Research Behind The Book Challenge:

After reading Donlyn Miller’s *The Book Whisperer* I was inspired to create a challenge that could work in my classroom. Miller teaches 6th grade reading. She challenges her students to read 60 books over the course of one year. In order to foster a love of reading she allows her student to choose whatever book they would like to read. She says, “The purpose of school should not be to prepare students for more school. We should be seeking to have fully engaged students now.” In order to fully engage her students Donlyn Miller surrounds them with high quality literature and the opportunity to use it.

Challenge Overview:

This modified challenge is designed to run for one semester. Students have a choice between a five, ten, or fifteen book challenge. Students work on their book challenge at home and at school during independent reading time.

Required Materials:
- Book Challenge Packet one for each student
- Book review binder with blank review sheets for students
- If you have access to technology you can give your students the option of recording their book reviews and then post them on School Tube.

Book Challenge in the Primary Classroom:

As the teacher you will preview the genre requirements for each challenge with the students whole group. During this process it is likely that you will be asked several questions about each challenge. Students work on their challenge independently and choose their own books based on each challenge’s individualized requirements.

For each book that is completed students have a checklist that they have to complete. They write the title and author of the completed book on the front of a small sheet of construction paper. On the back of the paper the students write their name. Once the paper is filled out it is displayed in the classroom book title forward. This gives students a sense of ownership when finishing their books. It will also help you keep track of all finished books. Students must also complete a book review which is kept in the library.

Students are given at least 45 minutes a day to read independently. This challenge is primarily practiced during my 90 minute literacy block. I used the book challenge in conjunction with my Daily five model. During my literacy block I have three sessions of Daily 5. In each session my students are given the choice of Read to self, work on writing, meet with teacher or respond to reading. If they are not meeting with their teacher they actively engaged in one of these other activities.
We meet in small groups twice a week for direct instruction. This is the time when we delve into the core of our learning. I utilize the format of interactive notebooking to teach my students literacy skills such as Theme and Figurative language that can be applied to all readings. At the beginning of the week I introduce a skill like Theme and then we practice it with a mentor text or short poem. Then when we meet the second time in the week we discuss their independent readings. This encourages them to practice using their reading skills on every book they read. It is more challenging for them and they are more engaged.

Key Differences:
The main difference between my challenge and Donlyn Miller’s challenge is that I give my students a choice in the degree of difficulty of their challenge. I allow them to choose between five, ten or fifteen books. I did this so all readers would be able to find a challenge that they were comfortable with. It was immensely successful. I was surprised that some of my avid readers picked the five book challenge while some of my reluctant readers picked the 15 book challenge.

As we work through the packet my students are also required to make a plan. We work together to figure out about how much time they should be reading independently every day for each challenge and they set goals according to this information. This reinforces the ownership aspect of the challenge.

The other key difference is that I require my students to meet certain genre requirements. Initially my students were hesitant because every challenge included and informational book but I was prepared for that. I added some new and exciting non-fiction to our classroom library and once those books were book talked I couldn’t keep them on the shelf.

Differentiation:
The challenge itself lends well to differentiated instruction because students are choosing their own books at their reading level and they are choosing which challenge to begin with. I have students who thought they would never finish a five book challenge and flew through it. I also allow my student to choose picture books if that is what they are interested in reading because I believe that these books will be a gateway to further reading.

Results:
The book challenge has been extremely successful and I plan on using it again next year. All of my students have become alive with the idea of reading for pleasure. I’m constantly hearing my students tell me that they love fifth grade because they can finally read what they want to read.
I have also seen a great amount of success with engaging reluctant readers. One student in particular comes to mind. He was a bright student who just didn’t enjoy reading. According to my assessment data his comprehension was on point or above grade level but he just didn’t enjoy reading. I took this as a personal challenge. I wanted to find one book that would interest him. After talking with him about his interests we decided that he would ask his parents if he could read *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. His parents were just excited he wanted to read anything and immediately got him the books. He was instantly captivated and has now finished that series and is almost finished with the *Gregor the Overlander* books, Collins other series. I hope that his new found passion for literature continues on but I am thinking about what books he might want to read next.

Another success I found with the book challenge this semester was with an unlikely friendship created because of the book *Hatchet*. There were two boys in my room one who had some behavioral issues, I will call him R and one who had a difficult time making friends, I will call him C. I turned R onto *Hatchet* very early on because of his love of survival stories and noticed that C was reading the same book. I suggested that they talk about what they liked about these books and a friendship was instantly created. Both boys have now finished the entire series and are virtually inseparable.

I didn’t realize until later how important this unlikely friendship was until after speaking with C’s mom at his annual 504 review. Apparently C had never had any friends before this year and the two boys have been inseparable. They talk on the phone daily, which is something that C had previously refused to do, and when they are not on the phone they are playing games or just being friends. The mom thanked me for bringing them together but I want to thank Gary Paulson.

The last big benefit I’ve seen with my challenge is my students willingness to read new books, not just fiction, but non-fiction too. There is an entire group of kids who have decided they are going to read every holocaust story in my library and the school’s library, and while that’s not my history standard, I am still overjoyed at their excitement for reading. I have seen improvement in every subject area as a result of this challenge. My students encounter every text knowing that they can use their reader skills to help them understand it. I believe that this attitude will help them in their future classwork as well as life. Overall this book challenge has been a huge success and while there are pieces I will change for next year I am so impressed with the outcome I’ve had this year.