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Stepping Into Science Fiction: Understanding the Genre

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STEPPING INTO SCIENCE FICTION

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Abstract

This manuscript focuses on fifth graders' understanding of science fiction. It is argued that it is necessary for students to understand both reading strategies and the key elements of a genre for comprehension. Students read *The Giver* within literature circles and conversation and written responses about the book were used for analysis. It was found that students often focused on the same aspects of text and noticed several elements of science fiction.



Your reading processes vary by genre. Reading is genre-specific. (Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012, p. 35)

What exactly is science fiction and how can a reader figure that out? Students in a fifth grade classroom explored multiple genres throughout their school year by talking and writing about each as they read books within the genre classifications. While it might appear that recognizing the essential qualities of a genre is not that difficult, this was not evidenced as the students explored science fiction.

Literature Review

Much of the research on reading is targeted to strategy instruction, but not necessarily strategy instruction connected to genres (Dewitz, Jones, & Leahy, 2009; Duke & Pearson, 2002). Early strategy-focused research supports the importance of strategy instruction for student comprehension (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992). Moreover, Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) discovered that skilled readers use strategies as they read, after they learn and practice them with teacher scaffolding.

Shifting a bit to include the text with a strategy, Almasi and Hart (2011) refined ideas surrounding strategy instruction and warned that short-term instruction in strategies might not transfer to all contexts for reading. They suggested teachers offer students opportunities to talk about the strategies they use, and in which situations they were used, so that a specific reading goal could be met. “Early studies focused on teaching students the strategy rather than teaching students to be strategic” (p. 253). They suggested that teachers support students in recognizing the intention that is required to successfully navigate text with an understanding of the variability of text genre.

Almasi and Hart (2011) also talk about the importance of considering the reader, the context, and the text when students read. They suggest that teaching students a strategy is complicated by the need to determine which strategy is most appropriate for the reading task. Thus, just knowing about strategies and randomly using them did not benefit the readers. Similarly, Duke and Pearson (2002) suggest that genre is important for comprehension; however, they do not fully explore how students and teachers might accomplish this. In general, most of the descriptions of strategy instruction do not focus on specific genres, rather, they recognize the differences in comprehension based on text structure (Almasi & Hart, 2011; Duffy, 2003; Duke & Pearson, 2002), but the potential differences are not explored.

Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, and Martin (2012) recently wrote about the importance of genre to comprehension. They acknowledge, “Readers use different processes to read different kinds, or genres, of text” (p. 34). Further, they offer suggestions for helping students recognize broad categories of genre, such as stories, dramas, poetry, and nonfiction. However, they do not dig into the differences within the broad genre categories. Similarly, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for fifth grade indicate that students are expected to read and comprehend stories, dramas, and poetry, but they do not identify issues surrounding genres under these umbrellas. While the CCSS standards also indicate that students should explain how a series of chapters contribute to the overall structure of a story, they do not mention the expectations surrounding various genres (www.corestandards.org). It appears that within the research on strategies and within the Common Core expectations, there is an assumption that students will understand the unique qualities of each genre and how its structure contributes to the meaning as they utilize various reading strategies.

Cadden (2011), however, describes how readers use genre understandings to set expectations for reading. These understandings help them as they navigate text. For instance, when reading fantasy they would know that magical elements would be present. This research suggests that strategies and genre both contribute to student comprehension.

When working with intermediate students, we noticed they were not necessarily aware of the unique qualities of each genre. We provided opportunities for students to learn about mysteries, before reading and writing mysteries by having them explore the genre and create a chart of key characteristics. Then, as they read mysteries independently, they continued to add to their chart expanding their knowledge of the genre (Youngs & Barone, 2007). This explicit knowledge helped them construct meaning within a genre, as the genre was the roadmap of what might be contained within the pages. This work suggests that, “It is important to discuss the many reading strategies that children need, and it is equally important to ask particular questions of the text” (p. 55). We would add that it is important to connect the strategies with genre, so that students can better select the strategy that best benefits a particular construction of meaning. For instance, rereading for clarity best suits mysteries; information may be passed over without much attention on a first reading, only to later be discovered that it was critical to the plot.

Science Fiction

Separating fantasy from its subgenre science fiction is difficult (Kiefer, 2007). Fantasy often creates a world that never existed, while science fiction creates a world that might occur in the future, particularly in dystopian novels. Kiefer (2007) writes about the content of science fiction, “Writers must construct a world in which scientific frontiers of genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, space exploration, or robotics have advanced beyond our present knowledge” (p. 389). She further discusses the value of science fiction as a means to “develop children’s imagination and intuition as well as exercises their speculative and improvisational abilities” (p. 390). Thus, science fiction allows students to interpret characters’ motivations within the characters’ world and use the reading strategies related to inferential understanding and rereading.

The key characteristics of the genre of science fiction are:

- Science fiction is often based on scientific principles and/or technology.
- Science fiction may suggest predictions about life in the future.
- Science fiction often deals with aliens or people from other worlds.
- Science fiction provides comments about important societal issues.

In our research, we define science fiction as narrative text focused on the future and, in particular, “Scientific possibilities that might affect societies of human or alien beings, or both” (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008, p. 120).

The book we chose for students to explore was *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) as this book is “...a rich source for analysis and interpretation” (Stewart, 2007, p. 22), and a classic example of the science fiction genre. Rather than selecting a newer science fiction text, we used *The Giver* as a foundational text that would lead to further exploration of more current science fiction works.

Latham (2002) suggested that one of the themes within *The Giver* is centered on childhood versus adulthood where roles are critical, rigid, and enforced. Childhood benchmarks are defined by events such as, at age 9 children receive bicycles. The essential age for children in this community is 12, which is when they receive their lifetime role. Moreover, the society in which the characters live is perfect and considered utopian, or as an extended childhood where no problems exist (Stewart, 2007). All members of the society, with the exception of

The Giver and later Jonas, are drugged so that they do not make bad choices by not making any choices at all. They lack memories of the past and exist in a continuous present. Within the society, the Committee of Elders makes and enforces all rules. Interestingly, they have removed all color, even racial color, and all members of the community share whiteness or sameness. One color that Lowry does name, however, is the color of *The Giver's*, Jonas's, and Gabriel's eyes, which are blue, unlike the other members of this society. She offers eye color as a hint to a special connection among these characters.

Stewart (2007) describes *The Giver* as a complex text since the ending is left open with possibilities. (Lowry has written 3 sequels so this openness is closed if students pursue the other books.) Stewart notes that this text is challenging for young readers to comprehend because it is filled with ambiguity, as there are multiple themes interwoven throughout this book, such as, the differences (or lack of differences) between childhood and adulthood, conformity, censorship, deception, and community.

Our work was guided by how students embrace the complexity of learning about and comprehending a specific genre, in this case science fiction. We chose science fiction because students indicated their preference for fantasy. We believe students were prepared through their fantasy reading to explore the complexities of science fiction. In this Study, we explore how fifth grade students comprehend and come to understand the genre of science fiction through the reading of *The Giver*. We accomplished this objective by listening to conversations centered on the book and analyzing the students' daily writing about it.

We responded to the issue recognized by Almasi and Hart (2011), that most researchers consider the end product of comprehension but don't document the comprehension journey of students by analyzing all of the talking and writing throughout the entire book study to document students' meaning journeys. Simultaneously, we incorporated the suggestions of Johnston (2004) and invited students to respond to questions like, "What did you discover?" or "How did the author let you know?" or "What kind of text is this?" in their conversations. The understandings of this genre came from students. We participated with them in this journey not as the experienced other, but as co-travelers

Methods

We used a qualitative methodology to explore student understandings of science fiction (Merriam, 1998), as our purpose was to describe their awareness of

this genre and the meanings they created (Shank, 2006). We engaged the majority of the fifth grade students in one classroom in a large, urban elementary school to learn about student understandings of this genre throughout their reading of *The Giver*.

Researcher Backgrounds

The two authors engaged in this endeavor. The teacher, Becky, participated daily and joined the student literature groups as a participant observer. She nudged students to move beyond noticing an event, and shifting to an interpretation of it. To accomplish this goal, she organized students into groups so they could participate in the reading, writing, and talking about each book routinely throughout the school year. Student groups changed as books changed and the jobs that students were responsible for within a group also varied by genre. For instance, for science fiction, she asked students to participate in certain responsibilities such as science fiction fact finder, summarizer, and journaler (Daniels, 2002).

The roles of science fiction fact finder and journaler (created by Becky) were critical to this study as both of these roles directly targeted science fiction. The expectations for the science fiction fact finder were to describe artifacts, language, or events that suggested this book was science fiction. The journaler was expected to find interesting points in the text and offer opinions as to why the author included these events. The person responsible for this role had to step into the shoes of the author and try to understand the importance of events and why they were placed where they were.

Becky assigned each role carefully. Directors had to be strong readers as they developed complex questions and had to be good managers of their groups making sure that each student participated. Summarizers were the least sophisticated readers in each group as their responsibility kept them grounded in the text. The other roles were assigned to the remaining students based on individual student preferences.

Direct and Informal Instruction of Genre

At the beginning of the year, Becky went over genres of literature with her students. This introduction was brief, as each genre would be explored in detail during the year. She also met with students daily in their literature circles and responded to their conversations. For instance, during the science fiction explorations, she might say, "That is a very interesting idea about science fiction, tell us again how that supports and identifies this book as science fiction?" She

then wrote responses to their daily literature circle jobs where she might ask, “So why is this idea important to understanding science fiction?” Periodically, as students explored a book, they convened as a class. Becky led students in developing understandings. For instance, on one day, she asked the students to consider possible themes in *The Giver* and how they discovered these themes. This whole class investigation was then followed with groups of students exploring relevant themes for *The Giver*.

Participants

Twenty-seven fifth graders participated in the study. The only children excluded were three students who were struggling readers and could not read *The Giver* independently. These students also left class during literature circles to receive special education support. The twenty seven participants varied in reading achievement; some were above grade level, the majority were at grade level, and about five students were slightly below grade level. The students all attended a large elementary school, approximately 1000 students from kindergarten to fifth grade with varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Gender was almost balanced with 14 boys and 13 girls.

Data Collection

Literature Circles

Students participated in literature circle instruction daily. There were five groups with 5 to 6 students in each group. During their exploration of science fiction, the literature circle jobs changed to reflect the genre. The jobs and descriptions were as follows: director, a person who created questions to guide discussion; science fiction fact finder, a person who researched science fiction facts that they noticed in their reading, described why the author included it, and how it supports science fiction; summarizer, a person who summarized the day’s reading; journaler, a person who explored events and tried to explain why the author included them and what was their significance to the story, investigator, a person who researched interesting details, including interesting vocabulary, and connector, a person who made a personal connection to the text.

Once a role was established for a student, she/he continued with this role throughout the reading of the book. This continuity allowed each student to become proficient in a role and allowed students who were becoming independent in reading to complete a more close-to-text expectation such as the summarizer. More proficient readers might be the director or journaler. Students

met in class daily for literature circles (approximately one hour) and read at home where they completed their literature circle job to share with students the following day. During their in-class meetings, they discussed their written responses, with each member of the group participating in discussion as triggered by the responses.

As we listened to the conversations during literature circles, we made notes about the central ideas that students discussed. We tracked when a topic consumed numerous literature circles, such as when students faced the real meaning of “release”. We served as the recorders of their conversations so we could learn how they collaborated to understand science fiction.

Journals and Final Posters

Each student wrote a daily response based on his/her literature circle job. We collected and dated all responses for this analysis. There were 263 total responses that were analyzed. We also used the students’ group posters to examine its more abstract qualities. These posters shared ideas about their interpretations of the themes within *The Giver* as they provided evidence of their understanding of this genre and their ability. For each identified theme, students located text support to verify the appropriateness of their theme.

Data Analysis

Both researchers examined student responses and considered them in relation to the conversations of the students. The conversations were used as confirmatory evidence when a theme was discovered in the written responses. We initiated our analyses by considering all of the written responses from the first day to the last. On our first pass through the written responses, we sorted out those that directly connected to the science fiction genre. Each response was identified by topic and frequency tables were created to recognize dominant themes (see Appendix). The majority of this analysis centered on the journaler and science fiction fact finder roles as they were most directly linked to the genre of science fiction. Although other responses were interesting, they did not often directly lead to an understanding of the science fiction genre. Rather, they focused on understanding the plot, the characters, or interesting vocabulary. We categorized these responses by topic and created a frequency table to determine consistent responses.

We then brought in observational notes from literature circle conversations and connected students’ talk with their writing. We determined when written responses and talk overlapped; this synchronicity showcased when students

targeted a topic they believed to be important (Shank, 2006). This data was used to further refine our initial understandings. Finally, we considered the responses as a journey and looked at the first responses to the last to determine the shifts in student understandings of the book and its genre.

Results

While it was evident that students developed in their understandings of science fiction, it was not an easy process for them. Throughout their reading, they were constantly nudged by Becky to consider their ideas in relation to science fiction. For example, she chatted with, and wrote to them about explaining why their evidence supported science fiction. Students often resorted to saying, “It is futuristic” or “It is different from today.” While we had hoped that students might offer more sophisticated responses about science fiction, especially as they neared the end of the book, they held steady with their earlier descriptions. This consistency in response, we believed, was due to their limited exposure and naïve understanding of science fiction. However, they did capture the identity of science fiction being about a future world and different from their current life experiences.

We also noted that the separate literature circles, and students within a literature circle, most often focused on the same science fiction element or aspect of the plot. We were surprised at the overwhelming convergence in responses rather than variability among groups. This result is interesting as students in each literature circle did not share responses or chat about the book with students in other groups. Moreover, the majority of reading and writing was completed as homework, away from the potential influence of other students.

The Journey

The Beginning

Students recognized the following elements of science fiction in their first responses: There was only one mirror in the community; light colored eyes were rare; they called stuffed toys comfort items; and there were rules about ages, a bike at 9 and a life assignment at 12. We noted convergence in responses centered on these elements. For example, a director asked – “Based on the text, why do you think Jonas is feeling worried about his job now that he is almost 12?” Another director asked, “What do you know about Jonas’s life style?” She went on to describe, “He had many rules to follow and things are opposite of the way they

are today.” An investigator examined what a comfort object might be and learned that, “it is an object to provide psychological comfort.” Another student questioned why age was not important after 12. He decided, “After 12 they wouldn’t need anything. The only thing that is important is the training they receive when they are 12.”

One director urged her group to “think about what examples of science fiction were in the chapter?” Her responses converged with the science fiction elements that students discovered – “not many mirrors, light colored eyes are rare, and stuffed animals are comfort objects.”

The science fiction fact finders and journalers focused on the same elements. Figure 1 is an example of a fact finder response in which he targets the issue of limited mirrors. He explained this choice for science fiction as “it is futuristic and the community is strict.” One of the journaler responses identified eye color, an element that students were curious about throughout the book. They determined these characters were related, as they were the only ones with blue eyes.

This scene is important because Lily notices that Jonas and Gabriel have the same light colored eyes. Everyone else in the community has dark colored eyes. This scene is important because it makes the reader think that Jonas and Gabriel have a connection.

Figure 1 Science Fiction Fact Finder Entry

FIND: I found that it’s forbidden to have more than one mirror in the community. This is found on page 21.

HOW IS THIS DIFFERENT: This is different because we have mirrors practically everywhere. We have them in bathrooms, stores, malls, dressing rooms. My sister can’t even go 2 hours without looking in a mirror. We even have mirrors in schools.

INCLUDE: I think the author included this in the book because to show how strict the community is.

SUPPORT OF GENRE: This supports the book because it’s futuristic. It’s more futuristic, and we don’t do that today. Also it shows the community is strict.

Other students worried about the strictness of the society and Jonas's rule breaking. They wrote about Jonas teaching Lily to ride a bike before she was 9. They focused on his breaking the rules and how this was risky in such a rule-governed community. One student wrote, "Even though it was not serious you could get in trouble. He broke the rule." Finally, a science fiction fact finder focused on the life assignments given to individuals at 12. She wrote, "In this time period people don't get to choose what they want to do. The author included this to show that this time is different from today. Jobs being given supports science fiction because in the future the government tells you what to do. You don't choose."

These responses showed how students were carefully reading to discover differences between the present time and the future. They were successful at noting these differences. Interestingly, they accepted the differences as part of the future and did not question the differences or why the author thought they were important to this story. Primarily, they were creating a sense of this new community and discovering the many rules that guided it. We thought it was interesting that the focus of these early responses were about the community and its rules, not necessarily the story line. Although they didn't voice it, community (or a future community) is critical to science fiction as the setting often determines the actions of the characters or the dilemmas they face. Tacitly, their responses indicated their understanding of the importance of setting.

They departed from this community focus to explore eye color, which they recognized as one quality that acknowledged difference among the characters, or at least between three characters and the rest of the community. They also began to worry about the choices that characters made within this society. For example, they worried about the trouble that Jonas might get into following his teaching Lily how to ride a bike. These responses indicated their personal connections to characters and their understanding of plot structures.

The Middle

Throughout the middle of the book, students shifted from setting and pursued a focus on the society and the rules that governed it. For instance, they reported on many details:

- Females under 8 wear hair ribbons.
- People get 2 children.
- They release people; they painlessly kill them.

- Jobs are assigned.
- Babies are given to nurturers, not a family for a year.
- They don't name babies for a year.
- Learn to ride a bike at 9.
- There is a House of the Olds.
- At 8 can choose volunteer work.
- Have to discuss dreams.
- Have to take pills.
- Everyone is the same.
- No one knows about war.

While all of these qualities of the community were shared, an abundance of students focused on dreams and pills, babies and expectations, and colors. These three ideas consumed much of the conversation in groups and the writing of the students.

Dreams and Pills. Almost every student included an entry that focused on the rules about dreams and pills. One journaler wrote, "It is important when Lily was telling her dreams because everyone else in the community had to share their dreams. It was required by law that everyone share." He continued with, "Jonas was taking his pill. It is important because he was in the love phase. He is not going to love anymore if he takes the pills. He will have to take them until he is in the House of Olds." Another student wrote, "He had a dream of Fiona and him in the House of Olds. He takes pills so he doesn't feel love because when he is older he is assigned a spouse."

Continuing with this theme, a science fiction finder wrote, "You need pills because you have dreams about girls/boys. It is different from today because we don't take pills. They have to take it for the rest of their lives; that is why it is important. It supports science fiction because that doesn't happen in real life." Many directors asked questions about dreams and the resulting pills. A girl wrote, "Do you think it is kind of weird if you dream about a boy/girl you have to take medicine about it?" She followed up with, "Would you take the pill after a week is over if your parents don't remind you?"

Babies and Expectations. Students focused repeatedly on the differences in how babies were taken care of in this society and their own experiences. For instance, one student wrote, “In real life we might bring a baby to daycare for a period of time but in this book the babies were taken care of for a whole year. And other people took care of the babies before they even had a home.” Another student was concerned because there were no grandparents. He said, “Today you can see your grandparents, but in this book there is no way kids would even know who they are.”

Students also began to deal with the issue of release as they explored the topics surrounding babies. One student showed the conflicted emotions of Jonas as he pondered release and his father’s role with it. He wrote, “Jonas thought his father wouldn’t like release and then he saw his father release a baby. Jonas had emotions and he knew this was wrong, but his father just saw it as his job, not murder.”

A director asked his group to directly consider release. He asked, “Why did the author show the release of this child?” His expected response was, “It shows what release means if you didn’t figure it out and how they dealt with identical twins.” Instead students talked about the decision to release one of the twins. They were angry that this happened and didn’t believe that killing the baby was the right thing to do, especially since the decision was based on weight. One student said, “I can’t believe it. How could they just kill a baby? I get why they didn’t let the babies live with their parents. It was easier to kill them when no one cared.” We found it interesting that while they were upset that one twin was released, they didn’t question the author’s motives for the significance of this event.

A travel tracer made the issue of release come alive through the setting and quotes she chose. She wrote:

Jonas was shocked because one of the twins was released. He moved his arms and legs in a jerking motion and his head fell to his side. His eyes were half way open and then he was still. Jonas felt horror because of the releasing. Now he knows what it means.

Most students talked about release as something they disagreed with, but their discussion was more abstract. The travel tracer’s response brought the students closer as they considered the very specific details of release. Finally, a student wrote, “Lowry included this because we don’t have it today. Science fiction is about the future. If we did have release today what would it be like? Think!”

Colors. Students focused on the newness of being aware of colors for Jonas and how other individuals in the community were deprived of seeing colors, or difference. Despite the role students were completing, the issue of color showed up continuously. For instance, a director wrote several questions targeting color:

1. Why did the Giver say, “that’s probably driving the scientists crazy?”
 - a. Because Fiona has red hair and that is not sameness and they want everyone to be the same.
2. Do you think Jonas will receive the memory of a rainbow?
 - a. Yes because he will learn about more colors and their importance.

One director pushed the idea of colors a bit when he questioned, “Would it be better if there was not sameness?” His response was that, “It wouldn’t be better because you would have to have the same haircut and color and everyone is the same skin color.”

A travel tracer noted that the scientists were mad because Fiona had red hair and they wanted sameness. Several journalers selected the scene where Jonas gets the memory of red. One wrote, “Red is a color and it means their community was black and white. It shows they live in a box with no color. They have climate control with no sunshine, and everything is the same even the weather.”

Finally, students explained the focus on color and its importance to science fiction. One fact finder wrote, “The apple showing up as red supports science fiction because everybody in the community can’t get the memory of colors. They have a different life style because only the Giver has memories.” Another fact finder suggested, “I think the author removed color so it made the community more lifeless, more dull. They don’t see differences as they are all the same, no color and climate control.” And one journaler noted that learning about the color red also brought uncomfortable memories, “Jonas saw elephants killed and there was blood everywhere and it was red.”

Colors led to conversations about sameness and what it would be like if everyone were the same. They talked about the conundrum that knowing and understanding colors could lead to good memories but to bad as well. The students’ focus on color helped them to understand issues of sameness in the community and how it was problematic. They also began to move into the author’s mind and see that the use of color, or no color, enhanced the sameness or dullness within the community, more than just writing about having no colors

could. We were able to see students shift from readers of a book to critics trying to understand the reasoning behind the author's decisions.

The Ending

Many students continued to ponder release and colors and their importance at the end of the book. However, students also shifted perspective and now focused on emotions and transitions, more abstract text qualities.

Emotions. Students started to focus on the emotions displayed by Jonas and how his emotions helped them understand events in the story. For instance, one student wrote, "Jonas felt angry and sad because of his dad. His father lied to him so Jonas did not want to go home." Another student wrote, "Jonas was puzzled because he didn't understand the Giver's plan." Finally, a student shared the Giver's emotions when she wrote, "The Giver felt love because of Jonas. The Giver told Jonas about his daughter and his love for her." In groups, they talked about how the book didn't share emotions at first. One student said, "At first everyone was calm even the Giver, but at the end the Giver and Jonas are full of emotion."

Transitions. During the conclusion of the book, the Giver talked about wanting to join his daughter and how Jonas was preparing to leave the community. Several directors posed questions such as, "What did the Giver mean when he said he will go to be with his daughter?" Students suggested, "Since Rosemary is dead, I think he is going to release himself." A student built on this explanation by offering, "Legend says when someone dies you can see others that also died whether you commit suicide or not."

While students realized that the Giver was to be released, they noted that he seemed happier when he talked about his daughter with one student noticing that he smiled when he talked about her. Another wrote, "He sounded like he was going to cry when he talked about her release and he seemed happier than ever that he was going to see her again."

These oral and written reflections showcase the shift from simple understandings to more complex ones. For instance, students understood that at the beginning of the book everything, including characters, were calm or one-dimensional. As the book continued, because of choice, characters demonstrated conflicting emotions.

The second transition that students discussed was Jonas's leaving. One student commented, "Jonas felt sad because he left and he left his closest friends behind. He also had to leave the Giver and that had to be hard for him." Students

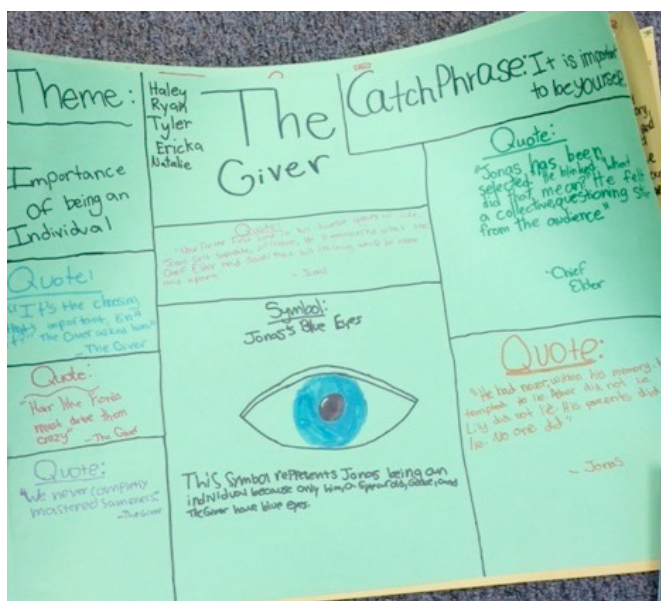
chatted about how scary it was for him to leave because he was sneaking away and he was taking Gabriel with him so that Gabriel was not released. Then they shifted to the exhaustion he felt as he peddled his father's bike in the search of Elsewhere. "Jonas felt exhausted from all the peddling. He knew he must sleep but he was worried about capture." In groups you could hear students talk about how scary it was for Jonas because there were planes flying overhead trying to find them. They also worried about what Jonas would do away from his community with a baby to take care of.

Many students were upset that there was no clear conclusion. One student said, "How could she end the book this way? I want to know what happened." Another student replied, "She set it up as a series. I get it. I have to read the next book." Although students were not satisfied with the conclusion, they understood the idea of a series of books, where plots are continued.

The Journey Continued

After the students completed *The Giver*, their teacher asked each group to create a poster that shared a theme, had a representative symbol, and a catch phrase. To support the theme that a group chose, they had to go into text to find support. Three groups selected choice as their theme, one group chose emotions, and the final group chose being an individual (See Figure 2).

Figure 2 A Final Poster



When considering the theme of choice, the catch phrases were: “There are many choices in life so make the right ones;” “The choices you make set your future;” and “You have to fight to choose freedom.” Vehicles were the symbol representing this theme. Two groups selected a bicycle because “The bike is how Jonas and Gabriel found their freedom.” The third group chose a sled “because it represents freedom for Gabriel and Jonas was able to save the others from sameness.”

Following are several quotes that students selected to support their theme:

- “For the first time, Jonas did not take his pills.”
- “Our people made the choice to go to sameness.”
- “The Giver chose to move away.”

The emotions theme caused some students to shift away from sameness. This group’s catch phrase was “Emotions help you see life to its fullest.” Their symbol was a “Christmas tree because it shows the memory where he felt excited about holidays.” Some of the quotes they used were as follows:

- “I felt very angry this afternoon.”
- “I’m feeling apprehensive,’ glad that the appropriate word finally came to him.”
- “‘We are almost there,’ he whispered without feeling quite certain without knowing why.”

The last group chose the importance of being an individual and their catch phrase was “It is important to be yourself.” Their symbol was a blue eye as only the Giver, Jonas, and Gabriel had blue eyes. They selected quotes such as:

- “It’s the choosing that is important.”
- “We never completely mastered sameness.”
- “Now for the first time in his 12 years, Jonas felt different, separate.”

The themes showcased students moving beyond more literal elements of text and stepping back to see the meaning behind this book. The themes, while different in description, all centered on the issues of sameness and being able to make decisions to move away from this conformity. Students understood that emotions led individuals away from the sameness expected to making choices, and

eventually to uniqueness. However, choices led to risk and difference led to internal conflict.

Discussion

Through reading, writing, and discussing students came to understand this text and the genre of science fiction (Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012, Duke & Pearson, 2002). Further, students looked for indications of science fiction as they read due to the literature circle jobs they held and in response to teacher promptings (Cadden, 2011). To discover science fiction characteristics, they often reread for clarity and to better understand an event or a character's behavior. These discoveries support the need to connect strategies with genre (Almasi & Hart, 2011; Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012). For instance, students demonstrated that setting was important in science fiction and they needed to reread to create an image of this world.

The major discovery, we believe, was that students spent most of their time noticing the differences in this community when compared to their own. They recognized that color and not knowing color were important, as were the issues of release and sameness. When pushed to explain how these observations helped them to know this text was science fiction, they most often replied, "It is different from today." or "It was futuristic." (They also knew that the setting was critical to understanding this book as is true of science fiction, but they stayed at a level of describing or noticing it, rather than moving to an analysis level where they explored the importance of various aspects of the community, such as strictness.)

We wondered what kind of support would be necessary for students to move beyond noticing to explore, for instance, why the author chose color as a way to move into memories? Why was color so important? What would have happened if she had chosen smells, for example? Why was color such a perfect choice to share memories? Similar observations could be made with release. Why was the one twin being released so meaningful to the discussion of release? Would release have seemed as awful if Jonas witnessed the release of an older person? Why did Lowry choose a twin? What is the significance of this choice to the story and to the reader?

Noticing is critical to understanding for without an initial perception, one cannot move to comprehension or understanding. However, noticing, in itself, is a naïve interpretation. Saying "something is different from today" is a beginning to critical understanding, but it is just a beginning or foundation. Our study opened up these more critical questions that could be pursued with students only after

careful scaffolding throughout their reading. The literature circle structure carefully built students' knowing or noticing so that with teacher scaffolding, they were primed to explore more complex interpretations at the end of their reading.

The science fiction fact finder and the journaler jobs helped students focus on science fiction. These roles complemented by the director's questions kept each group attentive on keeping the writing and conversation centered on the genre of science fiction. Perhaps, without these jobs or roles, students would have been more drawn to the plot or characters and would have seen the community in which they lived as not very important. This would have been a great loss to their understanding because the differences in this community are what hold the story together as characters respond to this complicated, rule-bound setting. Further, it suggests that for teachers using literature circles, roles or jobs need to be geared to the genre students are reading so that, in addition to the story, they gain experience with the genre in a more direct way. While general comprehension strategies were used by students throughout the book, particularly rereading for clarification, the combination of the genre's expectations and strategies better supported students' comprehension building.

There were many lessons learned in this investigation. First, students noticed elements of science fiction and talked and wrote about them, but it took probing to get them to consider the importance of these elements and why the author chose them. Importantly, students independently focused on plot, not the nuances of science fiction. Second, changing the roles and jobs to meet the genre's expectations facilitated students' understanding of the genre. For example, the science fiction fact finder nudged students to repeatedly focus on the genre itself, not just the story. Third, all jobs supported comprehension building and finding text support, with the exception of the connector. The connector role led students away from text support. For example, they wrote about when they were afraid or experienced a family member's death. While interesting, the personal narrative led away from the book and it was difficult for directors to bring the conversation back to the book. This was an interesting discovery and one for teachers to carefully consider with the current Common Core expectation of staying within text. Fourth, students had no difficulty supporting their opinions or observations with text support as noted in their writing, talking, and poster creation. Fifth, comprehension strategies and genres need to be linked to support students' understandings. Although students could independently read *The Giver*, they needed collaboration and teacher support to combine the narrative elements with the essential characteristics of science fiction.

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Appendix

Sample of Data Analysis

Date	Topic	Frequencies
2-26	mirrors	III
	Bike at 9	IIII
	Comfort object	II
	Eye color	IIII
	People get 2 children	II
	Jobs assigned	III
	Babies are given nurturers	IIII
	Don't name babies	I
	Release	IIII
3-1	Kids delivering food	I

About the Authors

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Diane Barone is a professor who researches literacy practices in schools. She visited the school at the beginning of the year for foundation data collection, and then visited the school once during the science fiction exploration. Both of the researchers participated in data collection and analysis.

