



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 54
Issue 1 2015

Article 1

8-10-2015

Reading Horizons vol. 54 no. 1

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(2015). Reading Horizons vol. 54 no. 1. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 54 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol54/iss1/1

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Reading Horizons

A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts



Published by the

Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center & Clinic
College of Education & Human Development
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI

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Volume 54, Number 1

2015



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A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

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**There is no more crucial or basic skill in all of
education than reading.**



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Similar Settings, Different Story Lines: The Positioning of ESL Teachers in Two Middle Schools

Mary McGriff, New Jersey City University
Maria Selena Protacio, Western Michigan University

Abstract

As the need to better support English learners' achievement in academically rigorous content area classes increases, so does the call for expanded ESL teacher/content area teacher collaboration. However, the nature and outcomes of such collaboration depend on how these professionals are positioned within their school settings. Using positioning theory as an analytic lens, this article investigates the collaborative interactions of two ESL teachers in two separate, but demographically similar suburban middle schools. It also examines the impact of these ESL teachers' collaborations on ELLs' opportunities for academic language and content area learning. Findings highlight the importance of ESL teacher agency in sustaining rigorous and effective literacy scaffolding for ELLs. Findings also highlight the need for the field to purposefully consider issues of culture and agency in teacher partnerships. Overall, this article informs educators' and teacher educators' efforts to optimize school-based, ELL/focused teacher collaboration.



Similar Settings, Different Story Lines: The Positioning of ESL Teachers in Two Middle Schools

Background and Purpose of Study

With the increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) in schools across the United States, research has documented the benefits of collaboration between English as a second language (ESL) teachers with their content area counterparts in meeting the educational needs of ELLs (Dove & Honigsfield, 2010; Teemant, Bernhardt, & Rodriguez-Munoz, 1996). The collaboration between ESL and content area teachers is especially important in light of research which has documented that mainstream teachers often feel ill-prepared to address the needs of ELLs in their schools (Fu, 2004; Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005; Li & Zhang, 2004). Further, a survey showed that middle school teachers wanted more training and information so they could better address the academic needs of ELLs in their content area classes (Hansen-Thomas & Cavagnetto, 2010).

Successful forms of ESL teacher/content area teacher collaboration include a shared model in which one teacher offers ELLs individual support while the other conducts the lesson. Alternatively, ESL teachers may anticipate difficulties their students will have with a particular topic and may pre-teach words or concepts before the whole class lesson. ESL teachers may also provide post-lesson reinforcement when unanticipated language or prior knowledge gaps present learning difficulties (Pardini, 2006).

In addition to sharing instructional responsibilities, successful ESL teacher/content area teacher partnerships include scenarios in which ESL teachers serve as consultants, offering specific guidance and resources for mainstream colleagues (Staehr Fenner, 2013). In all of these cases, the goal of collaboration is to identify general academic or subject-specific vocabulary and concepts that ELLs may not understand without additional scaffolding and to determine the most effective means of providing needed support. ESL teachers have been particularly helpful in identifying culturally embedded assumptions about students' prior knowledge and in providing ELLs with needed background information about a topic of study (Pardini, 2006). Research has documented that collaboration between ESL teachers and content area teachers is associated with bridging the achievement gap between ELLs and their native-English peers (Pardini, 2006) as well as an overall increase in ELLs' academic language proficiency (Dove & Honigsfield, 2010).

In order for successful collaboration to occur, each participant should agree on individual teacher responsibilities, including timelines for providing resources or lesson plans, processes for decision-making, expectations for student interactions, and assessment criteria. These procedurally focused understandings should be based on teachers' foundational agreement about how subject-specific and language acquisition goals should be integrated (Davison, 2006; Dove & Honigsfield, 2010). Yet, negotiating these shared understandings presents challenges. ESL teachers and content area teachers may possess varied grounding dispositions about what content should be taught. Being in school cultures that are less supportive of linguistic diversity and that offer limited collaborative opportunities for teachers create additional challenges for successful collaboration (Davison, 2006).

As the preceding research has shown, ESL teachers are a valuable resource for mainstream teachers; however, they are underutilized as studies have demonstrated that ESL teachers are often relegated to a support role within the school context rather than being perceived as equal to content area teachers at the secondary level (Creese, 2002). A factor which may contribute to the underutilization of ESL teachers is that content area teachers may be unaware of the responsibility they have regarding the literacy and language development of middle school ELLs, and may view teaching ELLs as the sole responsibility of ESL teachers (Jimenez, 1997; Rubinstein-Avila & Johnson, 2008). ESL teachers have the potential to share their expertise with their content area colleagues to help them make modifications to their practice to ensure that ELLs are able to better comprehend content and become active participants in the classroom.

Given the literature, which shows the importance of collaboration between ESL and content area teachers at the secondary level, we deemed it important to examine the ways in which these collaborations occur in the middle school setting. In this article, we discuss the contrasting experiences of two ESL teachers in two separate, yet demographically similar middle schools. We use positioning theory (Harre & Moghaddam, 2003) to examine the ESL teachers' interactions with their content area colleagues and to consider how these interactions facilitated and/or constrained ELLs' opportunities to develop their content-specific literacy skills. The following research question is addressed in this inquiry: How do two suburban middle school ESL teachers' interactions with their content area colleagues limit or enhance ELLs' access to rigorous content area instruction?

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes positioning theory as a way to examine the collaboration of ESL teachers with their content-area colleagues in suburban middle schools.

Positioning Theory

Situated within the social constructivist perspective, the concept of positioning is based upon the premise that identities are constructed and continually reconstructed discursively in social contexts where shared norms and practices exist (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). The concept of positioning incorporates the idea that through discursive interactions, individuals position themselves, or are positioned, in relation to colleagues, supervisors, family members, and others with whom they associate. Unlike the more static concept of role, position emphasizes the fluid nature of social interactions and holds that specific positions can shift, even during the course of a single discussion. Positioning theory, then, permits the study of the dynamics related to these discursive episodes, and it facilitates an understanding of how these discrete dialogic exchanges contribute to the ongoing work of identity development (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999).

As a practice, positioning incorporates three fundamental, mutually constitutive components: *position*, *acts* and *story line*. A position is determined by the rights and duties one possesses in a given context, and a position can limit or expand the range of actions an individual can then take. For example, among a group of primary grade teachers, one teacher may occupy a position of instructional leadership based on the fact that he commonly attends workshops and shares resources with colleagues. Acts are defined as the actions that have significance within a particular situation. For instance, at a grade level meeting the teacher positioned as an instructional leader may speak about an instructional strategy that his colleagues can use to support ELLs' emerging phonemic awareness. Such a verbal presentation would be viewed as an act since it would be associated with his recognized position among his primary grade teacher colleagues. The description of this instructional strategy would not be viewed as significant if, for example, it were made over lunch to physical education teachers whose practice typically does not involve early literacy skill development. Such a description would be viewed as an action. This example illustrates the power of context in determining the position of the speaker and the level of significance attributed to his utterance. Story line refers to the norms and commonly understood patterns of behavior that develop over time within a given context (Harre & Moghaddam, 2003). Over time, the acts of the teacher described above may validate his position of leadership among his primary grade colleagues. As he continues to share salient instructional strategies with these teachers, and as they discuss these specific instances, the individual episodes contribute to a story line of instructional leadership and reify the story line's existence in the school. Taken together, position, acts, and storyline interdependently comprise the factors that enable individuals to assume or be placed in positions that contribute to their identity development.

Other-positioning and self-positioning. Two categories of positioning – other-positioning and self-positioning-- bear particular significance in studies focusing on teachers’ collegial interactions. With other-positioning, one discursively situates another individual within a specific scenario. Other-positioning can take place tacitly so the positioner does not act purposefully, but rather acts in a manner that is consistent with established patterns of belief and behavior. Alternatively, other-positioning can take on a strategic quality so that the positioner’s act occurs with the aim of achieving a certain goal such as reinforcing an existing story line or contributing to the development of a different story line (Harre & Slocum, 2003; van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). Self-positioning takes place as an individual describes an episode from her life or refers to her capabilities and rights in a given context. Through the descriptions, attributions, justifications and consequences implicit in these narratives, the individual positions herself in a particular way. Thus, in this study, we examine how the ESL teachers positioned themselves and were positioned by the content area teachers with whom they shared responsibility for educating ELLs in their respective schools.

Literature Review

In the previous section, we defined positioning theory. In this section, we describe related research, which has used positioning theory to examine teachers’ positioning of themselves and their colleagues. Scholars have used the concept of positioning to examine how positioning educators impacts teaching and learning (e.g., Handsfield, Crumpler, & Dean, 2010; Reeves, 2009). Studies that highlight teachers’ positioning of colleagues illustrate how this type of other-positioning facilitates teachers’ development of desirable professional identities. However, these inquiries also reveal how other-positioning does not always lead to favorable learning conditions for students (Reeves, 2009; Watson, 2007).

Representative of this work is Reeves’s (2009) analysis of an episode in which a high school English teacher positions his fellow English teachers as being overly permissive and ineffective in preparing ELLs for adulthood. In this instance the teacher remarks, “It’s easier for teachers to just give the kid [ELLs] the answer than explain it to them. And I think that’s the way the kids get cheated” (Reeves, 2009, p. 38). This instance of other-positioning serves as a point of departure from which the teacher goes on to make the following declaration, “Because if they’re really going to be a part of this society, and they’re really going to function in it, then they’re going to [be] overwhelmed for a while, and I don’t shorten assignments” (Reeves, 2009, p. 38). In this manner, the teacher builds his own identity as an educator who, unlike his colleagues, can successfully equip ELLs to face life’s challenges; the effect of such positioning tactics is to create a storyline that elevates the positioner in relation to his fellow English teachers. At the same time, the other-positioning he

engages in serves to reify his practice of not modifying assignments for ELLs, many of who may legitimately require modifications based on their levels of English proficiency. Reeves's study illustrates how other-positioning, while contributing to a story line of positive professional identity, can also add to a story line of academic disservice toward ELLs.

Other work related to positioning has called attention to teachers' deliberate self-positioning discourses and to how these mediate students' learning experiences (Brock, Nikoli & Wallace, 2011; Handsfield et al., 2010; Reeves, 2009; Yoon, 2008). For example, the research of Handsfield et al. (2010) highlights a novice teacher's use of self-positioning to successfully assume the stance of an experienced educator. They focus on the teacher's recounting of a conversation with her principal in which she successfully justifies the use of unapproved instructional techniques to address the differentiated learning needs of her bilingual students. Here, the teacher's own description of the conversation with her principal took on an authoritative tenor as she commented on her "guts" in addressing "what I know is best for my class." (p. 421). In this manner, the teacher used her own discourse to deliberately position herself as a skilled and seasoned teacher so that her positioning moves contributed to her positive professional identity. In this instance, her instructional decisions were sound, so her deliberate self-positioning also added to a story line of effective ELL-focused pedagogy.

Taken together, this body of scholarship has examined other- and deliberate self-positioning in relation to teachers' professional identities and their concomitant story lines of pedagogical effectiveness. However, little is currently known about how positioning theory and its emphasis on specific discursive episodes can be applied to better understand ESL teacher/content area teacher interaction. In fact, the calls for well-articulated collaboration between these two types of teachers are so recent (Staehr Fenner, 2013) that long-standing patterns or well-codified modes of interaction may not yet have been established in many schools. Yet, as schools respond to these calls, opportunities for ESL teacher/content area teacher interactions will increase, and so will the other- and self-positioning moves that take place around them. Enhancing opportunities for ELL content area learning, then, requires that educators expand their understanding of these episode-specific dynamics and the local and cultural norms that ground them.

Methods

Data for this article were obtained from two separate case studies (McGriff, 2010; Protacio, 2013) centered on ELL education in suburban middle schools. In this section, we first describe each study. We then discuss how we analyzed the data from both studies in relation to the positioning of the focal participants in their respective school contexts.

Study One

The first study focused specifically on a professional development initiative with middle school teachers centered on improving participants' expertise in working with ELLs (McGriff, 2010). A case study design was utilized wherein Mary (first author) facilitated a teacher professional learning community focused on ELLs' content area literacy. The professional learning community met bi-weekly from August through December of 2009 to examine ELL-focused literacy building strategies and to explore approaches for situating these strategies into participants' respective classroom practices. Aside from Mary, participants in the learning community included the ESL teacher, Mrs. Knorr, as well as the five content area teachers who taught the school's ELL population.

Setting. Study One took place in Harding Middle School (HMS), which is located in a suburban town in a Northeastern state. The town in which HMS is located experienced an increase in its Latino population, which translated to an increase in the number of Latino students in the Harding School District.

In terms of support, ELLs in HMS were given 40-80 minutes of language instruction per day, depending on students' English proficiency levels. The ESL teacher, Mrs. Knorr, also provided daily lunch time tutorials in which ELLs completed science and social studies assignments. Aside from the language classes and the daily lunchtime tutorials with the ESL teacher, ELLs were placed in mainstream content area classes. Content teachers at HMS admittedly had limited experience working with ELLs, and prior to this endeavor, ELL-focused professional learning opportunities had been limited to occasional full-day workshops with no provision for follow-up support.

Focal participant. Mrs. Knorr held state certifications in elementary education and in ESL. At the time of data collection, Mrs. Knorr was in her seventh year as HMS's ESL teacher, and although she had previous experience as an international student liaison at a small private college, this was her first position teaching ESL in a K – 12 setting. During Mrs. Knorr's first four years at HMS, she taught ELL students up to three periods per day, depending on her assessment of each child's English proficiency and overall readiness to enter the academic mainstream. However, during year five of her tenure at HMS, the district adopted a literacy intervention program designed to increase reading proficiency among struggling students, and ELLs were included among the students chosen to participate in this program. The program was taught by the schools' reading specialists, and the time required to fully implement this program precluded Mrs. Knorr from teaching ELLs for three periods per day. The administrative team therefore determined she should instead support ELLs' content area learning within general education classrooms. Accordingly, seventh-grade ELLs attended science classes and eighth-grade ELLs attended

social studies classes. Mrs. Knorr accompanied both groups of students to these classes to provide push-in support. Table 1 serves as a quick reference about participants at Harding Middle School.

Table 1. *Participants at Harding Middle School*

Name	Position	Relevant Information
Mrs. Knorr	ESL Teacher	Provided 40-80 minutes of language instruction per day with School's ELLs by using a push-in model in the general education classroom
Mrs. Packer	Social Studies	Taught the social studies class in which Mrs. Knorr served as push-in ESL Teacher
Mrs. Jones	Science Teacher	Taught the science class in which Mrs. Knorr served as push-in ESL Teacher

Data collection. Data collection methods included three formal interviews, eight professional development sessions with HMS teachers, three formal classroom observations, numerous informal classroom visits, and document analysis.

Study Two

The second study focused specifically on the reading engagement of middle school English language learners in their ESL classroom (Protacio, 2013). A case study design was utilized for this study wherein Selena (second author) served as a participant observer in Mrs. Blake's ESL classroom for six months.

Setting. Study Two was conducted at Ford Middle School (FMS), which is a Grade 7-8 school in the Ford School District, a small school district in a suburban university town in the Midwest. The student population was fairly diverse, partly due to the high number of international graduate students at the local university. Those enrolled in Mrs. Blake's ESL class were mostly Muslim students from Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Saudi Arabia.

ELLs at FMS were provided a self-contained ESL class which lasted two periods in the afternoon. Otherwise, ELLs attended mainstream content classes. In terms of academic support, FMS provided homework support after school two days a week. Another class wherein ELLs could obtain support was their Academic Study Hall period, which was a 30-minute period which had a different purpose depending on the day. Mondays and Wednesdays were used for academic vocabulary lessons, school wide read-alouds, and community building activities. Tuesdays and Thursdays were used for academic and homework support. On Fridays, the whole school engaged in Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) during Academic Study Hall.

Focal participant. Mrs. Blake served as the ESL teacher for Ford School District's middle school and high school. She had 24 years of teaching experience as she has taught English, Spanish, ESL, and adult ESL. She had been in her current role as ESL teacher of both FMS and FHS for six years. She taught three periods at the high school in the morning, and then taught three periods at the middle school in the afternoon. Even though she taught at both the middle school and high school, Mrs. Blake said she considered the middle school her home base. Mrs. Blake originally was the ESL teacher at the middle school, but when the ESL teaching position became available at the high school, she told district officials that she wanted to be the ESL teacher at both schools so she could continue to support ELLs as they transitioned to high school. Mrs. Blake ensured that ELLs in her classroom would have academic support by actively recruiting community volunteers and regularly welcoming pre-service teachers. Table 2 serves as a quick reference about participants at Ford Middle School.

Data collection. Selena served as a participant observer in Mrs. Blake's classroom one to four times a week for six months. She also served as a participant observer in the after-school homework support program initiated by the school. Data collection methods included classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, and artifact collection.

Synopsis of Study One and Study Two.

Individually, Study One and Study Two offer portraits of ESL teaching and learning in suburban middle school settings. The ELLs in Study One were primarily Latino and eastern European while ELLs in Study Two were mostly from Middle Eastern countries. However, ELLs in both studies received instruction in pull-out and mainstream contexts. Additionally, ELLs in both studies received in-class support during their mainstream classes that was either provided by the ESL teacher or by community volunteers. The focal participant in Study One, Mrs. Knorr, had significantly less cumulative years of overall teaching experience than the focal participant of Study Two, Mrs. Blake. However, both Mrs. Knorr and Mrs. Blake possessed a similar amount of

experience in their current middle school ESL teaching positions. Overall, both studies had similar staffing and instructional frameworks in place to support ELL language and literacy development. Despite the similarities in context, in the Findings section, we will compare and contrast how each participant positioned herself and was positioned by their content area colleagues.

Table 2. *Participants at Ford Middle School*

Name	Position	Relevant Information
Mrs. Blake	ESL Teacher	Taught ESL at the district's middle school and high school, but considered the middle school as her home base. Spearheaded a school wide vocabulary initiative which focused on increasing all students' knowledge of academic vocabulary
Mrs. Jamison	Principal	Provided support for the school's vocabulary initiative. Included the word of the day in her morning announcements. Dedicated to increasing teacher buy-in and participation for the vocabulary initiative

Data Analysis

We used a system of coding which we created based on positioning theory (Harre & Moghaddam, 2003). Coding entailed determining whether each act was indicative of other-positioning and/or self-positioning. As previously discussed, other-positioning occurs when one discursively situates another individual within a specific scenario. Self-positioning, on the other hand, occurs when an individual discusses an event in ways that point to his or her capabilities and rights in a certain context.

As one example of our data analysis, one of the focal participants, Mrs. Blake, offered to present an academic vocabulary-building strategy to a group of content area teachers. We coded this as an instance of self-positioning because by making the offer, Mrs. Blake situated herself as a knowledgeable practitioner among her colleagues. Data related to the preparation for, and delivery of, the vocabulary presentation were coded as acts since these data carried significance

in establishing and maintaining the teacher's position as a knowledgeable practitioner. In Table 3, we provide other examples of coding.

Table 3. *Examples of Data Analysis Coding*

Categories	Data Source	Example	Explanation of Coding
Self-positioning	Interview	Mrs. Blake: Oliver's brother is over the high school now. He is not in ESL anymore. He exited. But I keep an eye on him. I get to his school and look. I notice this year, there's a sloop of absences. What's going on? And I caught it early enough.	In this instance, Mrs. Blake is positioning herself as someone who looks out for her former students. She is using self-positioning to show that she is an observant and caring educator.
Other-positioning	Transcript of a professional development session	Mrs. Packer speaking to Mrs. Knorr: "You know I was going to propose...this may not be the most appropriate time but you know how you have that office duty second period? That is our team planning time, and if you are okay with it, I was going to make a plea to start at least twice a month and then roll it over to once a week that they let you out of that office duty to meet with me."	In this instance, Mrs. Packer is positioning Mrs. Knorr as a support teacher. In this interaction, Mrs. Packer's statement implies that she is a better judge of how Mrs. Knorr should spend her time.

Lastly, we looked across positioning instances and concomitant acts associated with each focal participant in order to identify consistent story lines (stable patterns of belief and behavior) related to each focal participant and her interactions with her content area colleagues. Significantly, the story lines include opportunities that each focal participant's students had to engage in substantive content area learning at HMS or FMS.

Findings and Discussion: Similar Contexts, Divergent Story Lines

A story line captures patterns of belief and commonly understood behavioral norms that develop over time within a given context (Harre & Moghaddam, 2003), and in this section we focus on the development of four story lines that capture Mrs. Knorr's and Mrs. Blake's positions vis-à-vis their content area colleagues. In story lines one and two below, we examine how the rights, duties, and responsibilities that Mrs. Knorr associated with her job carried over to influence her ELLs' opportunities to engage in content area learning. We offer a corresponding examination of Mrs. Blake's positioning and resultant learning opportunities for her ELLs in story lines three and four. The story lines related to each school are respectively followed by a discussion of implications for ELL language and literacy development in content area classes.

Story Line One: Reduced Expectations and Limited Academic Rigor at Harding Middle School

A study of Mrs. Knorr's discursive interaction with her social studies teacher colleague, Mrs. Packer, best illustrates the manner in which the rights, duties, and responsibilities she held served to limit authentic learning opportunities for her ELL students in their social studies classroom. A combination of other- and self-positioning tactics lead to the development of this story line.

Mrs. Packer viewed the fundamental elements of Harding's ESL program, general education inclusion and supplemental support, as untenable and insufficient for ELLs' content area learning. These interpretations also gave cause for her reduced estimation of what ELLs could accomplish academically. For instance, during a morning professional development meeting in which Mary presented collaborative learning strategies that could be used in content area classes or during lunch period tutorials, Mrs. Packer overtly declined to consider using these approaches, stating, "I'm telling you, that would never work in my class." Mrs. Packer then shared her determination that ELL content area learning was not her ultimate responsibility but that of Mrs. Knorr. The science teacher, Mrs. Jones, agreed with Mrs. Packer, and expressed the view that Mrs. Knorr's lunch time tutorial sessions were also limited in their ability to support ELLs' content area literacy development due to the range of ELL needs to be accommodated at these times.

Mrs. Packer: This unfortunately goes back to you [Mrs. Knorr]. We can introduce everything but ultimately it is on you, which is what I addressed in that email to you that it is wonderful that you have that time [lunch period tutorials] to focus on them [ELLs]. But even with that, you are dealing with so many different levels.

Mrs. Knorr: Yes, and also the lunch periods are limited since sometimes they come late or they need to go back to buy something. Sometimes 8th graders will be there with 7th graders, so I am always juggling roles.

Mrs. Jones: And you have your lesson to do, as well.

Mrs. Knorr: Yeah, and sometimes that goes out the window if something else is more important.

Mrs. Jones: Yeah, it is difficult.

In this exchange, Mrs. Packer and Mrs. Jones positioned Mrs. Knorr as a teacher whose instructional time for reinforcing subject-specific and general academic literacy was not effective in light of her students' diverse needs. This positioning move was particularly deleterious since Mrs. Packer had already dismissed the notion of implementing collaborative approaches in her classroom, and lunchtime tutorials provided the only remaining opportunity to actively engage ELLs in scaffolded social studies instruction (albeit without the presence of English-proficient classmates). In this discussion, Mrs. Knorr's self-positioning discourse compounded the other-positioning acts of her colleagues as she contributed additional information about the complications of balancing and prioritizing different subject learning needs during lunch tutorial. A significant consideration is the fact that Mrs. Knorr's self-positioning discourse occurred after Mrs. Packer's statement disavowing ultimate responsibility for ELLs. In this manner, Mrs. Knorr validated and acceded to Mrs. Packer's view about the untenability of general education social studies instruction for ELLs. It was, therefore, not surprising that these teachers also expressed a preference that ELLs learn apart from their English-proficient peers.

In an earlier conversation about ELLs' learning needs, Mrs. Knorr and Mrs. Packer lamented about the teaching opportunities that were lost when administrators intervened to stop ELLs from maintaining the school's landscaping as a co-curricular activity organized by an instructional aide. Mrs. Knorr and Mrs. Packer favorably described how the instructional aide supported these students' learning of gardening terms while they weeded, pruned and watered plants around the building. Through this description, their thoughts about the inappropriateness of rigorous academic learning experiences for ELLs were plain to note.

- Mrs. Packer: Carol [instructional aide] did not get to work with me last year and I missed her. That one-on-one and someone of her abilities. I defend her left and right. She was doing so much more than taking care of the plants when she was working with them.
- Mrs. Knorr: They took that away from her, too. They didn't want her out there doing the plants. The fact that they are out there with the plants and they're talking and they're socializing and they're learning so much.
- Mary: Because of time in class, that's why they got rid of it?
- Mrs. Knorr: Yeah. They can't see beyond.
- Mrs. Packer: I brought up the fact that have you ever thought that there is more than one way to learn? And in a classroom where you are embarrassed. People look at it like, "Well why you would take Hispanic students out there? The only gardeners and landscapers you see are Hispanic, and you're teaching them that that is what they can expect."
- Mrs. Knorr: Yeah, but it is okay to put them in sports. Are they going to be soccer players? No, but you put them on the teams because they are good.
- Mrs. Packer: Let's put all the Asians in robotics.
- Mrs. Knorr: Yeah. Exactly.
- Mary: Was there ever any discussion about perhaps integrating biology into it or having the [gifted and talented] kids get involved?
- Mrs. Knorr: It was the basics. What's a root? What's a stem? What's a petal? The different tools.

As the primary teacher of Harding's ELLs, Mrs. Knorr positioned herself as a teacher who favored "the basics" over rigorous learning experiences for her students. Additionally, she viewed their physical and academic separation from English-proficient students as appropriate for their language acquisition. However, in addition to minimalistic views about the academic experiences that ELLs should have access to, it is significant to note that Mrs. Knorr again positioned herself as a follower of Mrs. Packer. She remained in this position even as Mrs. Packer engaged in stereotypical commentary about students from Asian and Hispanic backgrounds.

In both of these excerpts, Mrs. Knorr's repeated statements of "yeah" and "yes" demonstrate the manner in which she readily acceded to Mrs.

Packer's positioning of her. By providing arguments that supported Mrs. Packer's reasoning, even reasoning that relied on overt stereotyping, Mrs. Knorr took up a position that countered established best practices for ELL literacy development (Nieto & Bode, 2008) and that demonstrated her lack of voice when interacting with content teachers.

Story Line Two: Content Area Inclusion and Exclusion at Harding Middle School

Content area classes at HMS provided ELLs with limited access to intellectually rigorous learning experiences. Consistent with Mrs. Packer's convictions regarding her limited responsibility for ELLs' social studies instruction, she did not solicit suggestions about how to optimize these students' instruction in social studies classes. Moreover, Mrs. Knorr did not attempt to provide ELLs with additional linguistic supports, and she did not attempt to implement any of the collaborative learning activities examined during the morning professional development sessions that Mary facilitated. Rather, Mrs. Knorr sat quietly at the side of the classroom while Mrs. Packer taught. During guided practice lesson segments, Mrs. Knorr rotated among the ELLs, who were seated at different tables, to assist them in interpreting maps or in writing journal entries related to social studies topics. While all social studies students had the option of working with the classmates with whom they were seated during these lesson segments, there were no structured frameworks to guide this interaction, and ELLs were not invited to collaborate with English proficient peers. Rather, they worked by themselves and spoke only with Mrs. Knorr when she came to check on their progress.

In science classes, ELLs were seated together in the front row and did not interact with English –proficient students on a routine basis. Mrs. Knorr sat at the ELLs' table, and while Mrs. Jones taught, Mrs. Knorr ensured that her ELLs were on the correct page of text. Occasionally Mrs. Knorr would also prompt them to respond to a recall level question when she was certain they knew the answer. As a result of the limited opportunities to collaboratively analyze topics such as how geography has impacted students' individual lives, ELL students seldom had the opportunity to construct authentic understanding of concepts, and their completed written assignments rarely contained anything other than fact-based, single word or sentence-length responses. Although they were included in mainstream content classes, their inclusion was not authentic, and their language and literacy development were not optimized by their presence in these classes.

ESL Teacher/Content Area Teacher Interactions at Harding Middle School: Discussion and Implications

The story lines that developed from HMS's ESL teacher/content area teacher interactions reveal a learning environment with limited opportunities for

ELL language and literacy development. Content area teachers' positioning of Mrs. Knorr and Mrs. Knorr's self-positioning combined to create this untenable context for ELL academic achievement. HMS's content area teachers had the ability and inclination to decline responsibility for their ELL students. This was due, in part, to HMS having no established norms in place related to content area teacher accountability for ELL learning. However, in spite of the way that Mrs. Knorr was positioned, it is important to note that Mrs. Knorr made no move to counter this positioning of her; indeed, her self-positioning reinforced her colleagues' views and even led to her participation in a discussion that included cultural stereotyping.

Researchers have emphasized the importance of teachers affirming linguistic diversity in their classrooms and pedagogy (Nieto & Bode, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Additionally, ESL teachers have been identified as exemplars and as potential professional development agents in affirming linguistic and cultural diversity (Staehr Fenner, 2013). Mrs. Knorr's stereotyping remarks about Latino students, and her agreement with Mrs. Packer's comments about Asian students, demonstrate that ESL teachers themselves can fall prey to the culturally disaffirming mindsets that have been associated with minimalistic expectations and low-level academic experiences for ELLs. Thus, Mrs. Knorr's positioning provides a cautionary example about the potential insidiousness of cultural stereotyping and the damaging impact it can have on ELL learning.

Although ELLs' previous landscaping activities were halted when they were placed in mainstream social studies and science classes, a significant observation that arose from this study is the fact that ELLs' inclusion in mainstream science and social studies classes amounted to their *de facto* exclusion within these settings. In science and social studies classes, neither content teachers nor Mrs. Knorr attempted to facilitate ELLs' interaction with English-proficient classmates. As a result, they were not a part of student groups that were using academic English to build their understanding of content area concepts, and they did not get to learn from different students' perspectives. ELLs' experiences in their content area classes, therefore, sustain and extend Iddings's findings (2005) by illustrating how in-name-only inclusion of ELLs actually hinders their opportunities for substantive knowledge building.

Overall, the story lines produced at Harding Middle School provide educators with a reminder of the need to cultivate dispositions of cultural and linguistic responsiveness in teachers of all subjects. These story lines also serve as a reminder that structures such as ELL inclusion in mainstream settings do not, by themselves, guarantee that ELLs will be able to engage in substantive learning experiences. Rather, these story lines point to the need to regularly and critically evaluate the effectiveness of such arrangements.

Story Line Three: Systematic, Effective Literacy Scaffolding at Ford Middle School

In order to develop proficiency with the academic language and concepts germane to specific content areas, students must know and be able to use a lexicon of school-based words and phrases that have applications across subject areas and that serve as a base upon which subject-specific knowledge can be built (Calderon, 2007). Mrs. Blake served as a member of FMS's School Improvement Team, and in that capacity she spearheaded a school-wide academic vocabulary initiative aimed at building proficiency with a core set of academic terms by facilitating their instruction and regular use in all content area classes. While leading this initiative, Mrs. Blake had many interactions with her colleagues during staff meetings and during special meetings such as those designed to develop interventions for struggling students, and she provided all content area teachers with four sets of laminated vocabulary slides that she created. One component of the program included a word of the day that the principal, Mrs. Jacobson, defined and used in her morning announcements. Each teacher was then supposed to use the word of the day in his/her lessons and display the PowerPoint slide that Mrs. Blake created for each word of the day. In addition, Mrs. Blake created large signs that she had printed and displayed in the cafeteria using the word of the day within the context of health and nutrition. In her classroom, Mrs. Blake addressed ELLs' specific instructional needs related to these words. She taught the words' linguistic features, made use of cognates wherever possible, and provided ELLs with opportunities to discuss how they were using the words in their other classes. Collectively, these measures were aimed at providing ELLs' with a cohesive, meaningful approach to building academic vocabulary proficiency.

The vocabulary initiative included pre-and post-assessments that teachers administered each semester, and these data were analyzed to track student mastery of the terms as well as to track the overall effectiveness of the program. In the following email exchange with Selena, Mrs. Blake discusses her careful, on-going assessment of the vocabulary program in order to gauge its impact on ELLs' developing linguistic proficiency:

We pre-tested again this fall and will post-test as well.Sada and Aina are my "litmus students" since they routinely report to me when they hear or read one of the words we have learned (even words from last year!). They make connections to the examples from the slides and make applications within the new contexts. For me, this is beneficial on so many levels! I see them interacting with language and progressing in their proficiency, I get feedback on the effectiveness of these [Mrs. Blake's vocabulary] lessons, and I see how relevant these words really are since these girls report back to me almost every day that they are hearing or reading them in their other classes.

Here, Mrs. Blake positions herself as a reflective, proficient cultivator of ELL content area literacy as she describes her program's inclusion of formal pre- and post- assessments and her consideration of daily feedback from her "litmus students" in evaluating the program's effectiveness. Also implicit in this excerpt is Mrs. Blake's self-positioning as a teacher who holds sway in collegial interactions related to the vocabulary initiative. Mrs. Blake's reporting of Sada and Aina's "almost every day" use of words from her program in their other classes carries with it the message that other teachers were, in fact, routinely making use of the program materials and procedures within the contexts of their own disciplines. As a result of this broad implementation, ELLs could situate their knowledge of each term within many of their content area classes; this supported their overall ability to understand the concepts taught in these general education settings.

Mrs. Blake's self-positioning as a proficient, influential language specialist generated opportunities for other-positioning as content area teachers collectively validated her work on behalf of ELL content area learning and of student learning, in general. The co-mingling of Mrs. Blake's self-positioning tactics and her colleagues' other-positioning acts is apparent in an email discussion she held with Selena regarding a faculty meeting:

Today I presented to our staff the compelling evidence [pre- and post-assessment data] that our vocabulary initiative is working. We then looked at individual student data and brainstormed ways to do it even better. Teachers each put a round sticker next to their favorite idea.

In this message, Mrs. Blake describes how she shared favorable Spring 2012 vocabulary assessment results with the FMS faculty. In fact, the Spring 2012 data she describes in this email reflected a 20 point increase in student mastery of the semester's academic vocabulary terms, so her presentation of the data enabled Mrs. Blake to further strengthen her position as a proficient language specialist and vocabulary program creator. Mrs. Blake also describes how she led the faculty in collaboratively brainstorming and selecting strategies to enhance the vocabulary initiative. The faculty's engagement in a collaborative brainstorming session and their subsequent participation in an election to select approaches for program improvement had two effects: these acts encouraged the faculty's continued investment in a vocabulary program that directly promoted ELL content area learning, and they further legitimized Mrs. Blake's position of influence at FMS.

Although the aggregate effect of the FMS faculty's other-positioning of Mrs. Blake was to strengthen opportunities for ELL content area learning, not all faculty members participated in vocabulary initiative activities to the fullest degree possible. For instance, Selena had the opportunity to observe several times in both a seventh-grade and an eighth-grade English class. In Ms. Costa's

seventh-grade English class, the PowerPoint slides that Mrs. Blake created were displayed on one classroom wall. Ms. Costa also had the word of the day written on the board with the definition. Some days she would mention the word briefly, but there were also days in which she simply had the word displayed but did not verbally mention it. Meanwhile, on the two occasions that Selena was able to observe Mr. Killian's eighth-grade English class, he did not verbally mention the word of the day although he had it written on the whiteboard. The slides that Mrs. Blake created were not on display in Mr. Killian's classroom. While this limitation is important to explicitly describe, it is also important to stress the fact that program assessment results reflected ELLs' improved academic vocabulary proficiency, even though some faculty members implemented the program without full fidelity.

Broadly, the vocabulary initiative served to strengthen ELLs' access to academic content across subject areas by systematically scaffolding their growing proficiency with the academic vocabulary that served as a foundation for building ELLs' knowledge of the words and concepts encountered in each content area. However, at FMS this systematic approach to ELL literacy development was complemented by individualized student monitoring and intervention.

Story line Four: Proactive Advocacy at Ford Middle School

Mrs. Blake committed several acts throughout Selena's data collection process that form a story line of proactive advocacy for ELLs at FMS. She deeply cared about the academic, linguistic, and social development of ELLs in her classroom. In fact, Mrs. Blake shared that one of the reasons she agreed to be the ESL teacher for both FMS and FHS was so she could keep track of the students as they progressed through high school:

That was my choice... The teacher who was at the high school decided to resign or to retire and I already had several years' worth of students over there, and I just felt a real attachment to them, like I wasn't really sure if their needs were really being met once they got there or I just kind of lost track of them. And I just thought when she retired, I can do what she does, and what I do. And I can work with these kids all the way through their secondary education.

At the high school, Mrs. Blake's former students benefitted from her longitudinal knowledge of their progress and background. Accordingly, she routinely checked her former students' attendance records and grade reports, and she proactively pulled together their current teachers and family members to discuss concerns and to develop interventions when ELLs appeared to be struggling in school. In the following excerpt, Mrs. Blake describes the steps she took to help a former student who was the brother of one of her current middle school students:

Mrs. Blake: Yeah, you know, Oliver's brother is over the high school now. He is not in ESL anymore. He exited. But I keep an eye on him. I get to his school and look. I notice this year, there's a sloop of absences. What's going on? And I caught it early enough. I could call his mom and she didn't even know that he has been skipping. So we had our big meeting with his mom and the counselor. So teachers got him back on track and he is just doing great now. So that is an example of something, that if somebody would have never met him before, that was monitoring him from afar, they just might not even pick on something like an extraordinary number of absences or something. I just realized that is a pattern I've seen before and something is going on and we need to intervene.

Selena: Or might just judge him rashly and say this kid is slacker.

Mrs. Blake: And I know better, you know so... yeah. It is nice. I really feel good about that.

Here Mrs. Blake positions herself as a concerned advocate for an ELL whose current teachers might have interpreted the student's poor attendance as an indicator of his motivational level. Her acts of initiating contact with this student's parents and of participating in an intervention meeting when he was no longer her student reflect the level of agency and vigilance that she assumed in her interactions with the content area colleagues who teach linguistically diverse students.

ESL Teacher/Content Area Teacher Interactions at Ford Middle School: Discussion and Implications

Story lines three and four highlight Mrs. Blake's positioning as a competent and agentive ESL teacher. She accomplished this by developing a school-wide academic vocabulary program to benefit all students' content area learning, but in a way that was fully supportive of ELLs' needs. For content area teachers at FMS, a significant aspect their interactions with Mrs. Blake included her faculty meeting presentations. In these meetings, she interacted with them in the position of spokesperson for and creator of a program that:

- included the school principal's daily, direct engagement;
- included teaching materials that she created and that needed to be displayed in each of their classrooms;
- included words of that day that they were asked to utilize in their practice;

- included assessments that, in fact, demonstrated evidence of improved academic language proficiency among all FMS students; and
- involved her facilitation of faculty discussions about how to further improve the program.

Every aspect of the initiative that faculty members implemented served to situate Mrs. Blake even more solidly in her position of a competent and agentive ESL teacher.

A documented obstacle to providing ELLs access to rigorous academic standards is that ESL teachers do not have consistent opportunities to participate in school level policy decisions about curriculum (Staehr Fenner, 2013). Mrs. Blake offers a powerful example of how school level involvement with curricular initiatives can be used to serve ELLs' content area literacy needs. Moreover, it extends our understanding of this concept by illustrating how one ESL teacher's specific self-positioning tactics were used to achieve this level of involvement. Using Mrs. Blake's example as a blueprint, ESL teachers can take stock of the opportunities and resources at their disposal and carefully consider how they might intentionally situate themselves in positions of influence in their schools.

Mrs. Blake's attention to individual student progress also reflected competency and agency. She monitored former students' progress and was prompt about stepping in to initiate resolution of concerns whenever they arose. She acted to ensure that content area teachers did not develop negative dispositions about ELLs' capabilities or motivational levels even when these students were no longer officially her students. In this fashion, she positioned herself in a manner that might have been perceived as outside of her bounds in order to effectively advocate for ELLs. For this reason, her example is particularly valuable to highlight since it provides educators with an explicit illustration of ELL-focused advocacy that counters the documented patterns of ESL teachers being subordinately positioned within their schools (Creese, 2002; McGriff, 2015). Additionally, Mrs. Blake's example offers specific, preemptive steps that advocates for ELLs can take to forestall the development of reduced expectations related to ELLs' motivation, and to help colleagues expand their understandings of why ELLs may struggle with content area work (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

Conclusion

Positioning theory offers an ideal framework to support this analysis of ESL teachers' interactions since it focuses on the moment-to-moment negotiation of individuals' rights, duties and responsibilities as they interact within a given context. For Harding and Ford Middle Schools, data analysis revealed four story lines that capture how the dialogic positioning moves of

each school's ESL teacher and her content area colleagues impacted ELLs' access to rigorous content area instruction. At Harding Middle School, Mrs. Knorr's positioning was associated with discursive acts that constrained ELLs' content area literacy development. Conversely, the ELL-related story lines at Ford Middle School cast Mrs. Blake as a proficient, influential language specialist. The measures she took to position herself in this manner and the fact that her content area colleagues also positioned her in this way resulted in acts of significant benefit to ELL content area language and literacy development.

Clearly, the story lines developing around Mrs. Knorr's and Mrs. Blake's respective positioning and concomitant acts led to different content area learning results for ELLs in their respective school settings. However, the differences highlighted in this inquiry also raise the question of how ESL teacher/content area teacher interactions can more effectively support ELL language and literacy development. A noteworthy dynamic that presented itself in this regard is that of proactivity in positioning. Unlike Mrs. Knorr, Mrs. Blake was proactive in positioning herself as a competent, advocacy-oriented ESL teacher and curriculum creator. Her content area teacher colleagues, then, followed this lead through their engagement in the undertakings she initiated. This suggests that proactivity in positioning is a favorable tack for ESL teachers to take. It therefore raises the question of what professional learning measures could encourage ESL teachers such as Mrs. Knorr to adopt Mrs. Blake's self-positioning tactics so that they can serve as effective language specialists and advocates for ELLs in their schools. This is an essential question to examine through continued research because, as the need to cogently support ELLs' academic achievement continues to grow, ESL teachers will need effective ways to encourage, and even lead the authentic engagement of their colleagues in ELL language and literacy development.

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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 woman [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 personle [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 were [wear] big bowls on there 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 berry’s [berries], or sing like poeple [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 tell [until] the war has stop.” Through blogging with his buddy, Elliot 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 halp [help] him so are you going to halp him? I’m gowing to halp by not spending my money on a lot of thiings and not thak long sawers [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 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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Appendix A: A Long Walk to Water – Reader Response Pen Pal Blogging Schedule

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)
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



Selecting Words for Instruction During Primary Read-alouds

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Abstract

Reading aloud is a wide-spread practice in early childhood and primary classrooms that is purported to develop a range of literacy skills, including vocabulary. Since it is not feasible to teach all of the words in a given text, efforts to maximize the instructional power of read-aloud events have included research regarding word selection. This study explores the extent to which research-based practices for selecting words for instruction have been incorporated into the practices of four primary grade teachers. Findings indicate that teachers may rely more on intuition and personal experience to select words rather than following expert's recommendations. Implications for practice, teacher preparation programs, and further research are discussed.



Selecting Words for Instruction During Primary Read-alouds

Reading aloud to children is commonly accepted as a means of building vocabulary, particularly with emergent and beginning readers (Biemiller & Boote, 2006) and is a recommended practice in early childhood classrooms (International Reading Association [IRA] & the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1998). Although there is a preponderance of empirical research findings supporting vocabulary development during read-alouds (e.g., Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Senechal, 1997; Wasik & Blewitt, 2006), little is known about how practitioners have incorporated this knowledge base into their practices and whether vocabulary instruction is actually improving (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003) for the children in greatest need of support.

This exploratory study builds on the existing research in the field by examining the words selected for instruction during read-alouds by four primary teachers along with the rationale for their choices. While there were many points of convergence between the literature and the teachers' practices, there were also significant discrepancies between published guidelines, observed instruction, and the teachers' own perceptions of their practice. Exploring such discrepancies between research and practice provides the foundation for meaningful, relevant research in the future with implications for practice and pre-service teacher education.

Perspectives on Word Selection

Determining which words in a particular text to target for instruction requires considerable thought (Vukelich & Christie, 2009), and teachers need to have "a principled basis for identifying the words that should be targeted for vocabulary instruction" (Nagy & Hiebert, 2011, p. 388). Research continues in the field, but a theory to guide word selection does not exist at this time (Nagy & Hiebert, 2011). What we do have are general guidelines that support teachers in making critical instructional decisions.

In the most recent volume of the *Handbook of Reading Research*, Nagy and Hiebert (2011) identified four factors that impact word selection. First, teachers should consider the word's role in language. Does it appear frequently?

Does it appear in many kinds of texts, or only in certain content areas? Secondly, teachers should consider how the word relates to other words semantically and morphologically. Teachers should also consider the students' current knowledge about the word as well as its conceptual difficulty. The final factor is more pragmatic and suggests that teachers consider the word's role in the lesson, the particular text being read, and in the curriculum as a whole.

Many articles and professional resources have been published to guide the selection of words for vocabulary instruction, authored by some of the leading researchers in the field including Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, Linda Kucan, Michael Graves, and Andrew Biemiller. The guidelines are general in order to be applicable to a variety of instructional contexts. Factors that influence word selection typically include utility, relevance, and concept load. These factors might be framed within the following questions to guide teachers in the decision-making process:

- Is understanding the word important to understanding the selection in which it appears?
- Are students able to use context or structural analysis skills to discover the word's meaning?
- Can working with this word be useful in furthering students' context, structural-analysis, or dictionary skills?
- How useful is this word outside the reading selection currently being taught? (Graves, 2006, p. 68).

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) recommended similar criteria. Words selected for instruction should have importance and utility. Words might be selected based on instructional potential, such as introducing a specific morpheme. Finally, words that are somewhat familiar to the students but require further conceptual development are recommended. Their well-known model for categorizing vocabulary words consists of three tiers. Tier 1 words are common, everyday words that seldom need instruction. Tier 3 words are domain specific, academic language that might best be taught during content area instruction. Beck and colleagues suggested that teachers focus instruction on Tier 2 words, which are of "high frequency for mature language users" (2002, p. 8).

Graves et al. (2014) developed the Selecting Words for Instruction from Texts (SWIT) approach which suggests a focus on “essential words, valuable words, accessible words, and imported words” (p. 336). Essential words are those deemed critical for comprehension of a particular text. Valuable words are those with general utility, and accessible words are relatively common words that are likely unknown to children with limited vocabulary. Imported words are not found directly in the text, but enhance comprehension. Examples in this category are words representing key concepts and discipline specific vocabulary.

In addition to the characteristics of words described above, there are instructional factors that need to be considered when selecting words. Time is a salient factor in vocabulary instruction, particularly in the context of read-alouds, where the balance between effective instruction and an engaging, enjoyable reading can be difficult to achieve. Frequent or prolonged digressions to talk about word meaning can disrupt the flow of the story to the point where children lose interest. Stead (2014) suggested that, “having to stop every two minutes to explain new vocabulary compromises comprehension retention and pleasure” (p. 491) so teachers must consider the number of unfamiliar words and the amount of time needed to teach them when planning read-alouds. At the same time, word learning for many children is minimal without such focused attention (Elley, 1989). Children’s vocabulary develops best when their learning is guided by complex and open-ended prompts about word meaning (Wasik & Hindman, 2011). Longo and Curtis (2008) recommended choosing words that “help students to develop the most precise understanding possible in the time you have available” (p. 24). Teachers should consider a word’s importance and utility. Words that will be encountered in multiple contexts and the content areas are good choices, as are words that develop conceptual knowledge or allow students to express finer gradations of meaning.

In addition to general guidelines for word choice, several published word lists are available to teachers to guide their selections. Biemiller (1999) constructed a list of 2300 common root words, stating that “it would be desirable to have most children familiar with most (90%) of the words on this list by the end of grade 2 or 3” (p. 60). Biemiller updated this list to include 5,000 root words that 40-60% of students in kindergarten through sixth grade would likely know (2009). Other word lists include those developed by Fry (2004), Dale and O’Rourke (1981), and Chall and Dale (1995). These lists might serve to validate selections made using other criteria. More recently,

guidance can be found in word lists published by Graves and Sales (2012), Hiebert (2012), and Marzano (2004). Academic vocabulary lists by Coxhead (2000) and Gardner and Davies (2013) provide teachers guidance when selecting academic words for instruction.

Despite the availability of such expert recommendations for practice, teachers continue to struggle with word selection. In fact, teachers indicated on a survey conducted by Berne and Blachowicz (2008) that word selection is one of their top concerns regarding vocabulary instruction, indicating that the bridge between research and practice is not as robust as it needs to be. It is not clear at this time whether the problem is due to teachers' lack of familiarity with the literature, or the need for more precise and clear guidelines for choosing words.

Vocabulary Development through Read-alouds

In this study, word selection is positioned within the specific context of read-alouds, and thus a brief discussion of that literature is warranted. Read-alouds are recommended practice for young children (IRA & NAEYC, 1998) and are an effective vehicle for vocabulary development (i.e., Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Justice et al., 2005; Senechal, 1997; Wasik & Blewitt, 2006). Although read-alouds are common in preschool and primary classrooms, recent research suggests that the quality of such experiences varies considerably from classroom to classroom (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Kindle, 2011). Teacher decisions regarding words selected and instructional strategies within read-alouds reflect understanding about teaching and learning and can “enhance or limit learning opportunities” (Lennox, 2013, p. 383). Interactional styles adopted by teachers can encourage reflection on word meaning (Look and the picture and tell me what you think this word means) or be used more as an assessment (What does this word mean?) (Kindle, 2011).

Read-alouds provide the means to expose children to rich and varied vocabulary (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988), and children with strong language skills and vocabulary can learn many words through brief, incidental exposures. Children with less robust vocabulary require more explicit instruction on word meanings to benefit from such experiences (Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004; Fein et al., 2011; Justice et al., 2005; Loftus, Coyne, Zipoli, & Pullen, 2010). Opportunities to review new words and encounter them in

multiple contexts throughout the day result in more complete word knowledge (Kindle, 2009, 2010; Neuman & Dwyer, 2009).

It is important for teachers to understand the differential effects of read-alouds when planning instruction, both in terms of specific instructional strategies, and in word selection. While teachers are often encouraged to select Tier 2 words (Beck et al., 2002), for some groups of children there may be a need to address the more commonly encountered words of Tier 1.

Methodology

The purposes of this exploratory study were 1) to identify the words teachers selected for instruction within read-alouds in their classrooms; and 2) to explore the teachers' rationales for word selection. Classroom observations were conducted to identify which words were given instructional attention during the read-alouds and semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' rationales for word selection. Primary grade teachers were recruited from a private elementary school located in a middle-class suburb in the south-central United States. Through conversations with the principal, the researcher knew that daily read-alouds were encouraged in the school, and thus would be familiar routines for both teachers and students. The purpose of the study and expectations for the read-aloud observations were explained to the teachers in the consent documents. Additionally, the researcher met with the teachers individually to answer any questions they might have. One kindergarten (Barbara), one first grade (Patricia), and two second grade teachers (Cindy and Debby) agreed to participate in the study (all names are pseudonyms). The teachers varied greatly in years of experience. Debby, a retired public school teacher, was the most experienced with over 20 years in the classroom, primarily at the middle school level. Barbara was also a veteran with 10 years of experience in kindergarten. Patricia and Cindy were relative novices. Patricia was in her third year of teaching and Cindy was in the internship year of an alternative licensure program.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each teacher was observed four times over a six week period as they read-aloud to their students. In order to keep the read-alouds as authentic as possible, the researcher did not provide any input or suggestions as to which books might be read aloud. A list of titles read can be found in the reference section. Observations were roughly one hour in length and times were

scheduled at the convenience of the teachers in order to have the read-alouds be as typical as possible. All observations were digitally recorded and field notes were taken to capture additional data such as facial expressions and gestures. Recordings were transcribed and field notes were added to create a thick description of the read-aloud events (Carspecken, 1996).

Data analysis was recursive. As the transcriptions were read and preliminary themes began to emerge, a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) was developed to obtain information not directly observable (Merriam, 2001) such as teachers' rationales for word choice, understandings about use of read-alouds to develop vocabulary, and instructional strategies. For each topic, a lead-off question was developed and covert categories were identified. Covert categories are topics that the researcher hopes to discuss, but avoids explicit questions about in order to avoid leading the interview (Carspecken, 1996).

Following the transcription and initial coding of the interview transcripts, the observation data were again read and coded with further refinement due to insights gleaned from the interviews. Peer review of the data and coding occurred at several points: initial coding, development of the protocol, and final coding.

Results and Discussion

The focus of this exploratory study was to examine the ways that four primary teachers selected words for instruction during read-alouds. However, a brief description of the read-alouds practices of each teacher provides important context through which to interpret their choices. The four teachers in this study varied a great deal in both the total number of words selected for instruction over the course of the four observations as well as the number of words within individual read-alouds. Given the differences in purpose (instructional versus aesthetic), age (K-2), time allotted (15-45 minutes), and texts, quantitative comparisons between the teachers are not particularly meaningful. However, the data do contribute to the description of the practices of the teachers, and suggest some general patterns of teacher behavior. Table 1 details the words selected for instruction in each of the observations.

Cindy (Grade 2) typically reads aloud twice per day to her students. One is part of reading instruction as she reads aloud the novel that is selected for the

Table 1: Words Selected for Instruction During Read-alouds

	Cindy Grade 2	Debby Grade 2	Patricia Grade 1	Barbara Grade K
Observation 1	plain, bonnet	Parachute, gadget, life preserver, diving suit, shame, hoists, pulleys, crossbow	Pout, encyclopedia, famine, dye, discovered, questioned, research	Bit, lots, rest, glob, blob
Observation 2	Premises, frankfurters, rivers of spit, whizzpopper, vigorously	Prairie, hearthstone, dough, bonnet, mild-mannered, plain	leper	Chore, espresso beans, kinder, gentler, valid ID, protested, recount, governor, diner, town meetings, ballot, vice president, help wanted ad,
Observation 3		Plow, squall, hail, still, sly, hiss, pungent, bleating, flattened	Appalachia, folk tale	Collect, lend, mitten, buttons
Observation 4	Roamer, batted, meadowlark, dried flowers, rose velvet ribbon, rustle, wooly ragwort, kittywake, prairie	Left, langwitch, guogwinkles, chittering, oftenly, squibbling, titchy, dory- hunky, snorkles	Partner, glare, cuffs	Apron, lad, pester, stewing, sweet, choosy

unit to her students. The second read-aloud is less formal and intended to increase the students' enjoyment of reading.

Debby (Grade 2) is a veteran teacher with 20 years of experience teaching 8th grade. This was her first year to teach second grade. Debby and Cindy, as the two second grade teachers of the school, select the novels they are going to read together. Like Cindy, she has both an instructional read-aloud and a second that is “just for fun”.

Patricia (Grade 1) has a few years of experience teaching preschool, but this was her first year to teach first grade. Patricia often adopted a performance style of reading, which accounts for the lower numbers of words selected for instruction. Patricia also opted to use a story telling approach for her second observation, retelling two parables.

Barbara (Kindergarten) has ten years of experience teaching. Her style of reading is highly interactional, with extended discussion during reading and frequent stops to clarify, questions, and elaborate.

Word Selection: Intentionality and Spontaneity

The teachers in this study did not articulate a clearly defined set of criteria used to select target words for instruction during their read-alouds; however, through the observations and interviews, patterns of behavior and insight into their thought processes emerged. Two major criteria for word selection became evident during coding procedures: (1) the teacher's perceptions of the importance of the word, and (2) the teacher's perception of the degree of students' prior word knowledge. These criteria were positioned within the larger themes of intentionality and spontaneity.

Word Importance. Words were perceived as important for a variety of reasons. As Graves (2006) suggests, the teachers did choose words on the basis of their significance to comprehension of the story. Some words were intentionally selected because of their relevance to the theme or content area currently being studied, consistent with Graves' concept of word utility (2006). Two additional reasons for targeting words that are not included in Graves' guidelines emerged from the data: immediate utility and student interest. Words were often a focus on instruction when they had immediate utility and would be needed for an assignment following the read-aloud. This is somewhat different from the concept of utility described in the literature that centers on a word's

general utility rather than on the very specific practical utility of a subsequent assignment. Teachers were also very responsive to student interest in specific words. While a word may not have been initially targeted for instruction, the teachers spontaneously addressed student questions about word meanings during the read-alouds.

Important for comprehension. Teaching every unfamiliar word in a particular text is not feasible, so teachers prioritize words that are deemed critical to comprehension. In her interview, Debby stated, “I think that if it’s a word that definitely they need to understand in order to get the meaning – um, because some of them are just like descriptive words that if they don’t quite get it, it’s ok. But if it really has some kind of meaning to the whole story, then I need to stop and make sure that they understand it.” Words that were essential for comprehension were selected for instruction while those considered less important might be passed over altogether or dealt with in a cursory manner.

Important for content relevance. Books for read-alouds are often selected because of their connection to instructional themes or units (Kindle, 2008). In these cases, vocabulary that is related to the content or themes would be a natural choice. For example, Barbara does a thematic unit on butterflies each year. She selects non-fiction texts for read-alouds, focusing on content vocabulary such as larva and chrysalis to develop children’s understanding of these terms.

Cindy talked about the importance of selecting words based on their relevance to current events and the social studies curriculum.

Cindy: For example, right now we’re reading The Kid Who Ran for President (Gutman, 2000). So we’re looking at words like ballot, and to register, and Republican, and Democrat. And I think it’s really important, especially now with what’s going on right now in the nation – for them to understand what these words mean so that they know what’s going on and they’re educated as far as what’s happening.

Important for assignments. Teachers often integrate writing assignments with read-alouds (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004), and such assignments impact word selection. In this study, Cindy and Debby were both observed as they introduced the novel *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985)

to their classes. The different nature of their follow-up writing activity influenced their word selection decisions.

Cindy planned for her students to use the text *I am plain and tall* as a pattern for writing descriptive statements about themselves; thus, more than definitional knowledge would be required. Children needed to understand the function of the word *plain* as a descriptor of Sarah's appearance.

Cindy: Now Sarah said plain. What do you think plain means?

By imagining how she looks, she says plain.

Following Debby's introduction to the same text, she asked students to use visualization skills and draw a picture of what Sarah looked like when she got off the train. She also discussed the word *plain*, but was far more focused on the word *bonnet* so the children would create accurate depictions of Sarah.

In a subsequent chapter, Debby's post-reading assignment included drawing a picture of a storm and writing a description. As she read the chapter, she focused on words that were related to the task such as *squall*, *pungent*, *still*, *hail*, and *flattened*. She wrote the words on the board for students to use during their writing.

In these representative examples, word selection was influenced by immediate utility rather than the more general utility suggested by the literature (Beck, et al., 2002; Graves, 2006). By drawing attention to the words during the read-aloud, the teachers increased the likelihood that students would incorporate the new words into their writing. Opportunities for such authentic use of new vocabulary facilitate the acquisition of novel words into students' expressive vocabularies, which is an important word-learning task (Graves, 2006).

Important to students. Students in all observed classes asked questions about the meaning of words, exhibiting word consciousness, defined by Graves (2006) as "the awareness of and interest in words and their meanings" (p. 119, stress in the original). When students ask questions, they demonstrate their active engagement with the text and the construction of meaning. The teachers, who responded with definitions, synonyms, and examples, honored such spontaneous queries. Even though the exchanges were not planned, student interest was sufficient to engage in discussion, however brief. For example, when reading the end matter of *Leonardo and the Flying Boy* (Anholt, 2007), Debby mentioned the word *crossbow*.

Debby: (reading text) Salai met a predictable, reckless end when he was killed by a crossbow.

Student: What's a crossbow?

Debby: Like a bow and arrow only this way (making a horizontal motion with her hand)

While listening to Barbara read *The Bear's Picnic* (Berenstain, 1996), a student asked for the meaning of the word *lad*. Barbara reminded the students that they had seen the word in another story and asked them to recall the meaning. After a few wrong guesses, a student suggested that a *lad* is a boy. Barbara confirmed the correct response, provided additional information, and contextualized the definition within the current read-aloud.

Barbara: Lily had lion cubs that were named Lass and Lad, and Lad means a boy. Lass means a girl. So Papa Bear has called Small Bear "lad".

Cindy regularly incorporated student selection of words into her instructional routine. This practice is consistent with the research suggesting that student selection of words increases learning (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000). After reading each chapter, students were asked for words to add to an ongoing vocabulary chart. Students suggested words and phrases from the text that were then discussed and a few words were added to the class list to be looked up in the dictionary at a later time. Graves (2006) suggests that opportunities to practice dictionary use should be a factor in word selection, which confirms that Cindy's practice aligns well with the literature.

In all of these examples, teachers responded to student interest in word meaning. In her interview, Debby explained that is difficult to anticipate which words the students will and will not know. She is pleased that her students monitor their own comprehension and will ask questions if there are words they don't understand, interpreting this behavior as evidence of motivation and active learning.

Importance of context. The ability to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words from context is an important skill for young readers to develop. Using context clues is "probably the most frequently used reading strategy for determining the meaning of an unknown word" (Newton, Padak, & Rasinski, 2008, p. 7). When teachers select words for instruction that are presented in highly supportive contexts and model the strategies for using that context to determine word meaning, they help their students develop this skill

and encourage them to use this strategy independently, which in effect reduces the number of words that must be directly taught (Graves, 2006).

Debby and Cindy seemed particularly aware of the importance of context clues. As second grade teachers with fairly independent readers, the emphasis on context clues makes sense. Both teachers reported considering the context when selecting words for instruction in order to provide meaningful practice for students.

Cindy: I also try to pick the words that they can figure out the meaning just by the context clues. If I repeat the sentences, they'll get it. And so those are – what I think the best words to pick out – cause then they can justify why it means that.

Debby's prior experience teaching older students was clearly a factor in her beliefs about the importance of context as a strategy for success on standardized achievement texts as well as for independent reading.

Debby: I think that [context clues] comes from the 8th grade because that's- you know – that's what we did. It was all context clues. And even on the TAKS test, you know – it was context clues and how do you look at the words around that word and figure out what it is. And I think that's a good strategy to use actually.

Degree of Prior Word Knowledge. Clearly, the most salient factor in word selection among the teachers in this study was whether they believed that their students knew the word. Given the variance in the number and type of words that children in any particular class might know (Biemiller, 1999, Graves & Slater, 1987), determining word knowledge is a complex task. Teachers must be well attuned to students' extant word knowledge to make informed choices. Teachers' selections are guided by an awareness of degrees of word knowledge, sensitivity to students' confusions, and experience with children.

Degrees of word knowledge. Word learning occurs incrementally as novel terms are encountered in various contexts over time (Cronbach, 1942; Dale, 1965; Nagy & Scott, 2000). Some words might be unfamiliar to all students in the class, but it is more likely that students' word knowledge will represent several stages or points along the continuum from partial to full knowledge. An exchange from Cindy's class illustrates the point.

Cindy: (reading text) **Far from the field, a meadowlark sang,**
too. What's a meadowlark? What's a meadowlark?
Nathan?

Nathan: An echo.

Cindy: No, not an echo.

Sarah: A bird?

Cindy: A bird. It's a kind of bird.

Nathan did not know the word meadowlark and incorrectly inferred a definition from the context. Sarah correctly identifies a meadowlark as a type of bird, although in this exchange it is not possible to determine whether this constitutes prior word knowledge or if the word sang helps her make that connection.

The teachers also developed new meanings for known words, one of the six word-learning tasks identified by Graves (2006). Two teachers specifically selected words (badger, bat, stew) that fell into this category. Multiple meaning words were often selected for instruction, indicating the teachers' awareness of the difficulty posed by alternate meanings.

Cindy: You know, we saw "badger" in The Kid Who Ran For President (Gutman, 2000). Well it's not the animal, it's to annoy. And so, I would say what does badger mean – well it's an animal – well let's read the context – let's make sure that this is right.

In a similar example, Barbara drew her students' attention to an unfamiliar use of the word stew, pointing out the dissonance between the familiar definition and the context to help the students see the contrast.

Barbara: (reading text) **Now stop asking questions. Be quiet. Stop stewing. Your father knows what he is doing.**
So Papa has asked Small Bear to stop stewing. Is he talking about making stew?

Students: No!

Barbara: What does he want him to do? Stop stewing. What does he want him to do?

Sensitivity to students' confusions. While reading, the teachers responded to indications the children did not understand such as puzzled looks or questions. As Patricia stated, "You can see it in their faces when they don't understand." Perceived confusions impacted not only word selection, but depth

of instruction as well. Cindy explained, “But pretty much if I get a little puzzled look from them, I’ll go a little bit further with the word.”

Students in all classes were encouraged to ask questions about word meanings. This was evident in all classrooms and acknowledged by the teachers as a means of selecting words for instruction. Debby pointed out these questions may not occur during the reading itself but may arise on subsequent days after the child has had time to ponder what he heard.

Teachers often use favorite books year after year and use those experiences to guide word selection. Additionally, the two veteran teachers (Debby and Barbara) relied on their prior experiences as both teachers and parents to anticipate which words would be unknown. For example, although relatively new to teaching second grade, Debby reported using her knowledge of her grandson’s vocabulary as a guide as she explained, “And if I don’t think he would know that word, I try to stop and say – so you all know what that means?”

Intentionality versus Spontaneity. A somewhat surprising finding of this study was the lack of intentionality and advance planning in the selection of words for instruction. Although all of the teachers stated strong beliefs in the importance of vocabulary and the role of read-alouds in developing word knowledge, the data suggest that pre-selection of words was less common than spontaneous instruction.

Intentionality. All participants showed evidence of advanced selection of words at some point in the study, consistent with recommended practice (Beck et al., 2002; Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009; Graves, 2006). Such evidence might include having target terms written on sentences strips or on the board, indicated in lesson plans, or leading discussions prior to reading the text. Advanced selection of words seemed to occur more frequently when related to the purpose of the read-aloud, subsequent assignments, and instructional routines.

Three of the teachers (Debby, Cindy, and Patricia) had distinct differences in their read-aloud styles between those characterized as instructional and those characterized as aesthetic. For these teachers, the aesthetic read-alouds took place in a group gathering, with children informally seated or laying down on the floor. In contrast, the instructional read-alouds

took place with children seated at their desks and the teacher standing in front of the room.

There was a clear difference in the degree of planning for these two contexts with evidence of advance selection of words occurring more frequently when the read-aloud had an instructional intent. For example, Barbara had target words written on sentence strips or the board and discussed the words prior to reading when the read-aloud had an instructional focus. When the purpose of the read-aloud was aesthetic, she did not engage in either of those strategies. Patricia listed words on the board during an instructional read-aloud and had students choose two to include in their vocabulary notebooks.

Pre-selection of words also occurred when teachers had a follow-up assignment planned that would require their use. The greatest degree of intentionality was noted when words would be needed for a post-reading assignment such as when Debby highlighted vocabulary related to the storm so that the students would use these words in a writing assignment.

Another factor that appeared related to this difference was classroom routine. Cindy had a consistent instructional routine after reading that included a focus on vocabulary words. Children were asked to suggest words to add to a vocabulary list. Cindy added words that she thought were important. No similar routine was incorporated into the aesthetic read-alouds.

Spontaneity. During the course of this study, the teachers seemed more prone to select words during the reading. When they encountered a word that they thought would be unknown or was important to comprehension they simply stopped and addressed it at that time. They relied on their instincts, knowledge of “average” children’s vocabulary and in some cases, their own confusions or questions about word meaning to guide their choices.

While degree of spontaneity is needed to be able to respond appropriately to students, selecting words “on the run” can lead to ineffective instruction and teacher error (Kindle, 2008). Responding “in the moment” to student questions and confusions is important, but the lack of intentionality in word selection can lead to time spent discussing words of little utility, such as the nonsense words quogwinkle, chittering, and squibbling in the reading of *The BFG* (Dahl, 1982).

Additionally, spontaneity can be an inefficient use of instructional time. Incidences of extended, tangential discourse and the conveyance of confusing and at times erroneous information occurred when teachers did not have a clear definition in mind for a target word. For example, while reading *The BFG* aloud, Debby spontaneously selected a nonsense word for instruction from the text. When a student correctly used context clues to infer a definition, Debby did not acknowledge his correct response, but rather stated that she wasn't sure what the word meant, resulting in a confusing instructional sequence. Her lack of familiarity was confirmed as she realized a few paragraphs later that the child's definition made sense and confirmed the word meaning.

Adequate preparation can minimize the likelihood of misleading or erroneous information being conveyed. Reading the books in advance and analyzing the words selected for instruction would likely decrease some types of errors. Teacher miscues while reading aloud are easy to understand as teachers' attention is divided between the text and the students. But miscues can be problematic when the teacher is relying on context clues to convey word meaning and selects target terms spontaneously. While reading *The BFG*, Cindy substituted the word took for shook - an easily made miscue. Unfortunately, when the listener is trying to infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word, a simple miscue leads to confusion, particularly when the miscue is targeted for instruction. The phrase took the bottle vigorously provides a much different context than shook the bottle vigorously. When asked for the meaning of the unfamiliar word vigorously, students offered synonyms such as snatch and grab, using context clues as they had been taught. Even the teacher seemed confused by her miscue. She ended the discussion by suggesting that excitedly or quickly would be acceptable definitions.

Implications and Conclusion

Read-alouds are frequent events in primary classrooms and are an important vehicle for vocabulary development, particularly for children who enter school with smaller receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge. The teachers in this study showed some evidence of selecting words in advance (intentionality), but more typically relied on their experiences with their students and intuition (spontaneity) to guide them in identifying words that might be unfamiliar. To maximize student achievement and to begin to narrow the vocabulary gaps that exist among students, it is necessary to explore ways to

increase the learning potential in every facet of the day. The practices of the four primary teachers in this study provide a lens with which to explore our own practices as we seek to refine and improve our instruction.

Although read-alouds can be enjoyable literacy events with minimal teacher preparation, analysis suggests the instructional power would be greatly enhanced with a more considered approach toward word selection (i.e., Coyne et al., 2004; Justice et al., 2005; Kindle, 2012; Loftus et al., 2010). This is particularly important when read-alouds serve as a primary vehicle for vocabulary instruction and when student needs for vocabulary development are significant. Familiarity with the guidelines for word selection found in the professional literature and pre-selecting words for instruction based on those guidelines would be two simple steps to increasing student learning.

Recommendations for Teachers and Teacher Educators

The practices of the teachers in this study, in conjunction with the literature on word selection, suggest various steps teachers can take to refine their own practices. These concepts can easily be added as additional focal points in reading methods courses to be sure that novice teachers approach read-alouds with intention and purpose. For example, an assignment in a methods course might be to identify words for instruction within a read-aloud text and script how those words might be addressed through the use of labelling, gestures, or synonyms. As in most areas of teaching, when selecting words for instruction, it is a matter of balance.

- Immediate/Long term utility: Teachers should seek to balance words needed for immediate use in a specific context, such as a writing assignment, with words that have utility in the broader curriculum.
- Pre-selection/spontaneous choice: Teachers should respond to student questions and confusions, but this should be balanced with reasoned pre-selection of words.
- Personal experience/research literature: As teachers, we rely heavily on our own experiences and intuition when selecting words, and this can be quite effective. We need to balance that with familiarity with the professional literature to ensure we stay current in our understandings. Classifying words selected by tier or checking selecting words against

one of the published word lists are among the strategies teachers might use to ensure their choices are consistent with research.

Future Research

The descriptions of read-aloud events obtained in this exploratory study raise many questions about teacher practice and the criteria used to select words for instruction during read-alouds. Is passage comprehension the most critical factor, or should future utility be considered more salient? Should one select partially known words, as suggested by Biemiller (2006), or focus on words that can be taught in the time available (Longo & Curtis, 2008)? These questions indicate the need to continue this line of research.

In order to explore actual teacher practices in this study, it was deemed necessary to limit the influence of the researcher as much as possible. While a balanced text set of narrative and informational texts would have enriched the data set, the teachers were given complete freedom to choose texts in order to ensure authentic practice. The resulting dominance of narrative texts in the study is not unusual and the bias for narrative text in primary classrooms is well-documented in the literature (i.e. Duke, 2000). Future studies might strive to achieve representation of multiple genres and informational texts to examine how word selection is influenced by the nature of the text. Specifically, it would be interesting to note whether teachers were more intentional in their selection of words from informational texts, as well as to see how they determined the degree of prior knowledge students brought to the reading.

Additionally, future studies should expand the number of participants and educational settings. For example, the teachers in this school did not use a published curriculum in which both reading selections and vocabulary words are predetermined. It is possible that using such a program for reading instruction would have an effect on the words teachers selected for instruction in their read-alouds. A variety of educational settings would also facilitate an examination of how practice might differ in classrooms serving a large number of English Language Learners or students from under-resourced neighborhoods. Children from these populations typically have greater vocabulary needs (Biemiller, 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995). Are teachers more intentional in their selection of words and explicit in their instruction in these contexts? Replicating this study with more teachers in more schools will

provide greater understanding of teacher practice as well as the factors that influence their choices.

More research is needed regarding the guiding principles of word selection. Although there are several published lists of vocabulary words (e.g. Biemiller, 1999; Dale & O'Rourke, 1981; Fry, 2004) that might serve as a guide for teachers, does selecting words from these lists result in greater outcomes than selecting words based on other criteria, such as Beck et al.'s (2002) tiered system? This strand of research would serve word selection in published curricula as well. In an analysis of selected pre-school programs, Neuman and Dwyer (2009) concluded there were no apparent criteria for word selection. It is little wonder that individual teachers would experience confusion when purported experts are not in consensus on best practice.

Finally, research is needed to explore the reasons why the gulf between practice and research continues in education and what might be done to narrow the gap. Easy access to the professional literature via the Internet means that the availability of quality resources is no longer an issue. If research is not impacting practice, we need to consider why that is the case. Are teachers too busy to read professional literature? Are articles written in a way that findings are readily understood? What sources do teachers go to for continued professional development? In this study, the teachers talked about the importance of vocabulary development, but lacked a comprehensive approach to instructional that was based on research, relying instead on conventional wisdom. It is important to determine if there are contextual constraints on teachers, such as the requirement to follow a specific curriculum, that result in teachers ceding the responsibility for vocabulary selection to others.

Conclusion

Research indicates that read-alouds can be effective vehicles for vocabulary development in pre- and beginning readers (e.g., Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Elley, 1989; Justice et al., 2005). Ultimately, the impact of read-alouds on vocabulary depends on decisions made by teachers in terms of word selection and instructional practices. While the teachers in this study talked about the importance of read-alouds to build vocabulary, they did not have a clearly articulated set of criteria for word selection, nor did they engage in advanced planning in the same way they planned other lessons. The lack of such planning can lower the quality of instruction, and on occasion result in misleading

instruction as seen in this study. Given that research has shown that vocabulary gaps at school entry increase rather than decrease, educators need to approach vocabulary instruction and word selection with purpose and intent as they do with the other components of reading instruction.

Despite widespread acceptance of the importance of vocabulary instruction in the educational community, many schools, including the site for this study, leave the task of vocabulary development to teacher judgment, publisher recommendations in a basal program, or a purchased curriculum. The problem with these approaches is that there is no long range, unified understanding among those enacting such curricula for developing vocabulary. There is a need for schools and school districts to develop comprehensive programs for vocabulary development and read-alouds should play a significant role in instruction. The need for this type of program is particularly great in schools serving economically disadvantaged children and English language learners.

Studies of teacher behaviors during read-alouds illuminate areas of dissonance between research and practice. This work contributes to the field by identifying criteria that teachers used for word selection during read-alouds and drawing comparisons to best-practice recommendations in the literature. This comparison sheds light on the need for more effective transfer of knowledge from the research community to practitioners, and poses questions that lead to continued work in the field.

Finally, this study serves as a reminder of the importance of teachers to continue to reflect critically on their own practice in all aspects of instruction, including read-alouds to ensure every opportunity is maximized to impact student learning. Teachers in the primary grades do not necessarily have the freedom to select the texts for whole-class instruction and/or read-alouds. The teachers in this study were expected by the principal to include read-alouds daily, and they complied with this mandate. In other schools, teachers may be required to teach from a specific series and to adhere to publishers' suggestions for vocabulary words to teach. Nevertheless, teachers have the ultimate responsibility to use their own judgement in vocabulary instruction as they are best positioned to determine the degree of word knowledge of their students and to create a climate of word consciousness in their classrooms. However

well-intentioned, simply incorporating read-alouds will not be sufficient to grow students' vocabularies without purposeful, intentional planning.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Topic Domain 1: Teaching Experiences

Lead-off question: Tell me about how you came to teach at Westpark School.

Covert categories:

- Prior teaching experience – years and location
- Attitudes toward current school versus previous teaching contexts
- Attitudes/beliefs regarding students, parents, and administration

Possible Follow-up Questions:

- Tell me about some of your other teaching experiences.
- What made you decide to teach at Westpark?
- How do your experiences here compare to your previous experiences?
- What do you like best about teaching at Westpark?

Topic Domain 2: Understanding of Vocabulary Development

Lead-off question: Tell me about how you incorporate vocabulary into your instruction

Covert categories:

- Understanding of vocabulary development and acquisition
- How is vocabulary development incorporated into the language arts curriculum
- Understanding of the role vocabulary plays in reading ability

Possible Follow-up questions:

- How do you see your students' vocabulary developing over the year?
- What are some of the ways that you have developed vocabulary recently with your class?
- What evidence of positive impacts of vocabulary instruction with your students have you seen?

Topic Domain 3: Use of Read-aloud

Lead-off question: Talk me through the process of a typical read-aloud.

Covert categories:

- Text selection
- Uses of read alouds
- Word selection for instruction/focus
- Planning versus spontaneity

Possible follow-up questions:

- What are some of the books you have recently read to your students?
- What do you think about when selecting a book for a read-aloud?
- How do you decide which words to focus on for instruction?
- I noticed that sometimes the words seem to be selected in advance, and other times it seems that they reflect “in the moment” decisions – can you tell me a little about that?

Topic Domain 4: Instructional Strategies

Lead-off question: What are some of the vocabulary development strategies that you use in your classroom?

Covert categories:

- What strategies does the teacher consider to be good instructional strategies?

- Is there consistency between what is stated and actual practice?
- Is the teacher aware of her own strategy use?
- Is strategy use planned or accidental?

Possible follow-up questions

- What are some strategies that you have found to work well with your students?
- What are some of the strategies you have used this week in your teaching?
- How do you determine whether your vocabulary instruction has been effective?

About the Author

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Affirmation, Analysis, and Agency: Book Clubs as Spaces for Critical Conversations with Young Adolescent Women of Color

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Abstract

This paper explores how female urban adolescents of color, who participated in a literacy book club during their senior year in high school, understood the impact of race, class, and gender oppression on the novels' characters, themselves, and their communities. Based on transcripts from book club discussions and interviews conducted at the end of their senior year and the end of their first year of college, the authors illustrate how participants affirmed and asserted their voices; analyzed texts for racism, sexism, and classism; and promoted their own and others' growth and sense of agency as resilient young women of color.



**Affirmation, Analysis, and Agency:
Book Clubs as Spaces for Critical Conversations
with Young Adolescent Women of Color**

Books are powerful catalysts in the psyches of adolescent readers who may forge character alliances as they analyze relationships and behaviors (Rosenblatt, 1995). Through characters' experiences, students embrace or critique a myriad of scenarios during reading. If their connections with texts are strong, students may even place themselves within the text, making powerful bonds with characters and their situations (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Sutherland, 2005). These interactions create robust, complex reading engagements, within which adolescents learn about diverse experiences and uncover critical issues about themselves and their communities. These engagements, however, are contextualized as students construct meaning based on their cultural knowledge, background, and experiences (Brooks, 2006). Textual engagements can also be complicated or strengthened through conversations with others, particularly within book clubs (Enciso, 2007; Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001). Through discussions, book club members express initial textual interpretations, which become springboards to examine their own, and others' experiences and communities. These analytic conversations can shape and reshape adolescent identities as they learn to trust and affirm their own voices, take risks to act in new and positive ways, and analyze the texts and their own and others' perspectives, (Twomey, 2007; Vyas, 2004; Wissman, 2011).

Recently, researchers have called for more nuanced ethnographic studies to explore how diverse students respond to diverse texts so as to better understand the relationships and intersections between culture, identity, and interpretation (Brooks, 2006; Hill, 2009; Sutherland, 2005). This study will inform instruction and extend research that has been done on book clubs as critical and transformative spaces for urban African American, Latino/a, and Asian youth (Polleck, 2010; Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks, 2006; Vyas, 2004). In this paper, the authors analyzed conversations of five 12th grade adolescent women of color as they participated in a yearlong book club. The goal was to extend understandings of the experiences of diverse, urban adolescent females, as a way to complicate the

dynamics of book club and its effects on identity while simultaneously revealing the negotiations and conversations that occur, particularly when interpreting literature. In doing so, the following questions were explored: How did high school seniors analyze the identities and experiences of the characters and connect those to their own lives, specifically as these connections relate to issues involving gender and race? In what ways did book club influence the participants once they graduated high school?

Theoretical Framework

Reader Response Theory and Critical Literacy

The connection between identity and literacy is unique in that often students' identities can be influenced through the act of reading (Rosenblatt, 1995). Conversely, students' literacy engagements are influenced by their identities, in that who they are affects how they interact with different texts within different contexts (Ferdman, 1990). Literacy and identity are also both socially constructed (Moje & Luke, 2009). Typically, identity construction and literacy practices—both in and out of the classroom—are not conducted in isolation and are renegotiated based on text, context, and interactions with others. Overall, literacy and identity are fluid and interactive processes that are constantly changing, contradictory and permeable.

Reader response theory takes into account individual identities and social practices when considering literacy events. Coined by Rosenblatt, reader response theory shifts traditional textual interactions of one solitary meaning to a transaction between the author's text and the reader's interpretations of that text (Twomey, 2007). Rosenblatt theorizes that meaning occurs neither individually within the text nor the reader, but when the text and the reader transact (Fecho & Meacham, 2007). In this way, readers have agency by constructing meanings through the prism of their beliefs, cultural backgrounds, value systems, and experiences.

Several researchers have expanded Rosenblatt's work (Brooks, 2006; Twomey, 2007), theorizing that reader response should not only emphasize personal experiences but also account for the social and political dimensions of readers, texts, and context. Textual meanings are thus influenced by the reader's cultural background (Brooks, 2006) and by social interactions, sociocultural

conditions, and the contexts in which individuals engage with texts (Twomey, 2007). Furthermore, linguistic diversity and the ways in which we practice language are bound to whom and how we talk (Fecho & Meacham, 2007). Thus, students' social and cultural practices must be in the forefront of analysis when attempting to understand the complexity of literacy interpretations.

Another layer of meaning-making is the use of critical literacy, where students are encouraged "to adopt a questioning stance," whereby they "work toward changing themselves and their worlds" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 472). Educational theorists (Freire, 1986; Lalik & Oliver, 2007) argue that all places where literacy occurs are political. When readers attempt to understand and influence political dimensions of literacy spaces, they engage in critical literacy; thus, critical literacy is about transformation and social change (Gee, 2001). Jones (2006) believes that critical literacy creates spaces where students can "claim value in their experiences and critique mainstream ideals" (p. 60). Book clubs can create this context, where students discuss issues of discrimination placed on characters and their identities and communities.

Context, Conversation, and Construction of Book Club

Given that book clubs are not contextualized in isolation, this study is framed in spatial theories that examine how identities shape and are shaped by context (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). Researchers such as Kinloch (2009a) urge educators to examine relationships between location and literacy, as these constructs affect identities and literacy engagements in spaces outside of school, which "are oftentimes remarkably different from their school-based interactions" (p. 321). Informed by New Literacy Studies (NLS), spatial and literacy theorists explore the "multiplicities of literacies across various cultural and social contexts" (Kinloch, 2009b, p. 155), so as to understand how identities and interactions are shaped by the spaces in which they unfold.

Fisher (2006) defines these spaces as participatory literacy communities, where adolescents have a safe venue to explore identity, which may not be available in traditional school settings. Her research on alternative forums for literacy and identity development accounts for how power relations based on race, class, gender, and other identity markers permeate social contexts and determine which tasks are done, whose literacies are engaged, and whose voices

are valued. Book clubs are places to explore these conceptions, particularly how texts and conversations help to locate identities, create communities, and enact degrees of agency in the face of oppression (Smith, 2000).

Specifically, research has emerged about how book clubs assist young women and people of color, demonstrating how these locations operate as spaces to discuss race, class, and gender in ways that traditional classrooms often overlook or ignore (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Fisher, 2006). By using texts which illuminate the experiences of people of color, book clubs and other literary spaces have enabled young women of color to explore their historical legacies and connections with people of African descent (Fisher, 2006) and find voice and self-esteem (Boston & Baxley, 2007). They also grapple with topics such as discrimination based on skin color stratification (Brooks, Browne & Hampton, 2008). Further, researchers have found that book clubs helped prepare adolescents to live in diverse societies (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001) and assisted Asian adolescents experiencing identity duality (Vyas, 2004).

This study expands this burgeoning research by analyzing how young women of different ethnicities engaged in discussions of literature centered on the lives of women of color within an afterschool book club. The authors examine how participants conceptualized these experiences at the end of their senior year and one year later, after they completed their first year of college. The authors highlight how the women critiqued issues of race, class, and gender within the texts, their own lives, and their communities, as well as how these critiques grew more analytical and agentic over time.

Methods

Context and Book Club Processes

The book club met at a small urban high school in New York City. At the time of data collection, the high school served approximately 450 students of whom 66% qualified for free lunch. In terms of ethnicity, the school hosted students who were 62% Latino, 30% African American, 4% Asian, and 3% White. Ranked by the NYC rating system as being in “good standing,” at the time of the study, the school administration provided teachers with ongoing professional development on literacy and culturally responsive, student-centered, and differentiated instruction.

The first author who facilitated these groups had been a literacy coach at the school since 2004, and during the time of data collection, served as a part-time English teacher (although she never taught the participants). During the time of this study, book clubs were not part of the English classes' curriculum; however, independent reading where students had choice in texts was part of the entire English department's classroom culture. The adolescents in this study were seniors; four participated in book club with the first author for their first three years of high school. Sessions typically took place on Thursdays after school for one hour.

The history of this book club is long and complex. The first author originally recruited students during their freshmen year, by visiting English classrooms to explain the purposes of book club. She distributed flyers and held introductory meetings after school, where over 20 students attended. The first author established four separate book clubs based on grade level. The book club on which this study is based started with one 10th-grade African American female who graduated before this study took place and four 9th-grade females who participated for four years.

During their senior year, all of the participants were 17-year old females. A brief overview of participants follows. At the time of data collection, Tia lived with her father, mother, and brother. Her father is "Panamanian and African American and speaks fluent Spanish," while her mother is African American. Tia speaks English at home. During her pre-interview, she explained, "I'm technically African American and Hispanic, but when I write the question on a test, I always put African American. And I feel bad, like maybe I should put it all. I struggle with it." Fay identified as "Black." Her mother, a teacher in Kenya, died when Fay was three years old. Fay currently lives with her brother and father who are immigrants from Trinidad. Sofia identified herself as "Hispanic," explaining that her mother is from Ecuador while her father is from Cuba. Sofia speaks Spanish at home, where she lives with her brother and parents. Joy defined herself as a "Latino artist," clarifying during her pre-interview that she most identified "with reading books." Joy is a first-generation U.S. citizen who speaks Spanish at home and lives with her Columbian mother, her sister and her son, and her Peruvian father. During the final year of book club, the participants invited Mary to join because of her love for literature. Mary, who identified herself as Chinese American and speaks Hakka at home, is also a first-generation U.S. citizen who lives with her brother, parents, and grandparents. When asked in their pre-interviews about class identification, three of the participants identified themselves as "lower class," with Fay describing herself as "poor" and Sofia as "middle class."

As in the previous three years, this study of the book club employed a student-led approach, which allowed participants to have ownership over the discussions and choice of texts (Lalik & Oliver, 2007). The first author began the sessions with asking the women about school, home, and their relationships with others. Because the participants knew each other from school, they were friends and for the most part had bonds with one another and with the first author. Except for Mary who was new to the group, the first author was knowledgeable about many of the adolescents' personal lives, as they all confided with her about many intimate issues. These relationships were strong due to the longitudinal work the first author did with these four adolescents.

During the first book club meeting of the participants' senior year, the first author asked them about using a more "critical lens" when deciding on texts and interpreting novels. Initially skeptical, Sofia responded, "That sounds great—as long as it doesn't get boring—and we can still talk about our lives." The first author agreed—and the group met at a bookstore where they selected the texts for the year. The first author suggested that participants choose texts by or about women of color on the theory that such literature more likely mirrored their experiences (Au, 2009; Banks, 2007; Sutherland, 2005). The young women ventured through the bookstore and eventually voted on four novels: *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Golden, 2005), *Dirty Girls Social Club* (Valdes-Rodriguez, 2003), *Zami* (Lorde, 1982), and *God of Small Things* (Roy, 1998). See Figure 1 for summaries of the texts. Additionally, to be sure all of the young women felt comfortable with this new direction, the first author interviewed each participant about the new approach.

From October to May, book club met once a week. Routines and rituals had already been established over the past three years, and Mary fit in naturally. Each session began with time to discuss their lives, and then the group turned to the texts. Usually, one participant began with an initial emotional response such as "I can't believe what Lauren did!" or a question such as "Can we assume that stereotypes come from the majority race?" Other times the participants began with connections such as "That part reminded me of my family." The first author also asked the participants to use post-it notes to mark places in the novels where race, class, or gender was of significance to the story or connected to their experiences.

Regardless of how meetings began, the participants respectfully listened to each other and responded to a comment by asking questions or making statements of agreement or disagreement. No one raised hands nor looked to the first author for guidance; the participants led the group on their own, taking turns to ensure that every voice was heard. This is not to say the first author was silent; in fact, as will be explained later, she participated by sharing her responses, connections, and questions.

Roles of Researchers

As both researchers are white, they were careful to minimize the reproduction of a “European American ‘regime of truth’” (Rogers & Fuller, 2007, p. 88). The authors recognized that because of their Whiteness, they benefit economically, psychologically, and socially from their racial status and therefore lack the experiences of oppression that young low-income women of color live with every day. The authors tried to keep the integrity of the participants’ voices throughout the manuscript. While they could not include all conversations, they selected passages that built upon and contributed to research on critical literacy. By immersing themselves in scholarship by and about people of color and engaging in conversations with one another about the data, they pushed their analyses to be reflective and grounded in theories that work against deficit models. They also sought feedback not only from scholars of color but from the participants, who once drafts were completed, had the opportunity to provide feedback. The first author had a particularly precarious role where the lines of “pedagogy and research blur” (Fecho & Meacham, 2007, p. 179). To work against her hierarchal position, she gave the participants as much discretion as possible in the selection of books and the direction of the conversations.

As a participant observer in the book club, the first author asked questions to learn more about how the women understood and problematized issues of race, class, and gender—and even shared her own experiences and opinions when asked. In this way, the first author had a complicated role—as participant, facilitator, and researcher. She conferred often with the second author, both during and after data collection, so as to reflect on her role; both authors kept analytic memos (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). To be specific about the involvement of the first author, it is important to point to her verbal

Figure 1: Summary of Primary Texts

Summary of Primary Texts
<p>Dirty Girls Social Club: In this novel, Alisa Valdez-Rodriguez (2003) develops the narratives of six Latinas who attended Boston University together. Post-graduation, the women work to maintain success in both love and careers. Offering multiple perspectives from each woman, Valdez-Rodriguez also reveals the complexities of female friendships.</p>
<p>God of Small Things: Written by Arundhati Roy (1998), this novel is the story of an Indian family in the 1960s when Communism intersected with the hierarchies of the caste system. The primary characters, twins Rahel and Estha, learn painfully the consequences of forbidden love and power inequities. Roy explores, literally and symbolically, issues surrounding Marxism, race, gender, class, and voice.</p>
<p>Memoirs of a Geisha: Written by Arthur Golden (2005), <i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i> is based on Sayuri, a young girl who is sold into a geisha house in the 1930s. This text reveals her life and struggles, particularly addressing notions of power, class, gender, and the complicated relationships between women.</p>
<p>Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: Published in 1982, Audre Lorde tells her story through a new genre of biomythography. She details her experiences growing up in Harlem as a daughter of West Indian parents. She beautifully describes her life from child to adulthood, painfully revealing how issues surrounding race, class, homophobia, and gender affected her and her various communities of friends and family.</p>

contributions. In the initial meetings, the first author presented textual excerpts related to race, class, or gender and asked the participants why these passages might be important. For example, the first author asked, “Did you catch that line? ‘I’m just not a good Latina.’ What do you think she means?” The first author also revealed her own experiences in relation to gender and class

oppression. Hill (2009) finds this disclosure to be a critical part of discourse as a way to allow students to take risks and share difficult stories. The first author also assisted the women in co-constructing meaning of more critical language, such as the differences between race and ethnicity or the definitions of critical race theory and marginalization. Finally, through directed questions, the first author sometimes pushed the participants to think more critically about the texts, as in the following example from the final discussion of *The God of Small Things*:

First Author: Now that we've finished the book, what do you think the major themes are?

Tia: Maybe, power?

Author: So what is this [book] saying about power?

Fay: Power depends on the people.

Sofia: Power is about how everybody lives regardless of what happens, regardless of who's in power.

Author: Who do you think has power?

Fay: Maybe the men.

Sofia: I don't think so because the women seem to be, not powerful, but very headstrong.

Fay: Yeah, but it's the father that moves Estha back. No woman made that decision.

Sofia: That's why I don't think it's men because it's just stereotyping...

As reflected in this interaction, the first author not only asked participants to explain inequities, but she encouraged them to explore why these exist. She also asked the women to connect these inequities to their own lives and communities in order to formulate their own theories about contextualized oppression.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data came from multiple sources. While the first author met with the participants 23 times in one year, together, the researchers selected only 10 of these meetings for analysis, choosing sessions where all participants were in attendance and in which most discussions related to the books. Other data

included audio-taped interviews at the beginning and end of the year in which the participants discussed their literacy practices, communities, and understandings of race, class, and gender. The researchers also conducted audio-taped interviews with participants during the summer after their first year in college to examine the potential impact of the book club experience.

For the qualitative analysis of the transcripts, the authors used inductive and deductive coding procedures (LeCompte & Scheunsel, 1999). Before coding, the authors read through all transcripts for a holistic view of the data. They then coded broadly, based on discourse related to race, class, or gender; items were double coded when two or three codes intersected, which was often. During the next level of analysis, the authors coded discourse that centered on issues of identity, power, and agency—derived from research on critical sociocultural theory (Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007). An identity code was marked whenever the girls discussed their own relationship to race, gender, or class in terms of how they represented themselves. For example, Mary connected to the others when they talked about how their identities are often stereotyped, stating, “It’s the same thing. Do whatever you can, but for Asians, we have so much pride, especially the Chinese. They’ll go for ambitious stuff that seems so unworldly but yet we’ll try it anyway.” Like identity markers, power codes could occur when the girls discussed issues in the texts or within their own lives. For example, Sofia told the others, “Ladies, you have the power if you’re making your own money and you’re doing your own thing.” (This is also an example where we double-coded for both gender and class.) The power codes were then double coded, focusing on oppression and stereotypes—as these were other themes that emerged during analysis. Finally, codes of agency were marked when the girls commented on characters that resisted oppression or when they themselves discussed ways to confront or resist discrimination in their own lives. For instance, the girls retold many stories about ways in which the women in their families resist norms and create more independence. The authors also tracked the development over time of the young women’s growing and more complex understandings of their own and others’ identities and sense of agency. For the purposes of this article and its results section, the authors have focused on gender oppression, racism and stereotypes, and agency, as these codes occurred the most frequently when compared to others.

Results

Gendered Expectations and Oppressions

The first two sections of the results section address the first research question: How did high school seniors analyze the identities and experiences of the characters and connect those to their own lives, specifically as these connections related to issues involving gender and race?

The first book of the year the participants discussed and analyzed was *Memoirs of a Geisha*. They wanted to read this text first, as many of them had seen the movie and wanted to see how the book compared. Since the participants were women of different ethnicities, this novel was an effective starting place to discuss common issues related to gender. Before beginning, the participants discussed what they knew about Japan and geishas, with Mary providing many insights from her self-initiated study of Japanese culture. Most of the discussions that arose from the text related to women's roles in the books and in their lives. Overall, the participants held various, contradictory ideas about women's power in male-dominated societies and about women's complicity in gender oppression and the imbalances of power. During the first formal meeting of the year, the participants discussed the opening chapters of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which provide background of the main character who grows up in a small fishing village. The first author asked the participants about their thoughts on the representation of women in these opening pages:

Tia: I wanted to ask about how the men are treating women. I want to start with the fisherman, Mr. Tanaka. When [Chiyo, the main character] hit her head and was bleeding and spitting up blood. *[Tia reads this passage out loud to the group.]* Wait a minute. You beat your daughter and then you bleach your boat and then you have somebody bless the boat?

Sofia: The boat over the daughter.

Mary: It's a tradition because it's hard to catch fish. It's bad luck with women. They don't want women distracting them...The [men are] very superstitious.

Sofia: How come superstitions get to objectify women like that?

Mary: It depends on how the society is set up.

Tia: I also marked where [Chiyo] acted like a dog around him. When he wanted her, he looked back over his shoulder to

signal her. If my boyfriend pulled some shit like that...How dare you? I'm even more mad that she followed!

Sofia: They're puppets.

The excerpt above revealed how book club participants analyzed women's roles, both within the context of the text and within the context of their own lives. While Mary's analysis situated gender politics within the context of Japanese society in the early 20th century, Tia and Sofia analyzed the text from their contemporary views of gender dynamics. Beginning with criticism of the men's treatment of the main character Sayuri, Tia and Sofia critiqued the text in relation to what they would do in similar situations. Mary took a more contextualized approach, explaining how Japanese society of the time conceptualized women and their roles. Responding to the main character's experience from historicized and contemporary viewpoints, the participants differentially evaluated her responses to male oppression, with Tia and Sofia having critiqued more broadly how sexism historically and currently affects women.

In ensuing weeks, the girls continued their analysis of sexism in the text. Specifically, they discussed the roles of the geishas in the novel—and their perceived (or actual) positions of power:

Mary: [Geisha] manipulate their dannas [clients] emotionally and with words. It's like with Mameha [a geisha in the text] and the Baron [her primary client]. She could convince the Baron to do otherwise.

Tia: I don't care about all the talking she does, how sweet and whatever; Mameha can't control men. Especially after what happened to Sayuri [the main character] in the house [when Baron attacked her]. [Mameha] knew what would happen. The Baron was like, "Are you just gonna sit there and disappoint me all evening?" I was so mad.

Sofia: I was thinking that's not as degrading. Just like she said, you can control what you get in your life as a geisha.

Tia: No, that's the whole idea. She can't do anything! The wife. Women have no power...All she can do is fuss, and at the end of the day, he can walk out the room and go to another.

In this conversation, the participants engaged in a complex view of gender dynamics. They discussed the kinds of power geisha actually had and how women could use power in both negative and positive ways. Their level of analysis also demonstrated complexity related to the amount of agency women in general can exert and women geishas in the context of story could exert.

This critical analysis of women's power in the text then immediately turned to the participants' lived experiences, when Sofia said, "The geishas' situation is not much different than the women in the U.S. during this same time." She explained that women's "jobs" were to attract men to marry: "We were just the bread makers." Tia agreed, explaining that her grandmother warned her of men bearing gifts, which could be taken away as easily as they were given. Because of her grandmother's philosophy, Tia greatly respected her decisions:

She's not afraid to let a guy take care of her, but she works, always had her own car, always had her own money, always did her own thing. She's never been afraid to have a guy take care of her, but she's never allowed herself to be stuck in a position where she was depending on a guy.

Joy expressed similar admiration for her mother who also worked: "She always pays for everything...that's what it means to be a woman." In all of these cases, the participants demonstrated their shared personal connections with the novel—speaking back to the text and connecting to the geishas' experiences. Like Sutherland's (2005) research on Black girls, the participants broke boundaries and ascribed identities of what it means to be "woman," renegotiating their sense of self, particularly in how that has been articulated through the women in their lives. Simultaneously, they critically co-constructed their own theories on gender and what it means to be a woman with power.

During another discussion, towards the end of the novel, the first author asked the participants to discuss how gender intersected with class, asking, "Do you think that women back then gained power when they got money through the men they married?"

Sofia: No, I think they're more subjugated.

Joy: They're more constricted.

Sofia: They lose power.

Tia: You have the power if you're making your own money, and you're doing your own thing. That's where the power comes in.

This critique allowed the participants to think about the intersections of power, class, and gender. They recognized that women today have more power than women did before them, yet they also expressed ambivalence about how much power women today really hold. Mary said she felt that contemporary women live in a "man's society," yet could still become whatever they wanted. To do so, however, "women need to use their rights." The problem, according to Mary, is that many women are fearful of asserting themselves: "Women are too afraid to use their rights because they're afraid men will overpower them. Women can become whatever they want. It's just that women are too scared to invoke their rights." She also blamed women for using femininity so men would help them get what they want: "As a girl growing up to become a woman, I am in a man's society. I'm always gonna be oppressed. I'm weak, defenseless. I need a man's help. I'm supposed to be feminine with myself, no matter what." Mary's comments represent both traditional and empowered views of women's potential in contemporary society.

Tia, however, disagreed with Mary's analysis of women's complicity in inequality and referred to history as the reason for women's current position: "Throughout history, women haven't had the same opportunities as men... Even though it's a lot better, we're still not completely there." Sofia also contested Mary's comments: "If I want to do something, I'll do it. I don't have reason to be afraid." At the same time, she admitted to enjoying "the whole chivalry thing...I like it when a guy opens the door for me...We want to be strong and sometimes we want to be treated delicately so who's contradicting themselves? Is it the men? Or is it us?" Tia concurred: "We contradict ourselves. We want to be all-American women...I can be whatever I want to be, just like a man. But then: 'Oops, cut myself. I broke a nail. Can someone hug me?'"

The viewpoints here contrast with one another, displaying participants' different ideologies, gendered theories, and value systems. These differences illuminate that the book club became a critical forum, where participants of different ethnicities, families, and experiences shared contested ways of viewing

gendered constructions and resistance to sexism and imbalances of power. While the participants shared gendered knowledge of oppression (Brooks, 2006), their views about resistance and their analyses of agency diverged. The relationships built among participants over time enabled them to share widely different, even competing, views of gender, agency and resistance in a safe yet critically thoughtful venue.

Stereotypes and Internalized Racism

Coined by Sofia as “The Latina *Sex in the City*,” the second novel the book club read was *The Dirty Girls Social Club*. In discussing the text, the participants explored issues of race, ethnicity, and racism. In the first meeting about this novel, Sofia expressed her anger with the author’s depiction of the Latina characters, calling her representations “way over the top.” The other participants agreed. Sofia elaborated,

My problem with the book is that they emphasize the Latina way too much. They’re like, ‘I’m Latina. I lived in the slums. People don’t have it this way, and I conquered it all.’ I’m like, really? You have every right to feel proud, but know that there are a lot of people like you. I was mad.

Sofia also criticized the stereotype of the “passionate Latina woman,” especially when the character Sara, a mother and wife, stayed with her husband despite his abuse.

Sofia’s critique, as a Latina analyzing another Latinas’ representations, calls to question the issue of “authenticity” in texts (Brooks, 2006). While some readers may see the authenticity of the author’s voice, this was not the case for Sofia. Instead, Sofia saw the Latina’s characterization as stereotypical and something to be refuted. While in previous conversations about *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the women analyzed the plot and characters, now they were starting to evaluate and critique the author’s perspective, demonstrating the growing complexities of their analyses.

What also makes this book club unique is that because the women are all of different ethnicities, they responded to representations of race in varying ways. Whereas Tia, Joy, and Sofia were offended by the author’s portrayals, Fay thought the text’s exploration of race was more nuanced. Perhaps because her

own mother was African, Fay connected to the scene where a Nigerian man spoke about racism in the U.S. as opposed to that in Africa:

[The author] uses [his] standpoint to bring out something...[The author] addresses race throughout the book. In the beginning when [the character] Lauren was talking, [the author] was not going into [racism] much...but then she got deeper. That's why she threw in an African, because why would you stick a European in there to talk about race?

In these instances, it is evident the different stances the participants took when reacting to race due to complexities of their own identities and the way in which they connected to the text. While the author of *Dirty Girls Social Club* angered Sofia, Fay was relieved and grateful that she offered an African perspective to complicate racism. These interactions are integral to not only voice their interpretations about race and ethnicity but to hear other cultural viewpoints so they can renegotiate their initial interpretations.

Internalized racism was another topic that arose in discussions of *The Dirty Girls Social Club*. In subsequent meetings, participants recounted several instances where they thought characters were going through “identity crises” or participating in “self-hatred.” The connections they made with the Latina characters created parallel-text story lines (Brooks, 2006), where they identified with the characters’ experiences. For example, Tia made a connection between the internalized racism of one character in the book to a woman with whom she worked. Tia explained that Gloria, a Dominican teenager, never referred to herself as black, despite her dark skin. As an adolescent of African and Panamanian descent, who also calls her skin color “dark,” Tia found Gloria’s denial of her blackness insulting:

I want to say to her, ‘You’re black! Don’t talk about black people when you’re black!’ She’s my complexion! We can break down to the Triangle Trade because slaves stopped there. Just because you speak another language doesn’t mean that you’re not black...Some of the comments you make are unnecessary and you should feel offended by them yourself.

Tia was not afraid to raise the sensitive issue of colorism or inter- and intra-racial discrimination based on skin color stratification (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Sutherland, 2005). Connecting skin color discrimination to the

historical legacy of slavery, Tia confronted issues of self-hatred among people of color who negate or ignore aspects of their ethnic heritages.

The first author often pushed the group to explore why the cultural representations they embraced, negotiated, and/or contested existed so that they would go beyond their personal stories and move towards analyzing race and ethnicity critically. When prompted by the first author to explain why Gloria might have acted as she did, Tia responded,

I guess it is because she's dark. She's not light...the difference between how you see yourself and how other people see you is when you look in the mirror. You are constantly judging yourself, comparing yourself to what's ideally beautiful. What's on TV, in magazines, that's not human. That's scrawny and scary.

In this instance, Tia analyzed the political and social contexts in which racial and gender ascriptions of beauty affect women of color. As relationships among the participants built over time and with strategic questioning by the first author, the book club became a safe space for the women to critique the origins and differentiated forms of racism, using these understandings to maintain positive perspectives on their identities and experiences as women of color.

Anxiety, Amelioration, and Agency

The final two sections of results address the second research question: In what ways did book club influence the participants once they graduated high school?

During the last meeting of the year, the first author took the participants out to lunch to celebrate their work. The discussion quickly turned to their assumptions, expectations, and anxieties about attending college where the contexts would be much different than their high school. Joy and Fay both expressed anxiety about the racism they may face. About to attend a small liberal arts college, Joy revealed, "I'm really scared about it. I'm not going to lie." Fay agreed, "I'm going to Miami. I'm black and it will be all Cuban there." Tia and Sofia, however, thought that the race relations would play out differently. Tia described her future:

I'm going to a historically black college. I'm going to be dealing with black people all day long. Our opinions may be the same, our opinions may be different. But at the end of the day, we're all black, so race is never going to be an issue.

Sofia ended the conversation with encouragement to the others: "You have to put what everybody else thinks aside. It's about you. If you feel like what other people think is going to affect how you feel about yourself, then that's when it becomes a problem."

One year later, at the end of their first year of college, the first author interviewed the participants again. Mary completed her first year at a design school, finishing with a 3.4 GPA. She majored in computer art and worked at a local museum part-time. Because she did not go away to college, Mary said acts of discrimination had not altered; however, she was concerned that her literature classes offered no texts by or about women or people of color. To compensate, Mary had been reading books by a Chinese American author, Anchee Min, whom the first author recommended. Mary said she found these texts important as a way to identify with her own culture and history.

Tia attended a historically black college, where she found that contrary to her initial expectations, she dealt with issues of colorism and racial prejudice. She said she disliked the "pettiness" of her classmates' remarks related to beauty:

It was hard for me. I had to deal with black people from all different types of backgrounds from all different places. It gets down to my hair is lighter than yours; I have more money than you. I'm light-skinned, you're dark-skinned.

When the first author asked how she resisted these acts, Tia echoed Sophia's advice from one year before:

I just pay it no attention. I look at people like they're dumb and people are afraid to talk to me because they think that I'm snooty but I'm not. I just think it's stupid to have an argument about someone's hair being better than yours...What relevance is that?

Tia also credited her high school experiences for deciding to create her own all-female book club where she continued her critical work.

Like Tia, Sofia was surprised by the racial dynamics at the college she attended. She said that she considered joining the Latino Student Organization to connect with her culture, but felt she didn't fit in. "The problem I have with it," she explained, "is that it only dedicates itself to three Latin cultures: Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican." Sofia felt disappointed at the lack of opportunity to learn about her Ecuadorian and Cuban cultures. In response to feelings of isolation, Sofia also started a book club, eager, she said, to recreate "the trust and friendship" she had in high school. She also said she was careful not to select books that reinforced Latino/a stereotypes so that participants gained broader views of Latino/as' experiences and perspectives.

Additionally, Sofia said she struggled with sexism. While she was confident about her high GPA, she felt uncomfortable as one of the few women who majored in math. Despite the discrimination she received from peers and professors, she continued to resist:

I'm pursuing it like I would anything else. I'm not looking for someone to accept me as a female or as anything other than someone who enjoys math and wants to do it. I would assume that if someone can see my dedication, and someone can see me strive for it, then they won't care that I'm a female because I can do it just as well as a man.

This reflection provides repeating glimmers of the critical responses to racism and sexism and articulated ways of resisting that discrimination.

Fay's racial and gender consciousness also expanded when she went to college in Miami. For the first time, she started using the African name her mother gave her and learned Swahili because she said:

I wanted to become more connected to myself. I feel like I'm a whole new person! I always tell people I'm Kenyan. I'm a Trinidadian...I just want to be a little more connected to who I am, even if I can't necessarily know exactly who that [Kenyan] side of my family is.

She added that reading *Zami* (Lorde, 1982) helped in this exploration, explaining, "I like the power of her words."

While Fay felt confident about changing her name and learning about her African roots, she said she was dealing with much more racism than she had experienced up North. In interacting with her peers, she explained, "I'm from the City but the South is a whole different country. They look at people from

the East and they're like, 'You think you're better.'" In fact, this is one of the reasons why she joined a book club in college but later quit because she could not connect to the other students who did not seem to grapple with identity issues like she was. Further, she said she experienced intense institutional racism within her school and her job:

I don't think the South is a good place to live if you're black...When you go into a store, they go hard. They follow you...I was working at the mall and most of the time when you're black, they think you're Haitian or Southern. When they heard me speak, they were dumbfounded like they never heard anyone speak like me before. It made me laugh, but then it made me feel weird.

Fay also discussed how racism manifested itself in other ways:

I find that especially people who are educated like superiors or elders, they have this pity for you...the way they speak to you...I didn't need that. I didn't need you to help me do anything. I just want to show you who I am...I feel like people make these hierarchies based on fear.

Unfortunately, Fay said she had no place in which to articulate her frustrations—and spoke of returning north, as the South and its “racism everywhere” were too difficult. She also said she missed the support system of her friends, the book club, and her father. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) address the notion of shifting, specifically for African American women who respond and cope with various types of discrimination. Fay used shifting language, explaining how she is currently dealing with the combined oppressions of sexism and racism:

It's not easy being a woman. It is not easy being a person of color and young at the same time in America. I love that I have to prove myself in certain cases but sometimes it's like come on...but I say the hell with you...I speak my mind and I'm not disrespectful but I will definitely make things known. I do it in the most dignified way possible. I won't quit on anything...I started this, let me finish...I want to just say I tried. I have nothing to prove to anybody but myself.

Like Sofia and Tia, Fay developed a language of resistance and agency, where she articulated ways in which she confronts discrimination. While again it is not

conclusive if this is directly attributed to book club, this forum did allow the participants a space in which to voice their struggles and enact movements of empowerment.

Joy also went to college in an area where she felt different racially and economically. As a Latina, she said she felt comfortable at the college itself (as she lived in an international dormitory) but did not feel comfortable in the surrounding community. Because of this, Joy planned to start her own book club and join the Latina sorority in the fall. She saw these actions as means to becoming a stronger woman:

When I was in high school, except for book club, the girls weren't—I mean they were smart but the way they carried themselves, the way they said things were off. Then I got to college: the girls are smart, they're in control, they're answering questions, they're volunteering, they're putting out information. These women are going to be someone in the world. I'm going to be watching them on TV; I'm gonna hear about them in the news. You can tell: these women are powerful, strong, and I like that; I like that a lot.

Book Club as Critical, Agentic Space

In addition to asking the participants about their college experiences, the first author asked them to reflect on the significance of book club. All unanimously agreed that book club was a critical forum that was safe, allowing them to address issues that were important to them. Sofia stated, “We were comfortable and confided in each other.” Fay and Joy both said they became less shy and learned to participate more. Sofia and Mary found the book club to be “empowering” because participants listened and responded thoughtfully to what they said. Mary explained, “It was a time that I could release my own energy and just talk and not be worried about being judged.” Tia remarked that the book club “felt like family: we talked about issues of race, class, and gender but if we had a problem, we could talk about it. We still had that space.”

Additionally, everyone said the collective nature and bonding was one of the most rewarding aspects of book club. Joy explained:

It opened me up and helped because Tia or Sofia would talk about things. Now I've actually thought about them, especially with stuff I've been going through. I think, they did this and they taught me. We had

that time together. I loved it...I formed good friendships...I miss them a lot.

The participants also credited book club with having become more self-reflective and analytic, skills they said they profited from in college. They learned to analyze beliefs and actions of other people in their lives, especially as they related to issues of race, class, and gender. Fay stated, “[Those] books that are based on cultures give you a sense of what’s out there in the world.” Sofia expressed similar notions, explaining, that book club “lets you release feelings of oppression. You feel something within yourself, and you wanna get out and do something different...be open to all perspectives, even though you may disagree...you might change someone’s perspective.” Tia also said she learned how to analyze texts more critically, talk about personal and social issues, explore multiple perspectives, and reflect on characters’ behaviors in making her own decisions and choices: “Book club was part of the reason I was who I was. It helped me deal with situations. Reading certain things, analyzing and relating to books, remembering those books while I was in college, and relating real life to what happened in the book.”

As evidenced by the participants’ words, the book club had a significant and ongoing effect on their critical intellect and identity. All of the women continued to read novels about women of color and/or started book clubs in college as means to explore racial/ethnic and gender dynamics in political and personal contexts. In college, they extended their analyses of racism and sexism, articulating more subtle and nuanced understandings. They recognized the book club as having provided a safe space for sharing their feelings, experiences, and perspectives. Overall, the young women articulated the transformative effects of book club on their college experiences, enabling them to exert some agency and control in their intellectual and identity development.

Discussion

Analyses of transcripts from the book club sessions and interviews provided some powerful implications about the promise of critical literacy for the positive identity, agentic, and academic development of young adolescent women of color. Book clubs facilitated by a mentor or teacher committed to critical literacy can promote analytical reading and provide a space for adolescents to fashion and refashion their racialized and gendered identities by dissecting the contours and contexts of racism, classism, and sexism. Providing these opportunities can enable students to affirm and negotiate their own culturally complex identities and analyze various forms of oppression. Ultimately, book club promoted resilience to resist physical, emotional, and

social acts of discrimination and develop agency (Smith, 2000). Furthermore, the personal connections the women developed to each other, the texts, and the facilitator were significant, especially considering the longitudinal effects they revealed in their interviews.

Because of the small number of participants, the book club setting offered a unique space in which students could engage in difficult conversations. These spaces—spaces outside mandated curricula or standardized tests—act as a forum where students can participate in self-definition and collaborative meaning-making of texts, identities, and communities (Wissman, 2011). Thus, the creation of more intimate forums within and beyond schools is vital for the intellectual, literacy, and identity development of young people of color (Fisher, 2006). Further, the unique aspect of this study was the participants' mixed ethnic identities. In their discourses across ethnicities, the women discussed how variations in the particularities of racist ideologies played out across racial and ethnic lines. Simultaneously, they constructed commonalities in their experiences and shared critical approaches for agency and resistance. The experiences of these women obviously were diverse. However, creating opportunities for women of different ethnicities to share knowledge about the nature and effects of racism and sexism may assist women in attaining greater agency in confronting these issues (Sutherland, 2005).

This study is also unique in that it examined the longitudinal effects of book club on their college experiences. As evidenced from the interviews, the book club played a significant role in college. Many initiated their own book clubs and/or participated in other extra-curricular experiences where they could share their everyday struggles against oppression. Thus, these kinds of alternative forums may serve as a critical pathway to promote college retention for students of color. Research into the opportunities for and obstacles to student spaces and organizations both before and during college, as well as the experiences and outcomes of such spaces, should be an ongoing and fruitful area for future research in adolescent literacy (Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2004).

Additionally, this study has critical implications for ways to reconstruct secondary classrooms. Although many literacy educators may not be able to

reproduce intimate locations such as book club with the same level of self-disclosure, teachers must begin to create safer, more relevant classrooms for students of color. Reflecting on and using students' cultures when engaging in literacy practices is a first step (Au, 2009; Optiz, 1998). Like Brooks (2006), the participants not only felt validated in reading texts about their own cultures, but they also used these texts to confront racism and sexism in their own lives. Conversely, we want to provide multiethnic texts that allow students to question constructions that do not align with their own viewpoints, values, and beliefs. Thus, the authors see a critical need for diverse texts to reveal the multiple constructions and acts of resistance to complicate various forms of oppression. In this way, conversations are not just a way to find commonalities but also challenge ideologies to produce new understandings of the texts and our communities. Given the power of these conversations, the authors argue in favor of shifting the focus of literacy practices to include more sociopolitical inquiry, where students analyze and evaluate the socio-political orientations of texts. Finally, the book club demonstrated the power of allowing for more personal connections in the classroom. In response to Hill's (2009) notions of wounded healing and storytelling, the authors believe that critical work can happen when students are allowed a space in which to reveal their struggles as they connect and intersect with the texts that are studied in the classroom. Thus, educators need to put the same emphasis and focus on interpretation, critical analysis, and storytelling as they inform each other equally in increasing the meaning-making processes.

To conclude, while several studies have demonstrated the significance of critical literacy spaces for youth, this study contributes to the literature by illustrating the positive long-term impact of these experiences. All the participants commented on significance of the experience in sharpening their analytical literacy skills and giving them the confidence to participate in or create literacy and/or cultural spaces which enabled them to collaborate with other young women in college. While the participants' growing maturity and new environments undoubtedly contributed to their analytic skills and assertiveness, their experiences as book club members also influenced the development of positive racial and gender identities. As a result of their participation in book club, the participants gained stronger collective voices; learned to analyze racial, class, and gender relations in more complex ways; and exhibited greater agency in college. By documenting the experiences of committed and resilient young

women of color, researchers can inform academic communities about working towards the redistribution of power, where students and texts are transformed through re-contextualizing where and what transactions occur (Fecho & Meacham, 2007). In other words, book clubs can be a place where we “create pathways for social change and inclusion” (Twomey, 2007, p. 406), pathways to increase our support for alternative critical spaces for diverse youth that can ultimately transform literacy practices within our schools and communities.

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Reading Horizons (ISSN 0034-0502) is published quarterly by the Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic in the College of Education and Human Development at Western Michigan University.

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