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Fifth graders blog with preservice teachers to discuss literature

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Abstract

In this study, fifth grade students participated in a pen pal project with pre-service teachers where they blogged for eight weeks about the book, *A Long Walk to Water*, by Linda Sue Park. Partnerships were established to provide fifth grade students with an authentic audience in an effort to increase engagement in reading and writing. The authors posit that individualized instruction, access to an authentic audience, and the utilization of technology contributed to students' growth as readers, writers, and global citizens.



Fifth graders blog with preservice teachers to discuss literature

Writing workshop is a busy time in any classroom. The sounds of pencils scratch along the page, the computer keyboards click-clack, and the quiet hum of group discussions fills the air. Students work independently and collaboratively to brainstorm, draft, revise, edit, and publish their writing. However, this was not the case in Lindsay's (first author) fifth-grade classroom. In fact, many of the students were not engaged during writing workshop or reading workshop. Several struggled in writing and reading and needed ongoing encouragement and support. After exhausting everything in her repertoire, Lindsay brainstormed ways to increase motivation and engagement with her students. She contacted a colleague who was working with preservice teachers at a small, private, liberal arts university a few hours away. With the hopes of boosting engagement and providing students with an authentic literacy experience, they decided to partner preservice teachers with fifth graders to communicate on a blog to discuss their reading. The fifth graders were already familiar with the Kidblog website. By adding an outside audience, it was hoped they would be more engaged to communicate via writing to discuss a book.

After discussing the logistics of the study, Katie (the university liaison and second author) suggested the novel, *A Long Walk to Water*, by Linda Sue Park (2010). This book was selected since it was one of the required readings of children's literature for the preservice teachers and was appropriate for the fifth-grade students. The two main characters, Nya and Salva, were similar in age to the fifth graders. Additionally, this book is based on true events and fosters global awareness as readers learn about the challenges Nya and Salva face in South Sudan. Salva Dut, a Lost Boy, struggles to survive as he flees his war torn country. Due to the limited supply of clean water, Nya walks two hours twice a day to fetch and bring her family water. Upon learning that they would blog with college students, the fifth graders became very excited. They could not wait to begin communicating with their new buddies. Engagement was no longer an issue during reading and writing workshop. In fact, this became the

part of the day to which the students looked forward. This was clear to the teacher when, in the middle of math instruction, one of her students raised a hand and asked, “Can I get on the computer to see if my college buddy wrote back?”

The purpose of this article is to discuss what happened when the fifth-grade students and preservice teachers blogged with one another to discuss a commonly read text. In the literature review below, the authors examine how blogging can provide a communicative space that allows participants to interact with an active, authentic audience. Additionally, the importance of utilizing technology in the classroom is explored. By increasing motivation in the classroom, teachers can encourage student engagement. After the literature review, the authors describe the methodology, and then provide descriptive portraits of four of the fifth-grade participants. Next, the findings of the study are described and organized according to the broad themes including the fifth graders’ growth as readers, writers, and global citizens, as well as the benefits of technology integration inclusive of authentic audience and individualized instruction. Finally, the authors leave the readers with concluding thoughts.

Literature Review

Learning is social in nature (Graham & Harris, 2013; Vygotsky, 1986) and students’ language and communicative skills improve with regular communication (Vygotsky, 1986). Many teachers incorporate communication into daily reading and writing practices in order to provide students with a social learning environment. The construction of meaning is enhanced when students have the opportunity to interact with their peers to discuss a text. In fact, Harvey and Goudvis (2007) wrote, “Readers make meaning. But they can’t do it alone” (p. 15). One way to emphasize the communicative nature of reading and writing is to provide students with an authentic audience.

Templeton and Gehsmann (2014) reminded us that “teachers should not be the sole readers of everything students write” (p. 12). Instead, teachers should provide students with opportunities to engage in literacy activities with interested parties for a real purpose. Specifically, Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, and Nierlich (2008) described an authentic opportunity as one that allows students to “connect safely with real audiences” (p. 505). Boling et al. (2008) found that connecting with authentic audiences could result in “increased motivation and literacy engagement” (p. 505). Through interactions

with an authentic audience, students begin to realize that writing is a communicative process (Graham & Harris, 2013). With the increased access to technology, providing students with an authentic audience beyond the four walls of the classroom has never been more convenient.

The Common Core State Standards emphasize the integration of digital literacy skills within the curriculum (National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Researchers have determined several benefits to the use of technology in the classroom. These benefits include greater motivation as well as growth as readers and writers (Andes & Claggett, 2011; Mills & Levido, 2011). Writing online provides students with a sense of immediacy and access to authentic audiences from diverse regions (Tompkins, 2010). In addition, encouraging collaboration and motivation by providing students with digital forums to foster discussion can result in enhanced literacy and communication skills, and can support a sense of community (Larson, 2009).

Literacy teachers should increase motivation in the classroom in order to enhance engagement with reading and deepen comprehension (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011). Students' motivation to read and write increases when they have opportunities to collaborate with an authentic audience (Boling, et al., 2008; Witte, 2007) and access to digital tools (Boling et al., 2008; Tompkins, 2010). Mills and Levido (2011) found that even reluctant writers appeared to enhance their motivation to write when they had access to a digital forum.

Blogging as a Communication Medium

Blogging was selected as the students' communication medium for several reasons. First, the fifth-grade students were privy to a relatively quick response from their college buddies. Specifically, college buddies typically responded to the fifth-grade students within twenty-four hours. Furthermore, blogging allowed students access to 21st century digital tools and an authentic audience (Graham & Harris, 2013). Kidblog (<http://kidblog.org>) allows the teacher to establish privacy by controlling who has access to the class blog. Additionally, comments are first approved by the teacher before they are posted to the students' blogs. In this study, the college buddies were added to the existing fifth-grade class blog and the lines of communication were instantly established.

Methodology

The study took place over 11 weeks (see Appendix A for timeline) in the spring of 2013, in a suburban elementary school and a small, liberal arts university, both situated in the Southeastern United States. The fifth-grade participants were a diverse group comprised of 9 males and 12 females. Of the 21 participants, 9 were White, 11 students were African American, and 1 student was Hispanic. All student names included in this article are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

The project was originally designed for the elementary students and preservice teachers to blog weekly. Elementary students posted on Thursdays, and the preservice teachers responded by the following Tuesday. One weekly correspondence, comprised of two posts, was the minimum requirement. There were many weeks, however, that several students engaged in dialogic conversations, with the threaded discussions containing four to eight posts.

The preservice teachers checked the blogs regularly and responded when their buddies posted. The elementary students accessed the blog each week when the teacher took them to the computer lab. Additionally, students utilized the four classroom computers to check their blogs in the morning or at various times in the day when they finished other work. Responses were typically written within a day of posting.

All students received the same quality of online mentoring from their preservice teacher mentor. Before participating in this project, preservice teachers learned about formative assessment and comprehension instruction. They read *Strategies That Work* by Harvey and Goudvis (2007) and discussed ways they could foster these proficient reader strategies among their fifth-grade buddies based on the content of their reader responses on the blogs. Classroom time was dedicated to modeling and discussion of how to engage with the fifth graders in a mentoring role; preservice teachers were expected to read and post to the blogs outside of class time. Each preservice teacher was assigned two to three fifth-grade students.

These research sites and participants were selected based on the connection between Lindsay (the fifth-grade teacher) and Katie (the university liaison). After ongoing discussions, the two researchers determined this study could be beneficial for both groups. While providing fifth graders with an

authentic audience for written discussion about a commonly read text, this project gave the preservice teachers real world application of the skills they were learning in their teacher education program. Katie was the instructor of the literacy methods course in which the preservice teachers were enrolled. Due to the regular interactions and familiarity with the participants, the first two authors were participant observers in the fifth-grade and university classrooms respectively. Rachel, the third author, was an undergraduate research assistant and assisted with the data collection and analysis process.

This study was conducted to explore how digital communication with an authentic audience enhanced fifth graders' motivation and engagement with reading. Specifically, the researchers sought to address the following questions: (1) In what ways, if any, does the use of electronic pen pals to discuss a commonly read text influence fifth graders as readers, writers, and global citizens? (2) In what ways, if any, does technology enhance the participants' experiences as they participate in a project to discuss a commonly read text? To answer these questions, the researchers collected data including pre and post questionnaires from the fifth graders, semi-structured interviews with select participants at the conclusion of the study, and student writing samples in the form of blog posts.

After member checks were conducted to ensure that transcribed interview data was accurate, an ongoing thematic analysis was used to code and interpret the data (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998). The researchers used a constant comparative analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to individually examine patterns across multiple data sources. They communicated regularly to discuss the possible codes and categories that emerged from the corpus of data. When agreement was reached, the researchers reread the data to determine themes. Interrater reliability was employed to reach consensus on the emerging themes that became the basis of the findings. Using an interpretivist approach (Erikson, 1986), the basis of the findings was comprised from the strongest themes that emerged from the data.

The researchers decided that solely presenting themes would fail to tell the stories of the individual students. Due to space restrictions, the researchers were unable to describe each participant's entire experience. Therefore, they provide portraits of four of the fifth-grade participants, offering the readers a glimpse into these students' experiences. While these portraits are not intended

to be representative of the entire sample, the researchers aimed to share the stories in order to illustrate how the project influenced these individuals in unique ways. Following the in-depth description of these individual students' experiences, the researchers present the findings section which explores the overarching themes that developed across the fifth-grade participants.

Participant Portraits

Brooklyn

Brooklyn, a self-described “writer”, was already in the habit of writing to express her thoughts, compose songs, and create poems. Prior to participating in the project, Brooklyn’s grasp of collaboration, beyond the realm of seeking affirmation, was not apparent. She asked others if her writing was “good or not.” After participating in the project, Brooklyn appeared to recognize the power of writing as a means of communicating with others. She indicated that she wrote with her college buddy so they “could discuss the book that we were reading together.” Not only did Brooklyn adamantly declare that “writing is a very important skill,” but participating in the project seemed to increase her propensity to be reflective and specifically allowed her to “think harder about [her] reading and writing.”

Perhaps even more significant than Brooklyn’s development in the area of metacognition, is the growth in her awareness of global inequities. Prior to beginning the project, she possessed a surface-level understanding of different cultures as it related to the differences in food, people, and animals. Reading and discussing the book, *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2010) with her buddy allowed Brooklyn to move beyond her earlier understanding of “there are people different than us” to issues of inequality and the idea that some people are “suffering” and that “we can actually make a change in their lives.” Brooklyn progressed in her beliefs about the significance of learning about other cultures. After the project, she demonstrated her understanding that cultural awareness is important in order to “know how to treat [treat] people,” and to be able to “show them respect.” Brooklyn’s understanding of culture developed to include various levels of resource accessibility around the world and, despite being different and inhabiting vastly divergent areas of the world, people can have similar experiences.

The social aspect of this project was integral to Brooklyn’s enjoyment and progress. She believed that having a college buddy made the project fun.

However, Brooklyn did not see the social aspect as purely entertainment. She seemed to understand the educational benefits as well: “If you didn’t understand [the book] quite, the person could help you out.” She attributed much of her learning to the feedback she received from her buddy: “Mollie was there when I needed help with reading and writing.” Specifically, in one of her earlier posts, Brooklyn wrote a personal reaction, “I am really enjoying a Long Walk to Water” as well as a question, “Why would the old women [woman] just leave Salva? I know she needs water but take him with you. He is only 10.” In her comment, Mollie gave her personal reaction: “I am also really enjoying this book.” Then, she responded to Brooklyn’s question: “I was also upset that the old woman left Salva. She seemed to be doing it to project herself, but I would not want to be left if I was only 10 years old.” Mollie then prompted Brooklyn by asking, “Do you have any predictions?” In her post about the next set of chapters, Brooklyn indeed made a prediction, “Now Salva can not find his friend. He be dead or ate by a lion.” Mollie noticed the prediction and commented, “I agree with your prediction about Mariel (that he was probably taken by a lion).” This authentic communication and individualized instruction had an immediate effect on Brooklyn’s demonstrated reading skills.

Heath

Heath, a young man with a huge personality and an analytic mind, was the class comedian. His ability to showcase his quick, sarcastic wit was matched only by his penchant for contributing deeply resonating statements in class discussions. When asked, Heath readily shared his lack of interest in writing to communicate. Self-described as a talker, Heath recognized very early on that he was writing to a “real” person in his blog. Writing to communicate with an authentic audience appeared to make a difference in Heath’s effort. For example, his initial blog post consisted of bulleted, summarized points of the text. As Heath communicated with his college buddy, his writing skills appeared to improve. By his third blog post, Heath expressed his enjoyment of the story (“This book is cool”), made a prediction about the fate of Mariel (“I think he got mauled by a lion”), and asked his college buddy a question (“What do you think happened to him?”). Heath’s continued compassion for Salva was evident when he wrote about Salva’s group treating him poorly after the death of his uncle: “...treating Salva like he is nothing. That is so not right.”

Although Heath's self-perception of his reading and writing abilities was inconsistent, it is important to note that he felt that his abilities improved as a result of the pen-pal project: "I fill [feel] like a better reader and writer." Specifically, Heath stated, "I guess [the project] developed me, if you want to use that word, a little bit more into writing." Heath believed that utilizing technology improved his ability to write, noting "technology just helped us with writing better." When Heath used his iPod to compose and post a blog to his buddy, she noticed and complimented him on his correct spelling and use of punctuation. After reading his buddy's compliment, he attributed his success to his iPod. When interviewed, Heath stated, "If we were not using technology, maybe I would have more problems."

Ian

Ian, a talented and often mischievous young man, did not consider himself a writer at the onset of this project. When Ian engaged in writing, he felt "very bored" and typically "stopped in the middle." His low self-perception in the area of writing could be attributed to his fear of judgment. Ian wrote that he refused to share his writing because he doesn't "like people to look at my wrighting [writing] and I always feel like they're going to laugh at it." After participating in the project, Ian felt that his reading and writing skills improved, and he recognized writing as a form of communication.

Participation in the project positively impacted Ian's feelings regarding reading and writing. Ian explained that before the project, he "didn't really like" reading and writing. Yet after participating in the project, he stated, "reading and writing is more interesting now than before." Ian learned that "reading can be fun if you discus [discuss] it with someone that understands what you are saying." This is indicative of Ian's recognition that writing can be a powerful and engaging way to communicate with others.

Ian's family moved from South America when he was very young. His parents continued to speak Spanish in the home and Ian was fortunate to experience multiple opportunities to travel back to Colombia. Prior to participating in the project, Ian seemed focused on the language aspect of cultural diversity. He stated that it was important to learn about other cultures to "know what they are saying" and suggested a way to learn about other cultures would be to "learn the language." After the project, Ian's surface level understanding of cultures seemed to fade into the background. He asserted that

by reading *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2010) and discussing it with his teacher and his college buddy, he developed the understanding that different cultures can have different traditions.

Tanya

Tanya was a kind and slightly shy student who had a smile that lit up the classroom. Although Tanya had a hearing impairment, she readily asked questions and participated in class discussions. At the onset of the project, Tanya seemed to have a negative view of writing as a means of communication. She did not want to share her writing with anyone because “it’s personale [personal].” Tanya felt that she was not a writer and was not inspired to write stories. After participating in the pen-pal blogging project, Tanya’s self-perception as a writer changed drastically. She described herself as a writer because she was “easily inxspired [inspired] to be creatvof [creative]” and said that she enjoyed discussing the book, *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2010).

While Tanya’s love for reading did not appear to change over the course of the project, her beliefs about the role of discussion about text seemed to develop. Before beginning the project, Tanya felt that it was not helpful to talk to anyone about books being read, “because they might not understand.” After she blogged with her college buddy, Tanya felt that writing about the book with a college student was “fun” and made her “feel like a better writer.” In fact, she wrote, “it made me feel smart and exsiped [excited]” which indicated a change in her perception of sharing from not helpful to beneficial. Not only did Tanya’s appreciation for discussing books with others change, her college buddy, Kate, encouraged Tanya to notice the nuances of writers’ craft. For example, when they discussed the first three chapters of the novel, Tanya wrote, “I feel so sorry for Nya it is horrible to have to drink dirty water. I will have a food drive for clean water. I think Salva will go with the to men and stay them because they are the same tribe.” Kate responded to Tanya’s comments and asked some questions regarding the text as well, “Did you have a part of the first chapters that you really liked, or that you really did not like?” and “Do you like the way it is written?” Tanya, after reflecting about the chapters once more, wrote back, “And I liked the way it was written the author just maded it feel like you was there with them.”

Before blogging about *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2010), Tanya admitted that while she did not know much about other cultures, she realized it

was an important concept after participating in the project. By recognizing that “girls had to wear [wear] big bowls on their heads to get the water,” Tanya deepened her understanding of diverse cultures. She appeared to recognize that new skills could be learned from other cultures: “You can learn how to weave baskets, pick berries [berries], or sing like people [people] in different parts of the world.” Tanya also stated that it is important to learn about diversity and cultures across the globe.

The element of technology seemed to make the experience more enjoyable for Tanya. In fact, she wrote that it was “fun to write down what you want to say to them.” The authors posit that it was an effective way for Tanya to communicate. Instead of struggling to participate in an oral conversation due to her hearing difficulties, she was able to engage in written dialectic responses. She read the posts with ease and commented back with confidence that her thoughts would be understood.

Findings

In this study, the authors investigated how participation in the shared literature blogging experience affected fifth-grade students. While there were several positive outcomes observed at the culmination of the project beyond the intended goal of increasing students’ motivation, the authors were specifically interested in how the use of electronic pen pals to discuss a commonly read text might influence fifth graders as readers, writers, and global citizens. The authors also wanted to determine how technology might enhance the fifth graders’ experiences as they participate in a project to discuss a commonly read text. The findings have been organized under two broad themes: (1) Fifth graders’ growth as readers, writers, and global citizens, and (2) The benefits of technology integration inclusive of authentic audience and individualized instruction.

Fifth Graders’ Growth as Readers, Writers, and Global Citizens

Growth as Readers

Before the project began, many of the students had negative perceptions of themselves as readers. Several of the fifth graders’ self-perceptions as readers improved over the duration of the project. For example, Beth, who initially did not like to read, shared that she enjoyed reading after

participating in the exchange. Beth's college buddy helped her with reading strategies when she "gave [her] examples of how [she] should read the book." Not only did students' self-perceptions as readers seem to improve, there was a noticeable change in the level of comprehension for several of the students, as assessed through blog posts. Beth's improvement in her reading comprehension became evident when she reported that she began to think about what was going to happen next in a story. Her predictive thinking was facilitated by her buddy asking questions, such as "Do you think they will stay where they are for much longer?" and "What do you think will happen next in the story?"

Like Beth, Ryan's comprehension seemed to improve as a result of the blogging project. Ryan's posts developed from simple summaries to more elaborate responses. By asking Ryan questions, such as "Can you imagine how uncomfortable it must be to have as many bites as Salva did?" and "What do you think the visitors are going to do in Nya's village?" Ryan began to demonstrate his understanding of the text by asking questions and making statements, such as:

"What would you do if you were being forced into the Gilo river?"

Put yourself in Salva's shoes.

Would you be scared if you were walking with some boys and 1,000 of them died?

I would be terrified if I were Salva."

Ryan's thoughtful questions and empathetic reaction demonstrate his growth as a reader throughout his interactions with his blogging buddy. Other students' comprehension developed as well.

Brooklyn, from the beginning of the project, was adept at empathizing with the characters. In one of her posts, she wrote, "If I was Salva I would be scared out of my mind." She also wrote that she agreed with one of Salva's statements, "Doing something is better than doing nothing." Mollie, Brooklyn's buddy, complimented her for her connections and also stated:

"I love that you are quoting from the book, too! In the future, also put the page numbers of that quotation, that way you can go back and find that part! For example, I really liked all of the descriptions about

building the boats out of reeds. I felt like I could picture exactly what they were doing on page 44 when they were laying out the reeds.”

In a later post Brooklyn wrote, “They will have to make it to Kenya ‘one step at a time’ page 82. It took them 1 ½ years.” Mollie’s individualized instruction, and Brooklyn’s authentic discussion with her, seemed to contribute to Brooklyn’s growth as a reader. She began to not only pay attention to how the text made her feel, but she also noticed the nuances of text and was able to weave supporting evidence into her posts.

Growth as Writers

A similar trend was observed in the area of writing. Several students did not view themselves as writers before interacting with their college buddies on the blog. Beth initially noted that she was not a writer but after participating in the project, she referred to herself as a writer stating that she wrote at “[her] house and at school.” Beth explained that her “favorite part [about blogging with her college buddy] was when she tells me to add more details and stuff because I know I needed that stuff too.” In addition to her growing self-perception as a writer, Beth’s writing skills seemed to improve under the tutelage of her college buddy. Beth reported that her buddy told her to add details and that her buddy was “really, really happy and excited” when she included details. Access to an authentic audience made a difference with Beth. She immediately received validation for adding details because her buddy noticed and commented about the improvement. Beth also stated she was proud to be writing in “huge chunks.” In early posts, she primarily wrote summaries and surface-level questions, such as “Now I am going to talk about Salva and he made a new friend name Marial and they have some things in common,” and “Are you glad that they have some things in common and he met a friend? I am.” However, in succeeding posts, Beth was doing more than writing a lengthier piece. She was writing more sophisticated and thoughtful responses to her buddy. Beth heeded her college buddy’s suggestions, such as “add more details,” and “write a little bit more after your sentences. Don’t just write a little, write some more.” She recalls that she “wrote paragraphs. I went like Nya and then I wrote that part. Then I wrote Salva and I wrote his part.” Specifically, she expressed opinions (“I think that Salva needs to hold hope that his family is still alive”), asked thoughtful questions (“Why is Salva’s group

treating him poorly?”), and made predictions (“I think Salva is going to get through it”).

In addition, students’ writing skills appeared to improve. After seeing the responses from their buddies, several of the students’ responses grew from bulleted, summarized points to longer, more thorough responses. Elliott’s pen-pal noticed that the quality of his responses grew throughout the project. He began with simple summaries and opinions: “I think that Salva will go and hide in the desert [until] the war has stopped.” Through blogging with his buddy, Elliott developed to writing more reflective, personal responses such as:

“But he never gave up, he still had hope in his heart. Because of that, people in Sudan now have a better life. They have schools and water. I wonder if the war is over or if it is still going on.”

“I liked how the book ended because it said how to help [help] him so are you going to help him? I’m going to help by not spending my money on a lot of things and not taking long showers [not take long showers] are you?”

Additionally, Elliott was able to form an opinion and support it with evidence from the text in his last letter: “I like this book so much. It is a good book about someone that lost everything. It is sad but it gets better.” The skill of supporting an opinion with textual evidence is required for the Common Core State Standards. Specifically, ELA-Literacy W.5.9 states that a fifth grader should be able to, “draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research” (National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The role of ongoing communication with an authentic audience fostered students’ development of ideas and enhanced their comprehension. The college buddies’ responses provided probing for deeper textual understanding, while implicitly modeling a well-developed written response to convey their own thinking about what they read.

Growth as Global Citizens

Students also seemed to experience growth as global citizens. Prior to participating in the pen-pal project, many of the students believed that citizens across the world were “just like us.” Through the project, students developed their understanding of cultural diversity. Specifically, Briella learned that “being

different is good.” She also expressed empathy with the idea that it is important to know about other cultures “so that you can know how other people feel.”

Anna learned that “It’s better when there aren’t that many people that are the same. There are a lot more people that are different.” She added that we can “learn from other people.” Tanyesha discovered the importance of understanding other cultures so that she would not “disrespect them.” She stated, “All people are different” and proclaimed that being different was a “good thing” because “everybody don’t [doesn’t] have to be like everybody.”

Several of the students were so moved by the novel that they wanted to help. Brooklyn learned that there are people in the world that are suffering and wanted to make a positive change in other peoples’ lives. Leila determined that it was important to know about other cultures in order to help those that need it. The fifth graders seemed to recognize that there are many other people in this world and that we all share a responsibility as global citizens.

Participation in this project fostered a desire to help others. With raised interest about the struggles of the people in South Sudan, the fifth graders were inspired to take action and offer support. Charged with a desire to help, they brainstormed ways to raise money which included establishing a charity, eliciting donations, participating in the Water for Sudan fundraiser, and even sending people out in the community to help. Brooklyn commented within the blog posts “there are people still to this day who have muddy water. We could send gallons of water. Some of this is a sad story.” As Cassidy stated, “I also think [the book] did not just inspire you and I, but a lot of other people that read it.” The powerful messages elicited from this book offered students a conduit for change and a better world.

Benefits of Technology Integration

This finding addresses which ways, if any, technology enhanced the students’ experiences during participation in this project. The researchers found that the use of technology provided the fifth graders with an authentic audience to blog with and discuss literature. As a result of communicating specifically with preservice teachers, the fifth-grade students were provided with individualized instruction through this digital space. Furthermore, as 21st century citizens, the fifth graders noted additional benefits of technology in this project. They enjoyed typing their responses on the computer versus

handwriting, the immediacy of the digital response, and the ability to extend their reading experience through Internet research.

Authentic Audience

Access to an authentic audience beyond the teacher appeared to have an impact on students' motivation to read and respond to the text. Leila wrote that she felt "good" about blogging because she got to "communicate with the collage [college] student." In addition, one of Cassidy's favorite aspects of the project was, "That we were doing it with a partner, and not just with you [the teacher]... We wouldn't have really cared that much probably either." Interacting with an authentic audience may have also affected writing convention skills. Tanyesha heeded her college buddy's advice to space her words, which improved the readability of her posts. As Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) noted, "Editing matters when we go from private to public writing. If kids don't have real opportunities to go public, there's no compelling reason for them to proofread their work" (p. 67). Paige's college buddy noticed changes in the structure of her posts as the project progressed. Specifically her posts became more organized over time. Cassidy began to format her letters after her buddy's example. Her posts shifted from an informal free write of thoughts at the onset of the project to a formal letter format by the end.

Many of the fifth graders seemed to be deeply invested in the suggestions offered. Brooklyn's college buddy, Mollie, reported that Brooklyn responded to her suggestions. For instance, when she asked Brooklyn to be more specific, Brooklyn gave an example of a statement that she agreed with. Similarly, Leila's buddy noticed that her first posts "always seemed to be shallow, but when she responded to my comments on a post, those comments were deeper and much more focused." The fact that fifth graders knew they were writing to communicate with an authentic audience, who would read and respond to their thoughts, seemed to positively impact their engagement in the project.

Individualized Instruction

The preservice teachers provided individualized, targeted instruction to their two to three fifth graders based on formative data collected from the blog posts. Their suggestions and feedback were implemented nearly instantaneously. Early in the project, Heath reported that his buddy suggested he should be more consistent with his use of punctuation. When he used his

iPod, his buddy noticed that he was using proper punctuation. After reading the compliment on his post, Heath immediately ran to his teacher and reported that his buddy complimented him. Beth liked her buddy's suggestions and found the feedback beneficial. In fact, she told her teacher that if she got something wrong, her buddy "help[ed] her out."

The instructional suggestions varied from more logistical suggestions all the way to what some would term "life lessons." The college buddies taught the fifth graders a lot about writing conventions. For instance, Jaden's buddy suggested that he use capital letters at the beginnings of sentences. Brandon's buddy taught him to space out paragraphs. Paige's buddy helped her realize that "everyone is good at writing when they try." Finally, Tanya's buddy shared that "It's ok to make mistakes."

The college buddies met the fifth graders at their instructional levels. When students were ready for more complex instruction, their buddies gently nudged them within their Zones of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Tanyesha felt that "talking with someone older than [her] just made it easier." Stephanie reported that her buddy helped her become a better writer by having her write details as well as how to incorporate her feelings.

The college buddies were purposeful in their instruction. For example, Cassidy's buddy taught her to be a strategic reader by suggesting he reread the text to make predictions. This most likely enhanced Cassidy's reading abilities as demonstrated by the evidence that she made predictions and monitored them to confirm or revise accordingly. Instruction was both explicit and implicit. In fact, there were times in which the fifth graders indirectly learned from their college buddies' modeling of proper writing conventions. Specifically, Cassidy's initial posts were written in an informal manner; however, the format of her letters began to mirror those of her college buddy's as the project progressed.

Technology and 21st Century Citizens

The utilization of technology added another dimension to this study. As 21st century citizens, students seemed to appreciate the speed of blogging, the alternative to handwriting, access to digital tools, and the ability to conduct research on the web. They enjoyed the immediacy that blogging offered. In fact, Jon discussed the idea that handwriting letters meant that it would have taken longer. Blogging allowed him to "just press the button and it'll be there." Briasia

stated she enjoyed writing to the college students because “it[s] just like texting back and forth and I like to text.”

Several students mentioned their handwriting made it difficult for others to read. Jaden specifically discussed his appreciation of typing and being on the computer because his buddy “wouldn't even get to read it! Because I can't write! I can't write neat!” Removing the stress of being misunderstood due to handwriting may have enabled him to concentrate more fully on his response to the text.

The fifth graders enjoyed the convenience of the blog and the digital tools such as spell check. Tanyesha explained, “... the word, if it was wrong, it would pop up... the spelling.” Anna liked that she could reach the blog anywhere. She specifically stated that she enjoyed being able to access the blog at home instead of “just having to do it at school.”

Not only did the students appreciate the immediacy of the communication and access to computer tools such as spell check, they also enjoyed that they were able to research online. Access to the web allowed students to research information about Salva Dut, the inspiration behind the character in the book. In fact, after engaging in self-regulated research and finding Salva's website, Water for South Sudan (<http://www.waterforsouthsudan.org/>), Beth was excited to share the website and her newfound learning with her classmates.

There were several facets of technology that students enjoyed. The fifth-grade students mentioned benefits of technology such as the celerity of blogging, the ability to type instead of hand-write posts, access to digital tools, and the ability to conduct research. Heath summed it up succinctly by stating in his interview that “the technology just helped us with writing better.”

Conclusion

This project initiated as a way to increase reading and writing motivation in the fifth graders. Lindsay wanted her students to understand the power of writing to communicate by providing her students with an authentic audience. The traditional classroom where the teacher chooses every book, leads all conversations, and requires little student involvement (Larson, 2009) is becoming less and less relevant as our students transcend into the 21st century. Students deserve a forum in which they are able to create, communicate, and

receive feedback from a diverse and authentic audience (Mills & Levido, 2011). By purposefully choosing a powerful text, fostering communication, and providing students with access to digital tools, teachers can provide students with authentic and powerful reading and writing experiences. Providing students with these opportunities can help to foster lifelong readers and writers.

Implications from this research suggest the need for technology integration into literacy learning as a way to expand students' opportunities for using digital tools and engage with a wider audience. While partnerships in relation to this project included pairing fifth-graders with college students studying to become teachers, a variety of audiences may be considered. For instance, students can blog with peers from across the hall, around the country, or even around the world. The blogs can be used as a way to communicate with parents and family both near and far. Furthermore, blogs can be incorporated to connect with community members including experts in related fields that students are learning about.

It is the hope of the authors that this study can serve as a catalyst for further research. Future studies could explore a similar type of online interaction between preservice teachers and students from more diverse populations and across different grade levels. An additional avenue for exploration could examine how greater access to technology might affect the dialogic nature of the online conversations. For example, how would one-to-one access influence communication? While this study was conducted on a small scale, it has potential to inform educators by demonstrating the importance of providing students with authentic experiences with technology in order to foster literacy engagement and learning.

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Jan 7 5 th grade – initial questionnaires	Jan 8 Preservice teachers – sign forms	Jan 9 Preservice teacher – initial interviews	Jan 10 5 th grade – post introduction letters	Jan 11
Jan 14	Jan 15 Preservice teachers – respond to instruction	Jan 16	Jan 17	Jan 18 5 th grade – Post letter #1 (ch 1-3)
Appendix A: A Long Walk to Water – Reader Response Pen Pal Blogging Schedule				
Jan 21	Jan 22 Preservice teachers – respond to letter #1 (ch 1-3)	Jan 23	Jan 24	Jan 25 5 th grade – Post letter #2 (ch 4-6)
Jan 28	Jan 29 Preservice teachers – respond to letter #2 (ch 4-6)	Jan 30	Jan 31	Feb 1 5 th grade – Post letter #3 (ch 7-9)
Feb 4	Feb 5 Preservice teachers – respond to letter #3 (ch 7-9)	Feb 6	Feb 7	Feb 8 5 th grade – post letter #4 (ch 10-12)
Feb 11	Feb 12 Preservice teachers – respond to letter #4 (ch 10-12)	Feb 13	Feb 14	Feb 15 5 th grade – Post letter #5 (ch 13-15)
Feb 18	Feb 19 Preservice teachers – respond to letter #5 (ch 13-15)	Feb 20	Feb 21	Feb 22 5 th grade – Post letter #6 (ch 16-18)
Feb 25	Feb 26 Preservice teachers – respond to letter #6 (ch 16-18)	Feb 27	Feb 28	Mar 1 5 th grade – Continue working on final culminating letter
Mar 4 Preservice teachers Spring Break	Mar 5 5 th grade – Continue working on final letter	Mar 6	Mar 7	Mar 8 5 th grade – Post final letter
Mar 11	Mar 12 Preservice teachers – respond to final letter	Mar 13 Post questionnaires and interviews	Mar 14 Post questionnaires and interviews	Mar 15 Post questionnaires and interviews
Mar 18 Post questionnaires and interviews	Mar 19 Preservice teachers Final Paper Due	Mar 20 Post questionnaires and interviews	Mar 21 Post questionnaires and interviews	Mar 22 Post questionnaires and interviews