why not?" In my journal for this lesson, I noted that several students volunteered to share their responses to the pre-read journal

prompt. During this lesson, we focused on Act 1, Scenes 6 and 7, which focused mainly on Lady Macbeth and how she convinces Macbeth to kill King Duncan. My participation tracker for this lesson shows the highest percentage of participation for the entire unit: 93.33%. In my journal for this lesson, I wrote:

By the end of the act, students were very adamant that they do not like Lady Macbeth; they think she is far too manipulative and power-hungry. They do not like that she uses Macbeth's insecurities against him, and they say that she is promoting toxic masculinity.

Similarly, on April 14, students chose one of two pre-read journal prompts to respond to: one about confronting the suspected wrongdoings of a friend and one about hiding guilt from a loved one. In this lesson, we read Act 3, Scenes 1 through 3, which focused primarily on Macbeth and Banquo's suspicions of each other and, ultimately, the death of Banquo. In my journal for that lesson, I noted, "Students were very engaged in reading today. They did not like how Macbeth betrayed Banquo by killing him. They also think he is becoming too much like Lady Macbeth, whom they very much do not like."

Additionally, on April 23, students responded to a pre-read prompt asking about the long-term effects of guilt and whether they have ever experienced immense guilt. In this lesson, we read Act 5, Scenes 1 through 3, which focused primarily on Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking and Macbeth's reaction to hearing of his wife's apparent illness. In my journal for this lesson, I noted that students continued to be engaged in the reading and that they began to feel some sympathy for Lady Macbeth, mainly because they thought Macbeth had much more agency regarding the deaths of Banquo and Macduff's family than he did when he killed King Duncan.

Data also showed that students preferred collaborative literary discussion over more passive instruction. On April 16, I had students complete a survey about how they preferred to

engage with *Macbeth*. I had students indicate whether they preferred reading as a class, reading on their own, or primarily watching clips from film and stage adaptations for comprehension as well as enjoyment. 12 students responded to the survey, and all but three indicated they preferred reading and discussing the play as a class for both comprehension and enjoyment. This suggests that students valued collaborative literary discussion over more passive approaches, such as reading alone or primarily watching video clips.

In both the mini-unit and the *Macbeth* unit, students were invited to relate texts and themes to personal experiences and real-world issues, particularly in the summative assessments. For the summative assessment for the mini-unit, students were asked to analyze the theme of one of the texts we read and connect that theme to the world today. Unfortunately, we were on a time crunch the last day of this unit, and students did not have as much time to work on the summative assessment as I had planned. Of the 14 assessments I received at the end of class, nine were incomplete. Two of the five complete assessments had a clear connection between the text and the real world. For three of the five assessments, the connection was either not complete or was too vague.

As I planned the *Macbeth* unit, I was much more careful and intentional in creating opportunities for students to build a “bank” of connections to pull from when it came time for the essay by ensuring that each pre-read journal prompt asked students to make a clear connection between what happens in the play to things they have experienced or witnessed. At the end of the unit, students wrote a three to five-paragraph essay in which they wrote a summary of a specific moment in the play, supported by textual evidence and inferences, and then explained how they connected to that moment. This connection could have been a personal connection, as in a connection to something they have personally felt or experienced, or it could have been a

connection to the broader world. For this assessment, I received an essay from all but one student who has been struggling with regular attendance this semester. Six students met expectations and explained a clear connection they had to the moment they summarized; two students exceeded expectations and explained a multifaceted connection to the play; six students were close to meeting expectations and explained a connection but did not clearly explain how it was related to the play; one student did not explain a clear connection; two students did not get to that part of the essay before they submitted it. In addition to the higher completion rate, students' connections to the play began to go beyond the surface level. One student connected Macbeth's belief that he was invincible so long as Birnam Wood did not move to how the lack of consequences he receives from his parents has instilled the mindset that he, too, is above consequences at times. He then reflected on this connection, stating,

Not only is Macbeth reckless, but in the real world, without limitations or restrictions, knowing that you cannot be harmed in anyway because of your actions you feel as if you can do anything and that could be good or bad but we as people need this limitations of being afraid of death or afraid of getting in trouble because without it you will be reckless [*sic*] and could die or get in trouble at any moment [*sic*] with your actions.

Another student connected the play to the world beyond himself. He explained how wealthy and powerful people often lose their morals in the pursuit of even more wealth and power:

Many of the wealthy and powerful in America are a prime example of this. The companies that they have or the things that they do will often directly harm others, but it doesn't concern them because they're still in power. Often, like Macbeth, they will even see that their actions have killed others and they'll see that people are actively dying because of corruption or injustice caused by them.... It's also greatly significant because

it serves as a mirror into our society and the people in power. It also helps me reflect on my personal values, such as my friends and family and how some people throw things like that away simply for the purpose of gaining something for themselves.

These particular students moved beyond superficial similarities and began using their connections to better understand the play as well as using the play to better understand the world around them.

Survey data further supported patterns of increased investment in literary discussion and analysis throughout the study, particularly regarding students' perceptions of relevance and motivation. In addition to the questions about focus and motivation in Figures 1 and 2, students were asked about the relationship between relevance and motivation and how relevant they perceive this English class to be. Figures 3 and 4 below show the results of the survey.

When I can connect class to my own interests and experiences, I feel more motivated.					
Scale	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Beginning of the semester (17 students)	4 students (23.53%)	4 students (23.53%)	4 students (23.53%)	4 students (23.53%)	1 student (5.88%)
After the mini-unit (15 students)	4 students (26.67%)	9 students (60.00%)		1 student (6.67%)	1 student (6.67%)
After the <i>Macbeth</i> unit (15 students)	5 students (33.33%)	7 students (46.67%)		3 students (20.00%)	0 students (0.00%)

Figure 3. Student Perception of the Relationship Between Relevance and Motivation

The things we read and write about in English are relevant to my life.					
Scale	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Beginning of	0 students	5 students	7 students	2 students	2 students

the semester (17 students)	(0.00%)	(29.41%)	(41.18%)	(11.76%)	(11.76%)
After the mini-unit (15 students)	1 student (6.67%)	7 students (46.67%)		5 students (33.33%)	2 students (13.33%)
After the <i>Macbeth</i> unit (15 students)	1 student (6.67%)	7 students (46.67%)		4 students (26.67%)	3 students (20.00%)

Figure 4. Student Perception of the Relevance of English Course Materials and Activities

Prior to the study, fewer than half of students (47.06%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “When I can connect class to my own interests and experiences, I feel more motivated.” Additionally, only 29.41% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The things we read and write about in English are relevant to my life.” These pre-study responses suggest that many students did not perceive English instruction as personally meaningful or connected to their own interests and experiences. By the second survey, responses shifted quite a bit: 86.67% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that connecting class to their interests and experiences increased their motivation, while perceptions of relevance increased to 53.33%. However, in the third survey, students’ beliefs about the relationship between relevance and motivation decreased slightly to 80.00% and their perceptions of relevance plateaued. This suggests that while many students responded positively to personally relevant activities and discussions, students’ broader perceptions regarding the relevance of the English class may have remained more resistant to change within the relatively short duration of the study. This distinction is important because it suggests that personally relevant instructional strategies may support situational engagement and investment even when students’ larger attitudes toward school or English remain relatively unchanged.

Interestingly, despite this stabilization of students' perceptions of relevance, students' reported enjoyment of reading increased much more dramatically over the course of the study. In addition to the above questions, I asked students about their feelings toward reading in English. Figure 5 shows their responses.

How do you usually feel about reading in English class?					
Scale	I really enjoy it.	I mostly enjoy it.	I feel neutral.	I usually dislike it.	I strongly dislike it.
Beginning of the semester (17 students)	2 students (11.76%)	7 students (41.77%)	4 students (23.53%)	4 students (23.53%)	0 students (0.00%)
After the mini-unit (15 students)	1 student (6.67%)	7 students (46.67%)		6 students (40.00%)	1 student (6.67%)
After the <i>Macbeth</i> unit (15 students)	5 students (33.33%)	9 students (60.00%)		1 student (6.67%)	0 students (0.00%)

Figure 5. Student Reports of Reading Enjoyment in Class

Prior to the study, 52.94% of students reported mostly or really enjoying reading in English class. By the third survey, that percentage increased to 93.33%. This increase aligned with data from my reflection journal as well as participation data during the *Macbeth* unit, documenting students' willingness to participate in table group and whole class discussion and their preference for collaborative work over independent work. These findings may suggest that students became invested in the content of the text itself as well as in the collaborative nature of our literary discussions throughout this unit.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that personally relevant connections supported students' investment in literary discussion and analysis. Students not only participated more frequently but also used their connections to take positions on characters, evaluate motives, and

connect literary conflicts to human experiences they understood. This shows that relevance may have influenced students' motivation to engage with the content and shaped how they perceived the text as meaningful. Relevance appeared to help students think through literary themes as they relate to real-life experiences: relationships, choices, power, guilt, and responsibility.

Supporting Deeper Emotional and Interpretive Thinking

The third theme that emerged from the data was that personally relevant connections appeared to support deeper emotional and interpretive thinking. Across both the mini-unit and the *Macbeth* unit, students used personal experiences, emotions, and beliefs as well as their understanding of the world around them to interpret literary themes, characters, and conflicts. These patterns were reflected across my journal entries, student work samples, my university supervisor's observations, and participation data. Lessons that incorporated personally relevant connections, particularly ones that were more emotionally connected, corresponded with more nuanced inferential thinking and analysis of the texts.

One pattern that appeared during the *Macbeth* unit was that personally relevant connections coincided with more nuanced ethical reasoning during class discussions. This is particularly apparent when looking at my reflections of students' responses to the pre-read journal prompts. For multiple pre-read prompts, students demonstrated more nuanced reasoning during discussion of their responses. For instance, when talking about the morality and ethics of breaking a rule when doing so benefits you during the April 7 pre-read, many students responded stating that it depends on the context. While I received a variety of responses and examples, the consensus seemed to be that it is okay to break a rule or do something wrong as long as it does not harm other people. One example from a student was that it might be okay for a person who is struggling financially to steal food from a grocery store as they believed it would only harm the

company, not necessarily any individuals. They believed that the benefit of satisfying a basic human need outweighed the harm done to the company. Similarly, on April 14, students wrote about whether they would confront a friend if they knew that friend did something wrong. Only one student shared with the class on this day. He said that it would depend on how close he is with the friend and the severity of what they did. For example, if it were someone he was not very close with, he said he might not confront them because he does not know them that well; however, if it were someone he knew well and they did something illegal or something that really harmed another person, he would likely confront them or tell a trusted adult.

Students' layered perspectives on such ethical dilemmas went beyond their pre-read journal responses. This was primarily seen in students' perceptions of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. Early in the play, many students blamed Lady Macbeth more heavily for King Duncan's death because they saw her as manipulative and believed she used Macbeth's insecurities against him. In contrast, they seemed to sympathize with Macbeth because they believed he likely felt inferior to his wife, who displayed more traditionally masculine traits, and her manipulation tactics only rubbed salt in those wounds. When asked about their thoughts on who was most at fault for Duncan's death, students maintained their attitudes stating that even though Macbeth was the one who actually did the killing, Lady Macbeth was the one who planned it and manipulated Macbeth into doing it. They also stated that since Macbeth was having second thoughts in the scenes leading up to Duncan's death and he seemed to be feeling immense guilt and remorse afterward, it shows how much he was pushed by his wife to go through with it rather than it being entirely out of his own will and desire.

However, their feelings about Macbeth began to shift after he began ordering the deaths of other people on his own. After reading the scene with Banquo's death, I reflected in my

journal that students' negative feelings toward Macbeth began to grow as they "think he is becoming too much like Lady Macbeth, whom they very much do not like." They previously saw Lady Macbeth as someone who would do whatever it takes to gain power while Macbeth was more of a person who followed orders. At this point, they began to see Macbeth as someone who no longer needed his wife to make decisions. By Act 5, students' feelings about Macbeth had only strengthened, as he ordered the deaths of Macduff's innocent family members while Macduff was away in England. Students did seem to understand what Macbeth may have been feeling and thinking at that time, though. While their feelings about him did not change, they did note that his erratic decisions regarding the deaths of Banquo and Macduff's family may have come from his guilt about killing Duncan in addition to his desire to stay in power; they thought Macbeth may have felt that if he did not maintain his power, not only would he have killed Duncan for no good reason, but Duncan would have died for no good reason. Interestingly, students' feelings about Lady Macbeth seemed to soften after her sleepwalking scene despite having such a deep-seated hatred toward her for the entire play. During our discussions as we read, many students expressed that Lady Macbeth had only wanted Duncan to die so that she and Macbeth could have power; she did not necessarily want anyone else to die. They further expressed that even though Lady Macbeth did not play any direct role in the deaths of Banquo and Macduff's family, she still expressed deep guilt and regret when she was sleepwalking.

Students also used deeply emotional and personal experiences to support their interpretation of *Macbeth* within their summative essays. In the connection part across the essays, students frequently used experiences with guilt, regret, loss, and manipulation to interpret characters' internal conflicts. One student wrote about feeling guilty after lying about something

and the guilt remaining even after they told the truth. In reflecting on this connection, the student wrote:

Having these connections help me understand this play better because it shows how individuals feel when dealing with guilt over something they have done. The only difference is I didn't kill anybody. But guilt feels the same whether it's murder or a lie.

Understanding that helps me see why Macbeth falls apart, because guilt doesn't disappear just because you want it to.

Another student wrote about her guilt regarding not speaking up about something and the guilt never going away:

ive had bad guilt and still do all the time because I didn't speak up earlier in time i didn't try hard enough to get away i failed but then i got back up again but lady macbeth didnt she ended her life and that could have been me multiple times my mom my sisters and my brother would have been devastated i wouldnt be alive to help and see them.

These students used deeply emotional experiences to explain characters' internal conflicts within the play. The responses from these two students and others suggest that students were using personal experiences to interpret and analyze the text as well as using the text to interpret and analyze themselves.

Along with students' essays, I also documented multiple instances of students engaging more deeply with *Macbeth*. In the first few days of reading the play, I consistently noted that students appeared to have lower engagement and that I had to provide a lot of support in understanding the text on the surface level and guiding students toward making inferences, likely due to the fact that Shakespeare's works can be very difficult for high school students to comprehend at first. However, the extent to which I was guiding students appears to decrease in

each entry, as I noted multiple instances of students progressing toward more independence in their interpretations. On April 16, students had an assignment for which they wrote a summary of Act 3, Scene 6, which they read on their own. On this day, I noted that all students read the original text as opposed to the No Fear Shakespeare translation that was on Canvas. I received a summary from 11 of the 15 students present in class; of those 11 students, eight showed an accurate understanding of the play without my support. Two of those eight also began making inferences within their summaries. Later, on April 23, I noted that students “were making very insightful inferences about the play and even drew parallels between characters and events completely on their own” as we read. By guiding students to make personal connections to the text before and during reading, these patterns suggest that personal connections may have supported deeper interpretive thinking and literary analysis.

These patterns were also supported by data from my university supervisor’s observations. During both the mini-unit and the *Macbeth* unit, observations from my university supervisor documented instructional scaffolding strategies intended to support interpretive thinking, including modeling annotations, guided questioning, collaborative discussion, and prompting students to think about the text independently rather than simply receiving answers directly from the teacher. During the March 10 observation, my university supervisor documented several moments in which students were asked to discuss questions about the text collaboratively and explain their reasoning. Similarly, during the April 21 observation, my university supervisor documented scaffolded questioning strategies used to guide students through Shakespearean language and support interpretive thinking surrounding the events in the play. They specifically wrote that I “Asked questions to help students recall plot,” “used multiple questions to help guide students through the play then added additional information...included students in understanding

the language of Shakespeare,” and “asked clarifying questions to help students understand and predict what is going to happen.”

Together, these findings suggest that scaffolded reading instruction combined with personally relevant writing and discussion opportunities coincided with deeper emotional and interpretive thinking about literary texts. Students’ personal connections appeared to support not only their willingness to engage, but also the depth of their engagement. Students used their own experiences with the themes of *Macbeth* to interpret characters’ motives and conflicts, and they used the characters’ experiences to better understand their own. This suggests that personal relevance may have helped some students move beyond basic comprehension toward self-reflection and making meaning out of literature.

Chapter 5. Discussions, Limitations, and Conclusion

In their self-determination theory, Ryan and Deci (2020) explained that motivation is supported when students' basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met. My instruction specifically emphasized relevance as an autonomy-supportive practice as students were invited to consider how the texts read in class connected to their own experiences, beliefs, emotions, and observations. Rather than giving students direct choice in what they read and wrote about, my instruction supported students' autonomy through interpretive ownership. Students did not always get to choose what they read, especially during the *Macbeth* unit, but they were repeatedly given opportunities to make meaning from the text in personally significant ways. Furthermore, Vansteenkiste et al. (2018) argued that students may willingly engage in tasks that are not inherently interesting when they come to see those tasks as personally meaningful or relevant. This distinction was central to my teaching and to the focus of this study. My goal was not necessarily to make students love engaging in literary analysis and reading works by authors society has deemed antiquated (i.e., Shakespeare). Instead, my goal was to help students see the value in the texts they read and the work they do and to help them see why it all matters. The complex language and historical distance of Shakespeare could have created barriers to engagement; however, asking students to make personal and real-world connections with *Macbeth* gave them a familiar entry point into the text. When students discussed thematic ideas in relation to their own lives or the world around them, they were better able to participate in literary discussion. This suggests that relevance may have supported motivation and engagement not by making the text easier, but by helping students find a reason to engage with the work.

Priniski et al. (2018) described relevance as “a personally meaningful connection to the individual” (p.12) and proposed that, as a framework, it exists on a continuum: personal association, personal usefulness, and identification. Utilizing Priniski et al.’s (2018) framework, Guo and Fryer (2025) found that all three types of relevance supported students’ situational interest in individual math lessons and, over time, contributed to long-term domain interest in their middle school math class. Priniski et al.’s (2018) framework, and the supporting findings from Guo and Fryer (2025), helped me understand that my instruction most often supported relevance through personal association and, at times, identification. In my classroom, students were asked to determine how they connected to texts and themes and why they mattered for themselves; I did not explicitly tell them why they should have thought the things they were learning were relevant or mattered to them. When students connected characters, conflicts, and themes to their own memories, emotions, values, identities, or observations of the broader world, they had a stronger reason to participate in the work of interpretation. In the *Macbeth* unit specifically, students’ essays and discussions suggested that personal relevance gave them a lens for understanding the abstract literary ideas within the play. This connects to Hands’s (2024) argument that student-generated connections can be more meaningful than instructor-selected examples because students’ own experiences shape what they perceive as relevant. In my own study, rather than tell students why *Macbeth* is still relevant today, I provided openings where students could bring their own meaning into the class.

My study also builds on existing literature by showing how relevance can be embedded within curriculum rather than through individualized personalization for each student. Much of the scholarship on personal relevance that I reviewed examined instructional approaches that offered more extensive student choice or personalization than I was able to provide. Alamri et al.

(2020) described personalized learning in an online post-secondary setting in which learning goals, learning pathways, learner control, and assessments were tailored to students' needs, interests, goals, and prior experiences. Lee et al. (2020) described an interest-based curriculum organized around esports to connect to ELA, STEM, CTE, and SEL. Madison et al. (2019) used a journalistic approach to increase student interest and collaboration in a middle school ELA classroom. Rose and Bowen (2021) examined the effects of the CareerStart intervention on high school drop-out rates. In each of these studies, the researchers and teachers were able to design their own curriculum tailored to the needs of their students and their study. My most frequent critique of the existing scholarship was that their methods did not seem feasible in a realistic classroom. In the school district that MHS is a part of, each English 10 classroom is required to teach the same units from the same textbook. Due to this, as well as being a student teacher, I did not have nearly as much freedom as the educators and researchers in the literature I reviewed. Rather than design a curriculum that was relevant for my students, I had to find a way to make the existing curriculum relevant for them. I achieved this by building in repeated opportunities for students to connect the curriculum to their own lives, values, experiences, and to the world around them. This distinction is important because it reflects the ordinary constraints of many public secondary ELA classrooms. Teachers may not always be able to redesign an entire curriculum, offer students complete choice, or create an individualized pathway for each student; however, my study suggests that students can still be invited to make their own meaning from the work they are being required to do.

Limitations

One theoretical limitation is that I did not address all three needs outlined in self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci's (2008) self-determination theory rests on the idea that

humans have three basic needs that must be fulfilled in order for them to be intrinsically motivated: autonomy, competence, and motivation. My study used SDT primarily through the lens of relevance as an autonomy-supportive practice and did not directly measure the three needs separately. Because of this, my findings suggest that relevance was associated with increased engagement and participation, but they do not prove which SDT need was most responsible for this. Students may have shown situational engagement without necessarily developing a lasting change in motivation toward English. Relevance may have helped students engage in specific lessons, but that does not necessarily mean they internalized the value of English language arts as a subject overall. Due to this, I suggest that future research use tools that more directly measure autonomy, competence, and relatedness individually as well as internalization in order to determine which need is most strongly supported.

My study has a few methodological limitations, including the context and length of the study as well as the types of data collected. First, my study consisted of only one classroom at one high school; furthermore, the class size was fairly small with only 19 students. While the students of the class that was focused on for this study were fairly diverse, the findings may not extend to other classes, even others that I taught at the time as each class has its own unique personality and needs. Additionally, I recognize that a class of 19 students is quite small compared to most other high school classrooms. Due to this, the findings may not extend to classes with a greater number of students. In addition to class size, several students in this study experienced barriers to regular attendance. Irregular attendance creates its own set of barriers to truly accessing and engaging with one's education; students may disengage and lose motivation in class if their irregular attendance causes school to feel overwhelming. As I did not account for irregular attendance in my study, I suggest future research look into the relationship between

attendance and motivation and what role, if any, personal relevance plays in improving students' motivation in school. The length of the study also lends itself to limitations. This study was conducted in two units over the course of seven weeks. While I was able to do a pre, mid, and post-study survey to track students' perceived engagement and motivation over the course of the study, seven weeks is not enough time to track long-term changes. Future research could extend the study period to examine long-lasting changes in motivation.

One practical limitation of my study also lies in the class size. In addition to the sample size being too small for the findings to be generalizable, the small class size also provided me with some advantages that larger class sizes might not have and may have played a role in success. Due to having so few students, I was able to build very strong relationships with them individually and as a class. It would likely be more difficult to establish such strong relationships in larger classes. Many of the tasks that asked students to make personal connections required emotional safety and trust not only between the student and the teacher, but between the students as well. In a larger class or a class where students do not yet trust the teacher or each other, students may be less willing to make deep personal connections.

Conclusion

The purpose of this action research project was to better understand how integrating personal relevance into English language arts instruction influences students' motivation to engage with course content and how students perceive the relevance of instructional activities and texts when it is integrated into the course content. Through the lens of self-determination theory, I explored how inviting students to connect literature to their own experiences, emotions, beliefs, and observations of the world around them was associated with their engagement, participation, and interpretation of texts. From this study, I found that students appeared more

willing to volunteer, contribute to discussions, and remain actively involved during lessons when they were asked to connect texts and themes to ideas and issues that felt meaningful to them.

Students demonstrated stronger emotional and intellectual investment in classroom discussions when literary conflicts, themes, and characters could be connected to their own experiences and perspectives. Students also used their own connections as lenses through which to understand themes and issues within the texts they read. As I move forward in my teaching career, the findings from this study will continue to shape my instructional decisions as I plan to intentionally build opportunities for students to make personal connections into future units.

While relevance alone may not solve all motivational challenges in the classroom, this study suggests that helping students see meaningful connections between academic content and their own lives can be a powerful way to support participation and engagement.

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