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**READING CONFERENCES AND IMPACT ON LITERACY LEARNING**

by  
Ashley C. Danter

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Reading Education  
at  
Rowan University  
June 6, 2020

Thesis Chair: Marjorie E. Madden, Ph. D.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this work to all of my students- past, present, and future.

May this continue to help us grow, learn, and be better together.

## **Acknowledgments**

First, I would like to acknowledge and thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Marjorie Madden, for her continued patience and support through this program and for continuing to believe in me when I didn't believe in myself. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues in the MA in Reading program for their support and encouragement through this entire process; it truly does take a village.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the administration at the study site for allowing this study to take place and also to the student participants who continued to be flexible and understanding, both with me and each other, through the duration of this study.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my husband, Kyle, my parents, and the rest of my family who continually provided their unwavering support throughout this entire Master's program.

## **Abstract**

Ashley C. Danter  
READING CONFERENCES AND IMPACT ON LITERACY LEARNING  
2019-2020

Marjorie E. Madden, Ph.D.  
Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study was to examine how student discussions during reading conferences impact literacy learning in the areas of student comprehension and motivation. Surveys, interviews, audio recorded discussions, and notes in a teacher research journal were all analyzed for emerging themes. The findings show that reading conferences have a positive impact on student literacy learning, specifically that there was an increase in reading comprehension and motivation. The data also revealed the major role that critical, multicultural texts have on reading comprehension and motivation for reading when coupled with reading conferences. Implications for future research are discussed.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

“There’s nothing to read in here.”

This bold statement hit me like a ton of bricks. As if to rub it in, he said again, “But there’s nothing to read in here.”

“Nothing to read?” I echoed. “What do you mean? There are hundreds of books in here!”

With my outstretched hand, I gestured to, what *I* thought was, our fairly extensive classroom library. Lining the shelves were dozens of brightly colored bins containing all types of books including those sorted by genre, author, popular characters, season, and series. He continued to shake his head from side to side as I walked with him over to our classroom library and began suggesting some class favorites. I knew reading was not his favorite subject and that it did not come very easily to him, but I was caught off guard by how I felt when he rejected every last one of my suggestions. It was an empty, lost feeling that left me asking myself, “So now what?”

Now, he and I both knew this did not mean he could skip reading just because he could not find any books he was intrinsically motivated to read, but it resonated with me when I realized that I was not sure what to do next to get him to even *like* reading. Getting him to fall in love with and spend his free time reading was not on our short-term goal list, but realizing the importance of learning to read and making better use of independent reading time in school definitely was. After all, I had earned my undergraduate degree, I already had my first year of teaching under my belt, and I was doing everything I was supposed to do. He was being taught the curriculum, he was receiving differentiated instruction and materials, he was receiving RTI supports, and he

was given a choice in selecting his reading materials. How was it possible he was not able to find even a single book he wanted to read in this classroom?

When I stepped back and thought about how to help him find books to read, I realized I hadn't considered that although I thought the library was full of interesting books, there might not have been the right books for him- books that reflected his interests or contained characters to which he could relate. How could I expect him to use critical thinking skills to respond to text and improve comprehension or use any independent reading time productively when he had such a negative approach to any literacy activities? What improvements could I make as a teacher? What would happen if I studied reading motivation and comprehension abilities related to critical, multicultural texts of students in my classroom? I decided to find out.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research is to analyze student talk around critical, multicultural texts and explore the impact those texts have on elementary school students' reading comprehension and motivation for reading.

Rosenblatt (2014) argues that aesthetic reading, the type of reading that is for enjoyment, is intrinsic, and without demand, is getting lost in schools. She draws from John Dewey's term, transaction, when explaining what occurs between a reader and text during reading. Lucy Calkins' newest Reader's Workshop model places the emphasis back on providing ample time for students to read independently and interact with texts. Included in her Reader's Workshop model is time for conferring in small groups or individually with a teacher. The curriculum has roots in constructivist and socio-cultural theories and frameworks since students are constructing knowledge out of their

experiences (Tracey & Morrow, 2006) and applying it to their reading. The conferring that is built into this workshop model is allowing for social interaction built around reading. Researchers and theorists Paulo Freire (1970) and Kathryn Au (1998) argued that students need more critical thinking opportunities about their reading and encouraged the use of conversations. Freire coined the term “liberation education” and enforced what he felt was important in a classroom as it relates to Critical Literacy Theory. He felt that students should be challenging social norms and what they knew of the world in order to spur change. Reading and literacy are to be used as tools for that chance (Freire, 1970).

Gloria Ladson-Billings is another theorist whose work is closely related to Freire’s. She believes in Critical Literacy Theory and places a lot of her focus on culturally relevant pedagogy. She believes that literacy is a means for students to become activists. She believes that teachers and students could share the teacher/learner role and learn from each other through discussion, which ties into the important role of communication and conversations that were also encouraged by Freire and Au. Lisa Delpit (1988) is another theorist and researcher whose work closely relates to that of Freire, Au, and Ladson-Billings. Her work is closely related due to its connections to Socio-Cultural Theory under the Social Learning Perspective umbrella. She believes that students need to be taught in a way that is unique to them; she believes that culturally responsive pedagogy is imperative because teachers reach students best when they understand their home lives, home languages, and different aspects of their individual cultures and heritages.

Since the school district in which this research took place uses the Reader’s Workshop model during their literacy block, it was important to understand why that

curriculum is being used. The significance of the Reader's Workshop model is that it works because students are given daily opportunities to interact with texts as well as interact socially with others about those texts. When the teacher provides critical, multicultural texts, then culturally relevant pedagogy can be implemented. Given these research findings about how to best help students be successful in these literacy practices, reading conferences around critical, multicultural texts is a valuable way to combine best practices and evaluate their contribution to students' comprehension abilities and motivation levels.

### **Statement of Research Problem and Question**

The purpose of this research is to analyze student talk around critical, multicultural texts and explore the impact those texts have on elementary school students' reading comprehension and motivation for reading. Specifically, this study aims to promote deeper levels of comprehension of text through oral response, to motivate students in the reading process, and to foster understanding of proper etiquette in communicating about text. What types of critical, multicultural texts do different students choose to read and what is their motivation for the ones they choose? How can communicating about text effect comprehension and increase motivation?

### **Story of the Question**

When studying different theorists during one of the final courses in the Master's in Reading program, something started to click with me when learning about Kathryn Au. In doing a research project on Au, I learned about how talk and student discussions were at the foundation of how children learn. My mind immediately went back to that student who claimed we had "nothing to read" in our classroom and I began thinking about how

different his experience would have been if I had taken the time to discuss his interests, his life, and his motivation for reading instead of choosing books for him and telling him to read them anyway. I also wonder about how our conversations could have been steered if I had been more knowledgeable when it came to book discussions. If we had had more meaningful texts, would he have been more willing to participate in conversations with me about them? Could he have opened up more about his opinions and preferences if given more opportunities for discussions with peers? The student moved out of district before the end of his second grade year with me, but it was my experiences with him that provided the foundation and background to this current teacher research into reading conferences and their impact on literacy learning.

### **Organization of Thesis**

Chapter two presents a review of the literature that discusses research surrounding reading conferences and the benefits of using them in the elementary classroom. It also includes research surrounding critical, multicultural texts and their place in the elementary classroom. Chapter three provides information regarding the study itself, including the context of the study, the design of the research, procedure and data collection methods, and plans for analysis of the data. Chapter four analyzes the findings and data from the research collection. Chapter five is a conclusion of the research, including a summary of the findings and descriptions of the limitations and implications.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Although the pendulum continues to swing back and forth across the field of education and recommendations change about what is considered “best” for all students, there are some theoretical frameworks that have remained at the foundation of literacy instruction and learning. Near the heart of this foundation lies Louise Rosenblatt’s beliefs about Transactional Theory. Rosenblatt (1982) draws from John Dewey’s term, transaction, for this theory “to emphasize the contribution of both reader and text” (p. 268) during reading. She goes on to describe two different types of reading, aesthetic and efferent. Rosenblatt describes aesthetic reading as reading that the reader is intrinsically motivated to do, enjoys doing, and is done without demand, while efferent reading is teacher-driven, methodical, and has a formal goal (Rosenblatt, 1982). She argues that aesthetic reading, the type of intrinsic reading that is for enjoyment, is getting lost in schools. The loss of reading for enjoyment raises concerns for educators and leaves them wondering about the value aesthetic reading holds for primary children and how to incorporate it back into the primary classroom. Chapter two provides a review of research that supports reading for pleasure in the primary classroom as well as how it can be incorporated through independent reading and reading conferences in elementary classrooms.

#### **Reading for Pleasure in the Primary Classroom**

Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell define independent reading as a time when “students read books of their choosing for a sustained period of time” (Fountas & Pinnell,

2019, para. 1). They explain that in the classroom, independent reading is when “[e]ach reader selects a book from a rich, well-organized collection of books in the classroom...Students are free to choose any text for independent reading based on their personal interests, though you support learning how to make good choices through individual reading conferences and whole-group minilessons. Students share their thinking through discussion and writing, as you come alongside readers to support thinking through brief conferences” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2019, para. 3).

Over the past few decades, a number of studies have been conducted exploring the value of independent reading in the classroom. In 1998, Cunningham and Stanovich published their seminal piece, *What Reading Does for the Mind*. In this piece, they conclude that increased reading volume has a positive effect on reading achievement, specifically on vocabulary, verbal skills, declarative knowledge, and other cognitive abilities (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).

Richard Allington also researched reading volume and found very similar results to those of Cunningham and Stanovich. Allington (2014) analyzed data specifically related to reading fluency and reading achievement. He found that an increase in reading volume correlated with an increase in reading achievement (Allington, 2014). Allington also studied a meta-analysis conducted by Lewis and Samuels (2005) to explore whether there was a correlation between more reading and whether or not that led to better reading. After studying students who were allotted independent reading time during the school day, Lewis & Samuels (2005) concluded that “no study reported significant negative results; in no instance did allowing students time for independent reading result in a decrease in reading achievement” (p. 3). After analyzing the work done by Lewis &



Samuels, Allington also added that there was “a moderate and statistically significant effect for volume of reading” (p. 17). In Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s piece, *The Value of Independent Reading: An Analysis of Research*, it is written that:

[r]egular independent reading built into the school day aids the development of specific skills and habits that contribute to students’ overall reading achievement and attitudes toward reading. Hundreds of correlational studies found that the best readers read the most and the worst readers read the least (p. 10).

This analysis lists four major areas in which independent reading is shown to benefit: improving comprehension, building vocabulary, increasing fluency, and developing background knowledge and cultural literacy (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt [HMH], n.d.). Allington argued that “skill instruction is not enough; students need time to read” (as cited in Trudel, 2007, p. 309). Trudel (2007) also explains that studies have shown that the more time students spend reading meaningful, natural texts, the more benefits they receive in areas such as vocabulary knowledge, fluency, word recognition, and comprehension. Stephen Krashen, a published author and Ph.D. advocates for free voluntary reading in schools. He believes that when the classroom environment and libraries are enhanced, they become more enticing to students. The more enticed they are to read, the more they will read and this increase in reading will make them better readers (as cited in HMH, n.d., p. 3). Reutzel and Juth (2014) very bluntly state, “Time spent reading, including reading silently, has consistently correlated strongly with reading achievement.” (p. 29). Research has found that students who engaged in more reading opportunities in school were also found to also engage more frequently in reading

opportunities outside of school (Block & Mangieri, 2002). This increases volume, which also positively affects reading achievement.

In order to provide students with the opportunity to increase their volume of reading in school, time during the school day needs to be allotted for independent reading. In her book, *The SSR Handbook: How to Organize and Manage a Sustained Silent Reading Program*, Janice Pilgreen (2000) emphasizes the importance of set, structured periods of reading time for students.

[I]n order for children to be prepared to read for enjoyment and information, they must learn to be independent in making book selections and setting purposes for reading. We can help students begin to achieve this autonomy by surrendering some control to them. To do this we must provide them with opportunities to read under conditions in which they choose their reading selections, their purposes, and their own demands for learning. This is why they need carefully orchestrated periods of time to read in school. (p. 5)

The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report and a study done by Taylor, Pressley, and Pearson (2000) both found that students who engaged and participated more in free reading time performed better on standardized tests and/or in class than those who did not. These studies are all critical in showing that independent reading time is important, valuable, and can be extremely beneficial to students when implemented properly.

### **The Importance of Critical Texts**

Since there is a clear correlation between increased reading volume and reading achievement, one of the main factors that can help to increase the reading volume of

readers of all ability levels in primary classrooms is to provide students with choice. According to Atwell (2007), “The only surefire way to induce a love of books is to invite students to select their own” (p. 12). When students are given autonomy to choose their own books, they are able to select books that interest them and gain a sense of ownership of their reading. They may find it difficult to find ownership and interest in books that are chosen by someone else for them to read (Pilgreen, 2000; Sanden, 2012).

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s *The Value of Independent Reading: An Analysis of Research* reports that in the survey *Kids & Family Reading Report by Scholastic* (2014) 91% of children between the ages of 6 and 17 said that their favorite books to read were books they chose for themselves. Routman (2003) named students’ interests as a key factor in book selections and reiterated the importance of a wide and varied library of books from which students can make their selections, and Saul and Dieckman (2005) explain that “[r]eading skills improve when students are reading books that draw and hold their interest, causing them to read more attentively” (as cited in HMH, n.d., p. 7). Based on this analysis, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt concluded that “research strongly suggests that students be given the opportunity for self-selection of material during independent reading so as to increase motivation and interest” (HMH, n.d., p. 14).

In order for students to have a wide variety of books from which to choose, they must have many quality and appealing books available to them. Through her research, Pilgreen (2000) discovered that programs were more successful when books were readily accessible and available to students than others that required students to find their own. Having a wide variety of books directly presented to students leads to an increase in

reading volume, as well as reading achievement and motivation (Allington, 2014; Pilgreen, 2000).

Making sure that students have access to a wide variety of books is important, but it is imperative for educators to present books to students that are authentic, critical, and relatable. “Authentic literature in the form of trade books and other publications at an appropriate reading level is central to children’s literacy development” (HMH, n.d., p. 2). To ensure that these books are authentic, teachers need to be extremely cognizant of the books available to their students and they must consider the concept of the “culture of power” when deciding which texts are to be a part of the classroom library. Barton and Yang (2000) describe the culture of power “...[as] a set of values, beliefs, ways of acting and being that for socio-political reasons, unfairly and unevenly elevate groups of people (mostly white, upper middle class)” (p. 873). This concept of the “culture of power” is extremely important as it exposes:

[t]he separation of people through these arbitrary marker results in a tiered society where set rules and ideological standpoints result in barriers for those not part of the culture of power. These barriers are a product of human intervention, yet because they are legitimized by a caste-oriented society are often accepted as normal. (Barton & Yang, 2000, p. 873).

In her work *The Silenced Dialogue*, Lisa Delpit (1988) explains five aspects of the culture of power, including how power is traditionally applied in a classroom setting. When considering how most public classrooms operate, teachers typically have the power over the students, publishers have power over the textbooks, and administrators and board of education members have power over which materials are used in classrooms.

The power and control enacted in classrooms needs to be checked as they pertain to materials available to the students. Before presenting books to students or adding them to a library the perspectives of characters, portrayals of cultures, and even motives of publishers should be examined to make sure that the ‘power’ in that classroom is not excluding any views or backgrounds. All races, ethnicities, genders, family-types, and abilities need to be accurately portrayed through these texts.

Not only should the texts available to students be authentic, but they should also be critical texts. Critical Literacy Theory encourages students to use critical perspectives when reading texts, to consider the inequalities and underlying meanings that may be embedded by the author(s). This theory supports students using their knowledge about unequal forces of power at work within their education to stand up for themselves and others (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Critical Literacy Theory grew out of the social justice pedagogy of Freire. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who looked at education through a very political lens. In his seminal piece, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he discusses “liberation education”, meaning that he believed students should be challenging norms in order to spur change and that reading and literacy were the tools to be used for that change (Freire, 1970). Students are encouraged to use critical texts as a form of activism by evaluating inequalities or forms of power that exist in society and form their own opinions on what they read. In order for students to do this work, the books they are reading should be critical, multicultural texts. In her text *Multicultural Children’s Literature: Through the Eyes of Many Children*, Donna Norton (2013) writes:

Positive multicultural literature has been used effectively to help readers identify

cultural heritages, understand sociological change, respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations, and expand imagination and creativity...multicultural literature and activities related to the literature also improves reading scores and improves attitudes among students from varying cultures. When the literature and literature-related activities are part of the curriculum, and when adults know how to select this literature and develop strategies to accompany the literature, they encourage students to see commonalities and value in literature different from their own culture. (p. 2)

There are a few different ways to make sure the texts students are reading are considered critical, multicultural texts. Norton (2013) provides five guiding questions educators can ask themselves when evaluating texts to make sure they are authentic, including “What are the values and beliefs of the people in the book...?” and “Are the [major events in the plot of the story] possible for the time period and the culture?” (Norton, 2013, p. 8). The Council on Interracial Books also has *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism* which is a series of 10 questions or tasks provided as a guide to ensure the text is authentic.

To ensure that texts are also relatable, educators need to consider whether the available texts are mirror books or window books. Bishop (1990) has described mirror books as books in which students can see reflections of themselves and their worlds, while window books allow students to see other students and places that are different from themselves and their lives. It is extremely important for students to be able to see accurate portrayals of themselves and the people and places around them in the texts they are reading.

Educators can provide appropriate texts to all learners by making sure they are authentic, critical, relatable texts. Having a wide variety of appropriate books available for students allows them the autonomy to choose their own books for independent reading time, which has proven to be a key factor in increasing the volume of books read, which also positively affects reading achievement.

### **The Role of Reading Conferences**

One of the most important factors of independent reading time in the primary classroom is the support of an educator through reading conferences. According to Fountas and Pinnell's website (2019), reading conferences are opportunities for educators to sit alongside students individually to discuss what they are reading. During these conferences students and teachers interact by asking questions, discussing their reading, and discussing their thinking in regards to their reading. This allows teachers to take each conference in any number of directions including using this time to listen to the students read, teach or practice a specific skill or strategy, discuss progress on their reading logs, or provide the opportunity for open discussion with the students to increase literacy competencies.

Sherry Sanden (2012), an assistant professor at Illinois State University, conducted a study on eight teachers in various grade levels who were considered highly effective teachers, to analyze their use of independent reading time in the classroom. She explained that the designated independent reading time in these classrooms was successful because of three factors- book choice, behavior support, and guided independent reading. Sanden (2012) found that students felt a sense of empowerment to read because they were allowed to choose their books. They also had been presented with

clear expectations and procedures for what this time should look and sound like (behavior support) to help each student get the most out of this time allotted for reading. One of the most important conclusions she drew, however, was that students benefit greatly from independent reading time, if provided with the proper guidance (Sanden, 2012). She defends the effectiveness of guidance from teachers through reading conferences with the following:

My work with them demonstrates that the independent component of independent reading is actually a developmental process that occurs most beneficially under the guidance of expert adults. It may have been the lack of guidance and oversight inherent in some independent reading practices, especially with the youngest readers, that caused their effectiveness to be questioned. Therefore, enacting reading activities that privilege opportunities for student independence while continuing to be embedded with teacher support allow these teachers to use independent reading with greater confidence in its ability to prompt student progress. (Sanden, 2012, p. 227)

Students' ability to confer with teachers about their reading, receive feedback and gentle guidance, and then continuing on with their own independent reading is what makes this design of reading conferences so successful. This model of successful reading conferences that Sanden describes has roots in social constructivism, a theory developed by Russian scholar, Lev Vygotsky. As students read independently, they accept or reject ideas in their reading, as well as construct or reconstruct their background knowledge with newly learned information. Then students interact with their teachers during the



reading conferences, with the teachers providing assistance as students navigate the ideas and perspectives in their critical texts.

Social constructivism, according to Pletcher and Christensen (2017), is “the foundation on which teacher-student reading conferences are built” (p. 2). Vygotsky believed that children learned by interacting with others and he created the Zone of Proximal Development as part of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). This Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD, is defined as “the difference between what one can achieve alone and what one can achieve with the help of a more knowledgeable other” (Unrau & Alvermann, 2013, p. 68). Today, this idea is very closely related to differentiation. Vygotsky believed students could achieve more by interacting socially about their work. Reading conferences work well with this design because conferences are differentiated, and teachers provide scaffolded assistance to students, creating opportunities to discuss skills, strategies, vocabulary, and many other literacy abilities that are directly related to each student’s strengths and weaknesses.

Like Vygotsky, Freire also believed that students needed to interact socially to make what they learned from their reading meaningful. He believed this could be done through, what he coined as, dialogue and praxis. According to Freire (1970), dialogue is conversing with others to question what someone already knows and to realize how existing thoughts change and new knowledge is created. Praxis, he described, is people coming together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality; it is dialogue combined with reflection and action. To Freire, teachers and students were to be seen as equals. He believed that all parties should participate equally in constructing knowledge by engaging through dialogue, reflection, writing, or questioning. By doing

this, teachers learn valuable information from their students, just as students learn valuable information from their teachers. Through the use of dialogue and praxis with others, students are able to reflect on thoughts, create new knowledge, and use them as fuel to make true change. Two of his most prominent beliefs, that students should have to think critically about reading and that conversations are an integral part of students' literacy learning, were also shared by fellow educator and theorist Kathryn Au.

Au is another influential researcher who also built upon theories that were part of social constructivism and created frameworks based on the socio-cultural theory that placed the culture of society and language at the forefront of student literacy learning. She helped to develop the Talk Story model, which was founded in Hawaii at the KEEP (Kamehameha Elementary Education Program) where Au taught for over twenty years. This model insisted that reading should be a culturally appropriate instructional event, and one which blends a student's culture of language with that of the language of the classroom (Au, 1980). Basically, she believed that students' backgrounds and cultural norms had to be appreciated and welcomed in the classroom in order for students to feel comfortable participating. She believed in students using participation structures, such as talk story, in order for them to each make sense of their learning through the use of discussion-based techniques. To Au (1998), 'talk story' promoted a culturally responsive classroom because students were encouraged to discuss their learning, connect it to life and personal experience in and outside of school, as well as learn from one another. An extension of the Talk Story Model is literature discussion groups, which help emphasize that reading is a social event and encourage engagement with the text and other readers (Au, 1980). This allows ownership of the literature, which causes the student's learning

experience to grow. Through the use of reading conferences, all students are afforded more opportunities to participate in sharing their experiences both in life and with literature, which aids in motivation and comprehension. By sharing their experiences, interpretations, inferences and questions, children participating in these groups create more meaningful and engaging literacy experiences, and improve their comprehension through this social learning event.

### **Conclusion**

The literature has shown that independent reading and reading conferences all have a very important place in elementary classrooms. Sanden, Atwell, and Pilgreen, among others, all argue for the value of independent reading time in primary classrooms for readers of all levels. Vygotsky, Freire, and Au all argue that discussion around critical texts is imperative to increase student learning and competency. This means that reading conferences are crucial to student learning, as they combine the imperative aspects of independent reading with discussion and dialogue between students and teachers. The literature has also shown the importance of critical texts at the hands of young learners. However, the literature has not shown the effects of the combination of these elements; more research is needed to assess the impact that these critical, multicultural texts have on student engagement and discussions during reading conferences. The aim of this study is to analyze student discussions and engagement around critical, multicultural texts during reading conferences in an elementary classroom. Chapter three describes the context, design, and methodology of this study. It also details the course of action for collecting and analyzing the data.

## Chapter 3

### Context, Research Design, and Methodology

#### Context of the Study

**Community.** The school where this research was conducted is located in a rural town in southern New Jersey. The township covers about 25 square miles. According to the U.S. Census data from 2010, the town has a population of 2,489 people and 1,065 housing units. The median household income is \$65, 515, with around 7% of individuals below poverty level. The population breakdown by race of this community is 81.6% White, 16.1% African American, 0.9% American Indian, 0.6% Hispanic, and 0.8% two or more races. 46.2% of the population has a high school or equivalent degree and 17.4% of the population holds a Bachelor's degree or higher.

**District and school.** Lower Mill Elementary School (pseudonym) is the school in which this research took place. Lower Mill is a pre-kindergarten through eighth grade public school and is the only school in its district. This school is also a choice school, with a high number of students attending from neighboring cities. One of these cities has a population that is 30.5% White and 61% African American. Another one of the cities has a population that is 51% Hispanic, 15.8% White, and 30.5% African American. This allows the school population to be much more diverse than the population of the town itself. According to the 2017-2018 NJ School Performance Report, the school population by racial and ethnic group is 63% White, 8.5% Hispanic, 14.8% African American, about 1% Asian, and 12% of students are two or more races. The total number of students attending the school is approximately 300, with more than half of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. The district is classified as being in District Factor Group A, which

is the lowest of the 8 groups, and the groups are based on indicators of socioeconomic characteristics. This creates a school environment in which a small school in a rural setting faces a number of issues and situations that typically arise in urban school settings. It is also primarily a walking district. Only students who live farther than 2 miles away from the school are permitted to use buses as transportation. The majority of students are within that two-mile radius and they either walk or are driven to and from school.

**Classroom and teacher researcher.** The classroom in which this case study took place was a second grade classroom and had a total of 13 students. Besides the classroom teacher, there was a paraprofessional who had been alternating between this classroom and a first grade classroom equally throughout the day until about halfway through the study. This paraprofessional changed jobs within the school district and became a Basic Skills Teacher. Her schedule then changed to only being in this classroom three times a week for 30 minutes at the very end of the day. There was a retired teacher-volunteer who spent two days a week in this classroom and a clinical practice student who joined this classroom around the same time as when the paraprofessional changed positions. I was the teacher researcher for this study and am the general education teacher in this classroom. I have seven years of teaching experience, six of those years in this same school district, and five of those years in the same grade. The research was conducted during our Reader's Workshop time during our Language Arts block in the afternoon.

**Students and participants.** Out of the 13 students in the class, three are females and ten are males. Of the three females, one is Hispanic, one is African American, and one is White. Of the ten males, three are Hispanic, two are African American, three are

White, and two students are two races, both African American and White. Three of the students are Choice students, meaning that they live outside of the town, but have state paid tuition to attend. Out of the thirteen total students, three of them are in the Gifted and Talented program, one student has a speech-only IEP, two students have 504 plans, and three others have been referred to the Intervention and Referral Services team. Out of the students with 504s or have been referred to the I&RS team, two of them are on Tier 1 receiving in-class RTI supports, two students are on Tier 2 receiving in-class as well as pull-out RTI support and one student who has been on Tier 3 this year is in the process of being tested by the Child Study Team. Only seven out of the thirteen students in this class returned permission slips and were given consent to participate in this research study. The participants consisted of one Hispanic female, one African American female, two Hispanic males, and three White males. Of those seven students, three are in the Gifted and Talented program while two others are receiving RTI supports on Tiers 1 or 2. Three of the students have family members who speak Spanish at home, but English is the primary language spoken by all students.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative approach was applied in this study, since qualitative research includes “systematic documentation resembl[ing] the forms of data collection...” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 44) such as the surveys, interviews, careful observations, and descriptions of recorded conferences that were used. Qualitative research includes narrative descriptions of participants and phenomena occurring within a natural setting (Creswell, 2012) and this study was designed to take place in the students’

natural setting, which was the general education classroom during their naturally-occurring Language Arts block with the school curriculum already in place.

Teacher research was the most effective type of research for this study as, according to Shagoury and Power (2012), it is “research that is initiated and carried out by teachers in their classrooms and schools” (p. 2). They explain that teacher research “involves collecting and analyzing data as well as presenting it to others in a systematic way” and that this “...research process involves the kinds of skills and classroom activities that already are part of the classroom environment” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 3). The study was designed to allow the teacher-researcher to observe participants in their natural school environment and collect data through qualitative means, such as surveys, interviews, and observations.

### **Procedure of the Study**

This study took place in a second grade classroom over a period of six weeks. A schedule of two individual conferences per day, each lasting about 15-20 minutes, was created and followed. This allowed conferences with each student to occur two or three times per week. The *Funds of Knowledge* interview was conducted with each student during a conference in the first week. Also during the first week (and into part of the second week), each student completed both surveys, the *Me and My Reading Profile (MMRP)* and the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS)*. Conferences took place throughout the following five weeks. At the beginning of each of those five weeks, students selected two texts from a controlled selection of critical, multicultural texts to read independently during their designated reading time. Students read independently for at least 30 minutes a day, and they were scheduled to be pulled for conferring about those

carefully-selected texts during this time. These conferences varied between being just between the student and teacher, while others were done in small groups, but they were all audio recorded. At the end of each week, students discussed their books with each other before making new selections on the following Monday. During the sixth week, students completed each of the two surveys again, in order to measure any change in motivation and attitude toward reading.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The sources of data included surveys, conferences, interviews, and observations. More specifically, students completed the *Me and My Reading Profile (MMRP)* (Marinak, Malloy, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2015) reading survey at the beginning of the study to evaluate their self-concept as a reader, their feelings toward reading out loud either by themselves or others, and their view of the value of reading and again at the end of the study to see if any of those thoughts and feelings had changed. The *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS)* (McKenna & Kear, 1990) was also administered to measure students' attitudes towards academic versus recreational reading. Discussions were recorded while conferring with students about their reading. Student interviews were conducted using the *Funds of Knowledge* Interview (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) to explore the types of reading activities they enjoy (or not) and interests they have both in and outside of school, their use of multiliteracies, and different types of knowledge they already possess. Observations were recorded through the use of the teacher journal. This journal was a place in which I recorded my own notes, thoughts, suggestions, and plans from each day of the study.



## **Plan for Data Analysis**

The data collected before, during, and after the study was analyzed to gain a better understanding of the types of literacy learners participating in the study, as well as how their experience and preferences affected their choices and responses during the study. The *Funds of Knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) interview was done first to provide a baseline from each student on his/her knowledge brought in from home and outside of the school environment, as well as to gain an understanding of their interests in order to relate them to their reading during the study.

The *Me and My Reading Profile (MMRP)* (Marinak, Malloy, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2015) reading survey was administered to each student before research on specific books and responses began in order to gain insight to the students' personal views on their literacy abilities and preferences. This was the tool used to assess early reading motivation in these second graders before and after the study.

The *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS)* (McKenna & Kear, 1990) was administered before the research on the reading conferences began to examine student attitudes toward reading, both for academic and recreational purposes.

Conferences about their independent reading were recorded and analyzed to look for patterns and themes that emerged for individual students and also for the group of participants.

The teacher journal helped me to remember certain thoughts or patterns that stood out to me as the study was being conducted. If I thought of a change that needed to be made, a comment a student said, or something I saw during their reading that would be

helpful later on, I recorded it here. Weeks of these teacher journal entries were analyzed for trends that may not have emerged from the discussions themselves.

At the conclusion of the study, I was able to compare student responses in both surveys, the *Me and My Reading Profile (MMRP)* (Marinak, Malloy, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2015) and the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS)* (McKenna & Kear, 1990) to notice if there were any changes in student attitude or motivation toward reading. I analyzed the data from the interviews, surveys, conferences, and teacher journal to see if student attitudes, motivation, and responses had changed with regard to their reading, based on their survey answers and responses during conferences about their books. By analyzing their work and drawing conclusions, I was able to present findings on the effects talk and discussions have on students' reading abilities, motivation, and comprehension. These findings are detailed in Chapter Four. A summary of the study, limitations and implications of the study, and a final conclusion are all detailed in Chapter Five.

## Chapter 4

### Data Analysis and Findings

Chapter four discusses the findings after investigating the research question, “What happens when second graders engage in conversations during reading conferences about critical texts?” Data was collected over a period of six weeks with a total of seven students. Sources of data included interviews, surveys, audio recordings, and a teacher journal. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first consists of a series of short case studies about each student participant, although they were each given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The second section consists of a discussion of the themes that emerged from the study. There were four major themes that became apparent from the analysis of the data: (1) there was a change in the types of books students chose to read, (2) students were highly motivated to read the texts they chose for themselves, (3) students’ engagement and use of questions increased through the use of reading conferences, and (4) student responses became longer and more meaningful as the study progressed.

#### Student Participants

**Maddison.** Maddison is a seven-year-old, Hispanic female student in this second grade class. From the *Funds of Knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) interview that was done with each student, I learned that Spanish is spoken just as frequently in her home as English and that her family enjoys celebrating many Spanish holidays together. Her favorites include Day of the Dead, Cinco de Mayo, and going to church for Mary’s birthday, all in Mexico with her four cousins, aunt, uncle, sister, and parents. It was interesting, though, when she was telling me about these holidays, she said “the fifth of

May” instead of “Cinco de Mayo” because she assumed I would not know which holiday she was referencing since I only speak English. After she said “the fifth of May”, I repeated back, “Oh, Cinco de Mayo, right?” and she looked at me, seemingly flabbergasted that I would know of a holiday she celebrates in another country. I thought that was fascinating and we both learned a little more about each other in that instant.

Some other information Maddison shared with me was that when she is in New Jersey, she spends her time hanging out with her older sister, going to gymnastics practice, and eating meals together as a family. She loves to paint, watch TV with family, and go to church together. Both of her parents work so she spends a lot of time with her grandmother when her parents can’t be home with her. When speaking with her, she spoke very highly of all the family members she has in New Jersey and Mexico, and also seemed very excited to get to share about their celebrations and traditions.

When it comes to her independent reading behaviors, Maddison can always be found following all of our classroom rules. She sits quietly, pays attention to her reading, and reads books at an appropriate pace. During reading conferences or guided reading groups, she doesn’t hesitate to share her thoughts and ideas; she also really enjoys hearing from others and building off of what they are willing to share. She is involved in the Gifted and Talented program at the school.

At the beginning of the study, her results of the *Me and My Reading Profile (MMRP)* survey included a total score of 48/60. When broken down by section and question-type, she scored a 12/15 in the area of self-concept as a reader (SC), 21/30 in the value of reading (V), and 12/15 in literacy out loud (LO). Overall, these scores can be interpreted to mean that she thinks of herself as a fairly capable reader, both when

reading to herself and out loud to someone else. She recognized that learning to read is extremely important and that she enjoys reading a lot, but she also responded she does not enjoy reading with others or spending her free time reading. For example, she answered “lots” when asked if she had favorite books, but also responded “no” when asked if she liked to read during her free time.

After the *MMRP*, she also completed the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS)* which took a more in-depth look at her feelings toward recreational reading and academic reading. She scored a total of 33/40 in the area of recreational reading and 35/40 in academic reading. In class, I have noticed she chooses appropriate books for herself to read and will stay busy reading during independent reading time. She rarely asks for help and never complains about reading in any capacity, even when doing partner or small group reading. Although she answered that she does not prefer those methods, she is willing to participate in those types of literacy activities in class.

At the end of the study, her total *MMRP* increased to 50/60, with all 5 increasing points coming from the questions related to her value of reading. Her self-concept and literacy out loud scores remained the same. Her score for the *ERAS* also increased- recreational reading increased to a 37/40 and academic reading went up 1 point to 36/40.

**Elizabeth.** Elizabeth is a female, African American, seven-year-old second grader. English is the language spoken at home and her schedule outside of school is a very busy one. She has two younger siblings, is a member of a competitive gymnastic team and competes in big meets around the nation. Much of her time outside of school is dedicated to practicing for this team. Elizabeth named some of her favorite holidays as Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner, which are either spent at home or at a restaurant in

Philadelphia. Both of her parents work long hours and she spends a lot of time with her grandmother. On the weekends, she told me she likes watching TikTok videos or shows on Disney+, playing with friends across the street, and having sleepovers. There is a big emphasis on working hard, completing homework, and following routines in her home as well. In school, I have observed her do well with reading for increased periods of time, especially when she is allowed to read books she has brought in from home, which are typically chapter books about best friends, such as *Ivy and Bean*. Although she seems to enjoy reading during her independent reading time in the classroom, she has been vocal this year about not wanting to read at home if she did not have to and has also been very vocal about not wanting to do much of anything besides sleep since she is always practicing for gymnastics so late into the evening. (I did verify with the family after hearing Elizabeth vocalize her concerns, but family members say practices are long and difficult, but she gets an adequate amount of sleep at night. Elizabeth disagreed, telling me that fifteen hours just wasn't enough time!)

During the independent reading time in class, Elizabeth can be found reading in her assigned spot, following all of the classroom rules, except she loves to read and share with others about her reading. She has a tendency to approach teachers with questions and thoughts about her books too frequently, when instead they should be jotted and saved for a reading conference. When there is an appropriate time for her to share during conferences or small groups, she enjoys sharing her thoughts, but wants to have a lot to say. This leads to her making surface-level comments, as opposed to taking the time to think deeply about her reading and then sharing those thoughts and connections.

When looking at the data, her initial *MMRP* total score before the study began was 59/60. She scored 15/15 in the self-concept area and 30/30 in the area of value of reading, but only 14/15 with literacy out loud. This indicates that she believes learning to read is important and believes herself to be a very capable reader, although she has some reservations about others hearing her read aloud.

According to her *ERAS* results, she scored 29/40 for motivation for recreational reading and 31/40 for academic reading. Her *ERAS* scores more accurately matched my classroom observations of her mood and motivation toward reading during our school day than those of the *MMRP*, but I was encouraged to see that she had a more positive outlook toward reading according to her *MMRP* than I had realized.

When both surveys were administered to Elizabeth again at the conclusion of the study, her *MMRP* scores stayed the same (she still responded that only “sometimes” tells others about what she reads), her recreational reading score increased by 6 points to 35/40, while her academic reading score only improved by 2 points, bringing it up to 33/40. The six-point increase was noteworthy, as she now believed recreational reading could be done in the classroom and showed more enthusiasm toward her independent reading time each day.

**Jake.** Jake is a seven-year-old, Hispanic, second grade male student in our class. Although Jake is a very quiet student who typically shares more personal information through his writing than in conversation, he was very excited about the interview at the beginning of the study. He began by telling me, “Ooh, this must be like what my dad does. He is a doctor, but not the kind of doctor you go to for medicine. He is a doctor of the mind. Okay, what do you want to ask me?” He shared that he has one older brother

and two younger brothers. Everyone speaks Spanish in the home, including his parents. Only he and his brothers speak English to each other. He described his mom being able to understand English better than she can speak it, but did not elaborate on his father; he just shrugged his shoulders when I asked. They are a very religious family, and Jake is not afraid to share about his faith, even while in school. They do not celebrate Halloween, but do not need to be kept sheltered from it either; they simply just do not participate. He has a lot of family in Puerto Rico and they make frequent trips there to visit. He also has family in Hamburg, Pennsylvania and that is where his family moved to this town from. He has strong family ties, mentioning that they eat meals together, celebrate holidays together, and always go to church on Sundays. Since he has three brothers, he shared that they all enjoy going outside, going out to eat at restaurants, and going with their parents to different stores. His chores at home include doing his homework and keeping his uniform and shoes clean. Jake's mother is a lawyer who works from home and his father is a "doctor of the mind" who has an office in Philadelphia. He and his brothers are not allowed to go on YouTube, but he does enjoy watching the show "Nailed It" on Netflix, in which people at home try to recreate cakes and other types of food they have seen done by professionals. He is a very studious student who takes classwork and homework very seriously; he enjoys being successful in all subjects in school and he is a quick learner who has had learning new things come very easily to him so far. He is involved in the Gifted and Talented program at the school.

During his independent reading time, he is a student who follows all of the directions and spends his time reading his books appropriately. When he chooses books, he tends to choose books that are way below his reading level and he prefers to read them



multiple times. When he does expand his reading choices, he tends to gravitate toward nonfiction texts about space. He seems to be very particular about what he reads, and does not like to take book suggestions from teachers.

His total *MMRP* score was 48/60 with the scores from the three different categories being 12/15 in self-concept, 21/30 in value of reading, and 11/15 in literacy out loud. With the *ERAS* survey, his scores were 31/40 for recreational reading and 35/40 for academic reading. After conducting the study and administering the surveys again at the end, his self-concept score increased to 15/15, value of reading score increased by one point to 26/30, but his literacy out loud score remained the same. According to the post-*ERAS* survey, his recreational score increased by three points and his academic reading score increased by two points. Jake elaborated while taking this survey, explaining that he likes to read in school when he has to and he is good at it. He mostly likes to read about science and real life things. He said it is too hard to read at home because he has three brothers and it can get loud; then it takes him too long to read anything and he doesn't like it anymore.

**Bryce.** Bryce is an eight-year-old, Hispanic, male, second grade student. In class he typically is very quiet, does most of the work and activities asked of him, but has difficulty asking for help when he needs it; instead, he'll just cross his arms and sit until someone notices he is stuck. He got a huge smile on his face when I asked him if I could interview him and he was extremely willing to answer all the questions. He shared that he has one older brother and one younger brother and that they live on a farm with their parents and lots of goats. According to Bryce, they mostly speak Spanish in the home; his father can read, write, and speak English, but his mom communicates only in

Spanish. On the weekends, he explained that he likes to sleep in, but he usually has to help with the goats. In his free time, he just likes to play and hang out. He goes to church with his family and celebrates holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Day of the Dead.

When Bryce is reading during independent time, he usually needs a teacher to keep him on track, as he can get distracted easily. He always stays very quiet and will stay in his assigned reading seat for the duration of the reading time. He does not challenge himself or stay reading consistently, but will read to a teacher when asked. Bryce has very little motivation to read on his own, whether it's during independent reading time or not, but is very willing to do so with someone next to him.

After completing the two surveys before the study was conducted, Bryce scored 46/60 as a total score on the *MMRP* and 29/40 on recreational reading on the *ERAS* and 26/40 for academic reading. When breaking down the total *MMRP* score, he scored 13/15 in the area of self-concept, 21/30 in value, and 12/15 in literacy out loud. These scores indicated that he had a fairly high self-concept as a reader and felt he was competent in his reading skills, he does believe there is some value in reading and learning to read, but is not fully confident in reading out loud. The results of the *ERAS* survey indicate a higher preference for recreational reading than academic, although only by a few points. When he took the surveys again at the conclusion of the study, his academic reading score had increased to 29/40 on the *ERAS*, while the recreational score stayed the same.

**Bryan.** Bryan is a seven-year-old, Caucasian, second grade student. Although he seemed shy at first, he agreed to the interview and then seemed to really enjoy the individual attention. During the interview he shared a lot of information with me,

including that he is the youngest of four siblings, and English is the language spoken by all in the home. Bryan loves his two pet dogs, playing with Legos, and all kinds of sports. His mom is a middle school English teacher and his dad works at a nearby nuclear plant. Together, they take lots of trips to new places, watch sports, read, or just play together. When it comes to holidays, Bryan and his family celebrate many of them, but his top three favorites are Seven Fish Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. He does have to help out around the house during the week and on the weekends. Bryan is in charge of unloading the dishwasher, putting the trash bag back in the bin after someone else takes it out, and taking out the new puppy. He is an extremely quiet student who needs extra time to gather his thoughts before speaking or answering a question, but he enjoys playing with others and coming out of his shell more when an adult is not around. He is involved in the Gifted and Talented program at the school.

During classroom independent reading time, Bryan typically plays with the books more than he reads them. This student has a difficult time staying in his reading spot and leaves often to use the restroom. He usually reads through his books too quickly, does not want to talk about them, and often complains that there is nothing in his book bin that he wants to read. He would much prefer playing with Legos than to do any kind of reading.

On the *Me and My Reading Profile* survey, he scored a total score of 53/60. In the subcategories, he scored 14/15 in self-concept, 26/30 in value of reading, and 13/15 in literacy out loud. On the *ERAS*, he scored 32/40 for recreational reading and 36/40 for academic reading. At the end of the study, his *MMRP* score stayed the same, but the points were different in the subcategories. He scored 11/15 in literacy out loud, but

increased his value of reading score by two points. Bryan explained that even though he liked being able to communicate during conferences and small groups, he does not like to have others listen to him read out loud, but he thinks reading is more interesting now with these new books. He told me that he likes to read books that aren't for babies, and this is a statement he makes about things often in school in trying to keep up with his older siblings.

**Andrew.** Andrew is a seven-year-old, white, male student in this second grade class. He lives directly behind the school building with his parents and older sister on their farm. They have horses, pigs, goats, dogs, cats, and chickens. Andrew is a very animated speaker and he loves to do anything that he thinks will mean not having to do his classwork, such as joining me for this interview. He easily admits that school is not his favorite place to be and he shared that he would rather be at home playing video games on his Xbox or making TikToks on his mom's phone. Andrew explained that he doesn't like to read even though "he's really good at it" because he would rather be doing something with his hands, such as painting or even building a box that will hold all of his art supplies. He is very creative and has plenty of ideas to share, but that outgoing, fun-loving personality shrinks down into slumped shoulders and a boo-boo lip when it comes to reading.

Andrew had been on Tier II in first grade and Tier I in second grade. Although he continues to make progress, he has difficulty putting forth effort into his work in any subject area. He is another student who builds towers or a fence with his books instead of reading them. When he works with a teacher to decide which books he will read for the day, as soon as the teacher walks away, he goes back to playing with them. He'll

announce that he already finished those books, that there is no reason to reread them, and that there is nothing else to do. He enjoys nonfiction and learning new things, especially about animals, but not enough to enjoy books for a long period of time.

At the beginning of the study, Andrew's score on the *MMRP* was only 29/60. He scored very low in two different areas- self-concept and literacy out loud- with 6/15 in both categories. His value of reading score was 17/30. This was consistent with observations from class. Andrew was very honest in admitting that reading is important and you need it, but he really didn't like doing it and if he had to read, he greatly disliked when others would listen to him read. He did seem okay with having others read out loud to him; he said he would prefer just to listen because some of the words are too hard and he gets distracted. On the *ERAS*, he scored 12/40 in recreational reading and 11/40 in academic reading. By the end of the study, his *MMRP* score increased. His self-concept score went up by five points, value of reading increased by three, and literacy out loud went up by 1 point. The most significant increase in his data, however, was his recreational reading score on the *ERAS*, which increased by ten points. Even the way he was talking about books at the end of the study was different. He was often making recommendations to peers about books to read, asking me for new ones he could borrow, and verbalizing much more often his enjoyment of reading. Andrew was also much more willing to sit and actually read during the designated independent reading time.

**Lee.** Lee is an extremely happy student who is always willing to comply. While he does not challenge himself, he will take redirection well. When interviewed with the *Funds of Knowledge* questions, I learned that he lives with his mom, dad, and little brother. He also mentioned an older brother, but he does not live in the home with them.

English is the sole language spoken at home. Lee has three cats at home and they are his pride and joy. He loves telling stories about them, showing pictures of these cats, and including them into school whenever possible. He shared that they love celebrating birthdays and he frequently tells me that his mom's birthday is coming up as well as his little brother's, although he does not exactly know when they are. Lee loves to play Minecraft, other video games, and watch TV after school and on the weekends. When asked what kinds of TV shows he enjoys watching, he just laughs and says "All of them!" Lee told me that he does not have any chores at home and his dad used to be in the Navy and now he has his own business and lots of business cards. This student does have a 504 plan due to a medical diagnosis.

When it comes to his reading, Lee has an extremely positive outlook and thinks that every time he reads, he did the best job ever. Throughout his second grade year, he has made steady progress, but he has not improved his ability to spend time independently reading in the classroom. He believes each book he reads is done perfectly, that there is no reason to revisit it or discuss it for any reason, except if he really enjoyed it and wants someone else to read it. This can make before, during, and after reading activities challenging if they are to be done on his own, but when he works with teachers for extra support, he is very compliant and willing to participate. He tends to choose books below his instructional reading level and when left to work independently, he frequently can be seen finishing one book and then sitting quietly looking around the room.

From the way Lee talks about himself as a student and as a reader, his *MMRP* scores match his confidence. His total *MMRP* score was 55/60, with 14/15 in self-

concept, 29/30 in value of reading and 12/15 in literacy out loud. He often says reading is easy for him (after he figures out all the hard words) and that he doesn't need to reread because "it was already perfect." With coaxing and creativity, he is willing to reread, especially with a teacher, but he does it without realizing it is benefitting him more than the teacher. Although he views himself as an excellent reader, he has always been very honest about not enjoying reading very much. He doesn't talk about much besides Minecraft and Spiderman, which has an impact on the books he is willing to choose to read for himself. His *ERAS* scores were 10/40 in both categories, recreational reading and academic reading. Lee was not shy in explaining that he really doesn't like to read much and it doesn't matter where he reads or the purpose for his reading. At the end of the study, his recreational reading score increased by five points, even surprising himself when I pointed out the increase. He reacted by saying, "Well I guess I like it a little more than I thought. But I'm still going to play video games at home more than I read!"

### **The Texts They Read**

Research (Norton, 2013; Delpit, 1988; Freire, 1970) indicates the importance of providing students with plenty of critical, multicultural texts to read. There were few critical, multicultural texts available to the children in their leveled libraries so I had to provide the texts and it was from that group of provided texts that students made their weekly reading selections. These books were checked against a number of criteria to verify that they were indeed critical and multicultural. First, their inclusion and portrayal of a variety of characters was inspected. In this group of texts, many cultures and heritages were represented and the illustrations were accurate in their portrayal of these people and cultures. Images of the characters did not contain exaggerated or stereotypical

features. Norton's (2013) principles were used to make sure that the values and beliefs of people in the books were accurate and appropriate, as well as ensuring the major events and plots of the different stories were possible for the time and culture, as well as accurately depicted. The texts were also checked against the *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism* by the Council on Interracial Books. When reading over and inspecting these texts before making them available to the children, there were a number of aspects that had to be considered; these aspects included looking for tokenism (characters who look like white people except for the color of their skin), standards for success for the characters, gender roles, ideals portrayed through character traits and friendships, and depictions of family dynamics and relationships, among others. Delpit's (1988) idea of "culture of power" was examined through the author's perspective and by looking at the author's or illustrator's background. These steps were extremely important in making sure that students' self-images when reading these texts would not be negatively impacted, as well as ensuring that they would be digesting accurate portrayals of the characters and events depicted through each story. Bishop's (1990) ideas of mirror and window books was another aspect to take into consideration when presenting students with these multicultural texts. Bishop (1990) explains that mirror books provide students the opportunity to see themselves represented in a book, while window books allow students to see another outlook on the world. With a group as diverse as the group of participants in this study, it was crucial that each student would be able to find at least one book that he/she would consider a mirror book, and another that would be a window book.



Five books stood out to these students based on student discussions and teacher observations, so these books will be referenced most frequently in the next section. Those books were *Bintou's Braids* by Sylviane A. Diouf, *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki, *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto and Ed Martinez, *Goggles!* by Ezra Jack Keats and *Gleam and Glow* by Eve Bunting.

The first text, *Bintou's Braids*, is a story about a little girl in a West African village who admires the long, beautiful braids of her older sister and other women in her family. Although she is only ever able to get cornrows, she is able to choose her own reward after becoming a hero by saving her two cousins. Here, she realizes that true beauty comes in many different forms, and that she is perfect just the way she is.

*Baseball Saved Us* is a story told from the perspective of a young Japanese American boy who (along with his family) was kicked out of his home and made to live in an internment camp following Pearl Harbor. This boy, and others at the camp, found a way to use baseball to connect them to humanity and to give them a sense of freedom. This story provides a personal and relatable perspective, while accurately portraying a dark and ugly part of American history.

A third text is *Too Many Tamales*. This is a funny story about a mini-drama experienced by a young Hispanic girl, Maria, and her cousins, when she pulls them in to help her solve her dilemma. Maria tries on an important piece of her mother's jewelry and loses sight of it completely once they have finally finished making all the tamales for their big family Christmas dinner. Together, she and her cousins work to solve the dilemma on their own, but when that doesn't work, she tries to muster up the courage to

make the confession to her mother. This is a heart-warming, relatable story to students of all backgrounds.

*Goggles!* is a story about two friends who turn someone else's trash into their treasure and the group of bullies who are trying to take it away from them. This book is full of ingenuity, loyalty, and courage, with lovable characters that many have followed through other books by the same author.

The fifth text mentioned most often by the students is *Gleam and Glow* by Eve Bunting. It is about a Bosnian family who is forced to leave their home after unrest and war threaten their safety. Bunting manages to tell about war and hope simultaneously, when a little girl must leave her two beloved fish behind. The family later returns and everything has been destroyed, but readers continue to turn the pages wondering about the fate of the fish. This book combines real life events with timeless hope, all while tugging at all readers' heartstrings.

### **Key Findings**

**Changes in text selections.** In our second grade classroom, there are many books from which students can choose, but there are few critical, multicultural texts. Instead of having the students choose from our regular leveled libraries like they typically do, I called them over to our small group table I showed them this carefully selected group of critical texts. I explained that this selection of books went along with this project they were helping me with. The books were carefully laid out in front of them and then I told them they each could choose one at a time; after they read that book and we conferred about it, they would be able to switch it out for a different book from this selection. They

each became really excited and started flipping through the different book options. A few of them wanted to make sure they would have the chance to read more than one.

Andrew: Miss B, if I take one now and read it, will I be able to get another one?

Me: Yes, of course. Let's focus on one text at a time so we don't get our thoughts mixed up.

Andrew: Ooh, I already can't wait to get a second one.

Then Andrew and Elizabeth wound up really being interested in the same book. They looked at me as if I was going to decide who should read it first, but I told them to be problem solvers.

Andrew: Miss B, we both want to read this book.

Elizabeth: Yes, we think it sounds interesting, but who gets to read it first?

Me: You two can talk to each other and problem solve. What are some good ways you think you can solve this problem?

Elizabeth: We could read it at the same time.

Me: Yes, you could. Would you like to read it together?

Andrew: No, not really. Let's read it separate first and then maybe we could talk about it another time.

Andrew immediately gave in, telling Elizabeth she could have it first to read and that when they were done they would switch. This was very surprising to me, because usually Andrew can't find any books he is interested in, let alone books that he cannot wait to read. To my surprise, Andrew stayed consistently interested in the text options each week.

Despite choosing the same book as Andrew in the first selection of texts, Elizabeth stayed relatively picky about the books she chose. Typically, from our classroom library, she chooses series books such as *The Puppy Place*, *Pinkalicious* or *Fancy Nancy*. When invited to choose from this special selection of critical texts, she would inspect each book carefully, read the excerpts and flip through the pages. Her focus shifted to the characters of these new texts, and she selected texts that were mirror books for her; she resembled the characters on the covers of the books she chose to read. She's a young, female, African American student and the second book she chose was *Bintou's Braids*. Elizabeth immediately made a connection with the character on the cover and remarked, "Miss B, look! My hair looks just like hers!" After reading, she was able to make more connections to the actions and traits of the characters in the story, but the connection she made to the image on the cover is what initially drew her into reading this story.

After noticing Elizabeth's mirror book choice, I noticed other students in the group were also selecting texts that were mirror books for themselves. Maddison and Bryce both were interested in *Too Many Tamales*, saying that they make tamales with their families at home. During the third week of the study, Andrew chose the text *Weslandia* because after telling him it was about a boy who created his own civilization, Andrew said, "Wow! He must be really creative. I'm creative too so I'm just like him. I want to read this one." It was interesting to see so many of the students in this group selecting texts based on connections they could make with the characters, who often looked a lot like themselves.

**Increased motivation to choose books and read more.** Since the students were so excited about their book choices each week, their intrinsic motivation to read these critical texts increased. Andrew and Elizabeth had their previously mentioned interaction about sharing a text they both wanted to read, but they agreed that one would read it first and the other would read it second. Bryce and Maddison were excited about reading about the same tamales they make at home with their families and sharing this book with their peers who did not know what tamales were. Jake could not wait to read a new book by his favorite author, Ezra Jack Keats. He usually has difficulty finding books that he is interested in at his level and tends to want to select books that are way below his independent reading level so he can read them quickly and then show others that he finished. One of the books he loves to read over and over again is *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. As soon as he saw *Goggles!* by the same author as an option, he became excited and wanted to read it right away.

The students were motivated by each other to read more as well. Bryan and Lee were initially not very interested in any of the selected texts available to them, until they heard their classmates discussing them. When Bryan and Lee first came over to the table to make their selections, they both said “No, thanks” and turned to go back to their independent reading spots. Before I had a chance to confer with them individually, they each came back to the table after seeing and hearing their classmates get excited over the very books they had walked away from. Bryan asked Jake if he could borrow *Goggles!* as soon as he was finished with it and Lee wanted to read *Weslandia* first and then *Goggles!* after Bryan was finished reading it.

Data gathered from the surveys also showed an increase in motivation. According to the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*, six out of seven students' recreational reading scores increased. One student increased by two points, two students increased by three points, another student increased by five points, a fifth student increased by six points, but the most significant increase was ten points. The seventh student's recreational reading score stayed the same. Andrew was the student whose recreational reading score increased by ten points. He was the student who displayed more interest and motivation in choosing and reading his books each week and the data supports his actions. From conducting this survey, I also learned that all of the students viewed reading these books in school as recreational reading. Their academic reading scores all either stayed the same or only increased by one or two points on the same *ERAS* survey. After conducting the *ERAS* at the end of the study, I individually asked them all why they think they like to read more now since I noticed some of their scores increased. I received some of the following responses:

Maddison: I like to read when I'm bored and there's nothing else to do, but it is sometimes kinda fun when you have books about good food, like about tamales.

Elizabeth: I really liked the book where the girl looked like me, but I also still like reading about puppies and we don't get to read them too much in school.

Jake: I like when I get to read all of Ezra Jack Keats books.

Andrew: I didn't think I liked to read much, but now I do. Only because I like reading cool books, and you gave us a lot of cool books to read. Not like before.

Bryce: It's just okay. Sometimes I like to read and sometimes I don't...but definitely not in school. It's hard to read.

Bryan: I still don't like to read, but I really liked the books everyone else was reading too.

Lee: I don't need to read a lot because I'm already a great reader. I only read in school when I have to.

The advantage of including a survey instead of just interview questions was that the students answered more honestly by circling the Garfields that best matched their answers and no one could see which they had circled. Some of the students in this group were very hard pressed to admit out loud that they enjoyed reading or any of the books they were presented with in this project, but their reactions and survey answers suggested that they became more interested in these texts and their motivation to read them increased.

**Student engagement.** “He looked so HAPPY! He was smiling and giggling, while trying to hide his face at the same time. He continued to look at Maddison, as if he was communicating with his eyes, asking her if they were really sharing about real life experiences from their home.” This was part of an entry about Bryce in my teacher journal the day I read *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto and Ed Martinez as a read aloud. Two students from the group had already borrowed it to read during their independent reading time and since it had created quite the buzz among the students, they asked if we

could share it with everyone as a read aloud. Before I read the story out loud, Maddison and Bryce asked if they could explain what tamales were so everyone would understand. This made sense because not only are Maddison and Bryce good friends, but they both come from large Mexican families and their families are very close friends as well. Both families even travel to Mexico a few times a year to visit grandparents and other family members who still live there. As Maddison began to explain what a tamale was and list the ingredients, Bryce chimed in with her, and he had a huge smile on and kept giggling. He kept looking at Maddison as if to say, we're really telling them about our food?

Maddison: Bryce, how do we explain masa?

Bryce: It's doughhhhhh.

Maddison: What do they make the picaquitas from? Wait, never mind. Masa is like sand sorta. Well, not sand. It's like powder and then you pour water on it and then it's like dough.

Andrew: Wait, what are you saying? /Ta/-/mail/-/eys/?

Maddison: No, /ta/-/mal/-/eys/, but you have to change how you say the end of the word too.

Bryce: Yeah, it's /ta/-/mal/-/eys/.

After hearing Maddison and Bryce say the words *tamale* and *masa* correctly, Andrew, myself, and the other students all practiced our pronunciations. When I said them, Bryce looked right at me and said, "But Miss B! That's a Spanish word! How did you say it like that?" He seemed surprised and excited about teaching those of us who are not native Spanish speakers how to properly pronounce words that he was only used to hearing from Spanish-speaking family and friends.



Although he was very shy about it, the pride on his face was evident and as they thoroughly explained the ingredients needed and the way tamales are made (and eaten), the rest of the students were listening intently and seemed enthralled. They were all connecting in a way that I had not seen before; these two students were taking the lead and explaining from experience and the rest of the students seemed to be drawn to that. Many of them even commented that they wanted to try a tamale after hearing Maddison and Bryce explain them.

As teachers, we often try to hook our readers in before a story or a lesson. With Maddison and Bryce leading the discussion and teaching the other students from their own experience, it was the best hook to get everyone interested in this story. After realizing that the topic of this story was so easily relatable to their peers, they were hooked. All the students continued to practice *tamale* and *masa*, even saying them with me as I read the story aloud. They were extremely motivated to hear the entire story and participate with predictions and thoughts along the way. Although this particular read aloud was not a typical reading conference, we used it as an opportunity for a group discussion and it allowed them to build new connections with each other, which also helped them increase respect for one another and their differences.

Student engagement also increased based on the number of questions students were asking. During and after reading texts such as *Gleam and Glow* by Eve Bunting, *Goggles!* by Ezra Jack Keats, and *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki, students were asking many more questions than the amount they typically ask over books discussed during reading conferences before this study began. When discussing the text *Gleam and*

*Glow*, many of the questions they had did not go beyond the text because there was much more for them to try to understand in these critical, multicultural texts:

Lee:           Why did Papa join the underground? How can it be underground and above ground? That doesn't make sense.

Elizabeth:    Who doesn't want them living in their country? Why not?

Andrew:       Are you sure he's eight? Why does he keep wetting the bed?

All the questions they were asking showed that they were engaged in the story and were trying to make sense of it, but were unable to do it completely on their own due to lack of schema. Reading conferences were the perfect opportunity to provide the space for research and more questions related to these serious topics and fictional characters.

When reading and discussing *Goggles!* students were making connections between what the characters were like in this story compared to in other Ezra Jack Keats stories, such as *The Snowy Day*, *Whistle for Willy*, and *A Letter to Amy*. During this story, the students were sharing literal connections they made between the story and their own lives.

Maddison:     It looked realistic so it was a good story for kids to read because they could relate to it.

Elizabeth:     This book made me worried. I thought they were going to get beat up more by the big kids.

Lee:           I thought the big kids would catch them! I have an older brother and he would've caught me for taking his goggles. But don't worry, I know karate.

Jake: This book just makes me want to keep turning the pages. I was happy, but worried for the young boys at the same time.

These students demonstrated engagement with an increased number of questions asked during the read aloud. While it was great to see increased engagement, this illustrated the challenges of reading beyond surface meaning of the texts. Students did not have the schema to comprehend the full meaning of the texts. Some of the texts were about historical events the students had never heard of and others were about injustices and mistreatment of people to which they could not relate. It was during their reading conferences that they would receive some guidance to help make connections and build schema. Reading conferences provided the time to research these events with the students, provide any other necessary background information, and answer their questions as they arose. For example, students were asking about Pearl Harbor and the Bosnian War, during the books *Baseball Saved Us* and *Gleam and Glow*, respectively, since they were the cause for the events in each story. Students also asked many questions about the guard in the tower from *Baseball Saved Us*. Toward the end of this story, the main character, Shorty, hits a home run despite the odds stacked against him, and the guard in the tower notices and gives him a discreet thumbs-up. Some of the questions and comments from the students included:

Lee: I think the guard should let Shorty out. He gave him a thumbs up.

Bryan: Wait, can he do that? Can he let him out?

Bryce: If he knows the people shouldn't be in there in the first place, I think he should just open the gate.

This single event allowed us to think more deeply and engage in conversations about humanity, struggles with morality, and symbolism in stories. This scaffolding and differentiated guidance helped each student find ways to think more critically both about the text and about how it applied to them and their own lives.

The book that raised the most questions was *Baseball Saved Us*. None of the students had heard of this book before and they thought it was simply going to be about a baseball game. Four of the students borrowed it at separate times to read independently, but brought it back complaining that it was either too difficult for them to read on their own or that it didn't make sense due to lack of schema. Since this occurred with so many of the students in this group, I decided to do it together as another read aloud so that I could help them through it and so they could also lean on each other for understanding.

From the back cover of *Baseball Saved Us* I read, "Surrounded by guards, fences, and desert, Japanese-Americans in an internment camp create a baseball field. A young boy tells how baseball gave them a purpose while enduring injustice and humiliation. The first person narrative is moving" (Mochizuki, 1993) and I watched looks of confusion come over their faces as they began to ask what guards and fences had to do with a camp. Next I read the author's note to provide a small amount of background information which was:

In 1942, while the United States was at war with Japan, the U.S. Army moved all people of Japanese descent away from the West Coast. They were sent to internment camps in the middle of American deserts up until 1945. The reason, the U.S. government said, was because it could not tell who might be loyal to Japan. None of these immigrants from Japan- or their children who were

American citizens- were ever proven to be dangerous to American during World War II. In 1988, the U.S. government admitted that what it did was wrong.

(Mochizuki, 1993, p.1)

With this new information in mind, we then took a book walk through the whole story, looking at the illustrations on the pages to wrap our minds around the story before reading it. Students continually asked questions about how the camp worked because they found it difficult to relate it to anything in their background knowledge or experience. The term *camp* is something they associated with fun or spending time with their families in the summer, but the context in which it was used in this story did not match what they previously knew. All the students also asked questions about the barracks mentioned in the story or why they were not able to just go buy what they needed in order to play baseball. I was able to carefully elaborate to help them reconstruct their schema, and these questions were segues into important conversations to help expand their knowledge. Students also demonstrated how much they needed to lean on each other to try to make sense of their reading. This showed an increase in engagement during reading.

Although most of their questions did not yet show deeper thinking, it was interesting to see these young minds at work, trying to process all that these books contained. They displayed engagement when they continued to probe and ask questions, while also asking to keep reading so they could try to answer their questions and understand the stories better.

**Improved student responses.** Students demonstrated improvement in their questions and responses during reading conferences as the weeks progressed through this

study. In the first two weeks, many of the connections the students made were simple and literal. For example, when reading and discussing *Goggles!* with different students, their initial reactions included:

Elizabeth: The characters and details were good. It's a good story for kids to read.

Maddison: The pictures looked realistic so I can relate to them.

Jake: I know the character Peter from another book. The characters were nice.

Even with prompting, they were unable to expand upon their responses. Elizabeth was not sure what was "good" about the characters and details. Maddison was not sure how she related to the characters and Jake just responded with "I don't know, they're just nice." when I asked him to show me parts of the story that made him think they were nice. On their own, the student participants were not able to give supporting reasons, recognize symbolism, or provide responses that demonstrated the use of their critical thinking skills. By the fifth and sixth weeks, student responses to the same text changed drastically. We reread the text together in a small group and the students began discussing it with each other.

Lee: Why did he take those goggles? Whose goggles were they?

Jake: No one's! They found them.

Bryce: Look at the picture. It looks like there's trash so maybe someone threw them away. But what is this other stuff all over?

Lee: I don't know. Maybe they just found them on the street.  
Sometimes I find things outside and keep them.

Bryce: I don't. My mom says I can't.

Jake: I think it's okay if it's something that no one else wanted. But if it's something that someone dropped and wanted back, I don't think you should be able to keep it.

This conversation showed a profound change in their thinking. These boys began to rely on each other and share personal experience to help make sense of the story and improve their understanding. Their conversation drifted into speaking about character traits and comparing what the characters were like in this story to what they are like in Ezra Jack Keats' other stories.

Elizabeth: I think Peter was brave for standing up for himself. He didn't give the big kids the glasses just because they said to.

Andrew: Yeah, and also he was brave too because the big kids hit him when he turned to look at Archie, but he didn't even cry. He just got right up and made a plan with Archie to get away from the big kids.

Bryan: Peter was definitely the leader. He was making all the plans and saying most of the words.

Elizabeth: I'm just glad the big kids didn't find them. I think if they did find them, they all would have gotten in a big fight. And you're not supposed to fight and hurt other people.

Andrew: I wouldn't want to fight, but I would like to hide out like they did. I wish I had a pipe to talk through.

Elizabeth: Andrew, then you could train your dogs to bring you things in your

secret spot! But it was good thinking by Peter to yell about the parking lot. The big kids believed him and that's how they got rid of them.

Jake: But what if the big kids come back after seeing that the parking lot is empty? Then they'll know they got tricked. They could be even more mad, too! I liked the ending that there wasn't another fight, but I'm still nervous that those big kids could come back looking for them.

Although there was still a lot for this group to work on, the conversations they had showed progress from their conversations in the first two weeks. They were now discussing character traits and feelings, connecting events to their own life experiences, and were putting themselves in the shoes of the characters in the story. The students in this small group were responding to each other and elaborating on what others were saying, instead of waiting for me to ask questions and then providing simple answers. Students also demonstrated going back in the story for evidence and using context clues and the illustrations to help them make inferences and practice many skills that they had been learning in their guided reading groups.

*Gleam and Glow* was a text that many were interested to read because of the fish on the cover. After attempting it themselves, a few discovered it was too difficult for them to read independently so this turned into another read aloud for this small group. At first, many students had difficulty getting past the basic, literal aspects of the story.

Andrew: I love this story because animals (the fish) were alive and I live on a farm. The animals regenerated.



Me: What do you mean by regenerated?

Andrew: There are more of them.

Me: Why do you think there are more and why is that important to the story?

Andrew: Because you need more fish so you're not sad when they die.

Lee's initial reaction to the story was that he also liked it because he had a goldfish once. He also went on to share that the goldfish died, he was really sad, but it knew it was part of life. Bryan added that the painted pictures were really interesting because of how realistic they were. After experiencing reading conferences full of more probing questions and discussions about symbolism, ending the story by bringing it "full circle" with something from the beginning, and the touching on the serious events being alluded to in the story, their responses to this text changed. Some of their responses from the conferences include:

Andrew: Oh! So the fish had babies and they would all keep living. But it was a sign too. The people could keep living too. They're sad, but they can make it better.

Bryan: So when they were talking about wetting the bed and walking to a new place, did those things go together? I wonder how the boy was feeling?

Elizabeth: I moved once and it was sad to leave my friends. It would be even more sad if I had to leave my pets!

As the study went on and the conferences continued, students displayed improved responses through the use of deeper level thinking strategies. They began to elaborate

more, reference the text for evidence and support, and demonstrate an increase in empathy by putting themselves in the character's shoes. Although they did not fully understand the magnitude of the serious events being discussed in each of the critical texts, they did begin to share their emotions and reactions toward what they knew was cruel and unfair, such as the internment camps described in *Baseball Saved Us*. It was extremely interesting to hear their thoughts and conversations change over the course of six weeks.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The findings suggest that critical, multicultural texts had made the difference in motivation and engagement during reading conferences and small groups. These texts contained characters and events that were much more complex than the texts students were used to reading and discussing. Having a variety of cultures and characters represented throughout these books presented each student with the opportunity to see themselves reflected in stories, as well as to see other perspectives on the world. Since the group of participants for this study was diverse, using critical, multicultural texts allowed students to find themselves represented in different books. Results suggest that students became motivated to make their own voices heard. They were motivated to want to share about their own lives and opinions, while also being interested in hearing firsthand accounts from the lives of their friends.

After analyzing student talk around critical, multicultural texts and exploring the impact of those texts on elementary school students' reading comprehension and motivation, the data revealed a few different trends. There was an increased interest in these new multicultural texts and increased engagement in reading and discussing them,

with a teacher or with peers from all participants in this group. Students were initially drawn to books in which they could see themselves reflected in the characters (mirror books), either based on looks, traditions, or life events. Through the use of reading conferences, students were able to reconstruct their schema and add new information they learned about world events or people through discussions based around the characters in the stories. This was done through discussions with the teacher and peers. Since mirror books vary for each child, students motivated each other to read more of these critical, multicultural texts to gain a deeper understanding of books that they would consider to be window books by communicating with peers and sharing personal accounts. When each student was able to contribute his/her own life experience and opinions, others drew a new interest to books they would have otherwise skipped, leading to the conclusion that student communication was a big factor in increasing motivation and aiding in comprehension.

In conclusion, the data suggested that overall, reading conferences do have a positive impact on students' reading comprehension and motivation for reading. Students demonstrated increased interest in choosing these critical texts, starting with mirror books and expanding based on opinions, stories, or recommendations of peers. The data also showed increased motivation toward reading these critical texts, through conversations in which students were asking to read more books or borrow them from peers when they had finished, as well as through data collected in the attitude and motivation surveys. Through the data collected from the reading conferences, it became evident that student engagement increased based on the increase in volume of questions asked, as well as the length of discussions students had about certain texts. The responses students gave

about texts and back and forth with each other also demonstrated improvement, from simple, literal responses to responses that were more elaborate, empathetic, and demonstrated the use of critical thinking skills. Chapter five will provide a summary of the findings, as well as limitations of the study and implications for the future.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions and Implications**

#### **Introduction**

As explained in the literature review, aesthetic reading is getting lost in today's schools (Rosenblatt, 1982). In order to encourage reading for pleasure for all students, there are a number of things that educators can do. Setting a consistent, independent reading time in the classroom each day (Sanden, 2012; Pilgreen, 2000), allowing students to choose their own books (Allington, 2014; Pilgreen, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 2019; Atwell, 2007), and having a variety of critical texts available to students (Friere, 1970; Norton, 2013) are three of the major steps that educators can take in order to motivate students to want to read for pleasure.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the research question, "What happens when second graders engage in conversations during reading conferences about critical texts?" This was extremely important as it was a way to combine the three major things educators can do to help motivate students to read for pleasure. The aim was to determine if student literacy abilities improved with teacher guidance through reading conferences as students read critical texts during established, daily independent reading time.

This chapter provides a summary of the findings, conclusions drawn based on those findings, limitations of the study, and implications for the future.

#### **Summary of the Findings**

Over the course of six weeks, I worked with seven students to examine the effects reading conferences had on students' abilities surrounding the critical texts they were

reading independently. At the start of the study, student interviews were conducted using the *Funds of Knowledge* interview (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) to explore the types of reading activities they enjoy, interests they have both in and outside of school, their use of multiliteracies, and different types of knowledge they already possess. After the interview, students each completed two surveys. The *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS)* (McKenna & Kear, 1990) and the *Me and My Reading Profile (MMRP)* (Marinak, Malloy, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2015) were administered to measure students' attitudes towards different types of reading (academic versus recreational) and to evaluate their own literacy competencies. The *ERAS* was also administered again at the conclusion of the study in order for students to reevaluate their literacy abilities. Comparing pre- and post-study results allowed for analysis of triangulated data with regard to student opinions, noting any changes in their motivation, attitudes, and responses to reading.

After the interviews and surveys were all conducted, seven student participants took turns choosing and reading critical texts that were presented to them apart from our typical classroom library books. Each student read for approximately thirty minutes each day during independent reading time. I met with each student for a reading conference approximately twice each week, for a total of ten or more times by the conclusion of the study. Data sources included audio recordings of the conferences, surveys, interviews, and a teacher journal and these were all analyzed to discover trends or patterns that emerged over the course of the study.

Analysis of this data divulged four major themes: (1) there was a change in the types of books students chose to read, (2) students were highly motivated to read the texts they chose for themselves, (3) students' engagement and use of questions increased

through the use of reading conferences, and (4) student responses became longer and more meaningful as the study progressed. Students demonstrated increased interest in choosing these critical texts. Choosing mirror books (books in which they can see themselves) (Bishop, 1990) first was a trend that emerged over the course of the study. The data also showed increased motivation toward reading these critical texts. Through the data collected from the reading conferences, it became evident that student engagement increased based on the increase in volume of questions asked, as well as the length of discussions students had about certain texts. The responses students gave about texts and back and forth with each other also demonstrated improvement, from simple, literal responses to responses that were more elaborate, empathetic, and demonstrated the use of critical thinking skills.

### **Conclusions of the Study**

In this study, students were encouraged to have discussions around critical texts with the guidance of a teacher through the use of reading conferences. Specifically, I was looking to see if students were motivated to read these new critical texts and if their responses to the texts would become more critical and thoughtful over the course of six weeks by receiving prompting and guidance in their thinking during the conferences. This study supported the findings of research on aesthetic reading, the use of reading conferences, and critical texts in the primary classroom by combining all three and analyzing student progress.

Research done by Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) and Allington (2014) concluded that an increase in reading volume had a direct correlation to reading achievement. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) found that students who read more had

increased reading achievement in areas such as vocabulary, verbal skills, and other cognitive abilities related to literacy. Sanden (2012) found that having a specific time designated for independent reading time each day was beneficial for students. With this part of each day set aside for reading, it allows students to read each day which helps them increase the volume of books they read. The analysis done by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (n.d.) found that by increasing the volume of books read, students are able to improve comprehension, build vocabulary, increase fluency, and develop background knowledge. While not all of these aspects were monitored in my study, the independent reading time set aside each day was critical in allowing all the students to read and share the critical texts used throughout the study. Guiding students in their book choices for each week allowed me to see what they were choosing to read during their independent reading time. This is where the trend of selecting mirror books (Bishop, 1990) first emerged. Students were excited to see themselves represented on covers and in these different stories, so they were motivated to select these texts and to read them on their own during their independent reading time each day.

With all the research supporting allowing students to choose the books themselves (Atwell, 2007; Pilgreen, 2000; Sanden, 2012), this study supported that research in allowing students to choose which books they would read each week from the controlled selection of critical texts presented to them. Students who had not previously been willing to choose their own books or who frequently said “I don’t want to read anything in here” were now asking to take more than one text at a time or be the first to trade with a classmate as soon as she/he was finished with the next book they wanted to read. Students in this group who typically chose books below their instructional reading level



in an effort to read a book quickly and claim that they were “finished for today” were now making lists of books they couldn’t wait to read and reading for the entire length of the designated reading time. Some even asked if they could discuss the books from this study with other teachers who were visiting our classroom. Students demonstrated an increase in interest and motivation in reading these critical texts. Saul and Dieckman (2005) concluded that readers read more attentively when they choose books that draw their interest (as cited in Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.d.) and that is exactly what happened as the weeks progressed through this study.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that students learned best with the help and guidance of someone more knowledgeable. Reading conferences are modeled after this social constructivist approach of students constructing knowledge from what they are reading, but changing and reconstructing knowledge to align with what they are learning alongside an educator. Freire (1970) and Au (1998) also argue that discussion around critical texts is imperative in increasing student competency. Reading conferences are the perfect opportunity for students to participate in such discussions and receive differentiated guidance and feedback, since they are done individually with the teacher. The teacher works with each student to strengthen his/her individual cognitive abilities as they relate to literacy. Through the reading conferences conducted with this group of participants, students demonstrated an increase in engagement about the critical texts, asking more questions each week and engagement in an increased number of discussions with the teacher and/or peers about the critical texts read. Student responses to the teacher and to each other became more elaborate, more respectful, and more empathetic through

the coaching, frequent feedback, and scaffolding of background information as needed according to the various texts.

The survey conducted at the conclusion of the study helped to gauge the interest and motivation of the young readers. When analyzed, the data showed an increase in six out of seven of the participants, as well as a shift in thinking about aesthetic versus efferent reading. At the end of the study, the students showed more positive thinking toward reading and considered more of the reading they enjoyed to be recreational reading, even though it was being done in school. This study overall was able to show that aesthetic reading can be incorporated back into schools and students can be motivated to read for pleasure. By keeping consistent, designated reading times as a part of the daily schedule in the classroom, having students select their own texts to read, and providing a wide variety of critical texts from which students can choose, students can increase achievement and engage in meaningful conversations about critical texts with teachers and peers.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study was the short, six-week time frame in which the study took place. The students read for thirty minutes each day, but each student was only able to confer with me twice each week. This short time period allowed for some trends to begin to emerge, but if the study was able to continue for a longer period of time, it would be interesting to see what else could emerge.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of critical texts on different reading levels. Many of the texts that students were interested in reading were above their instructional reading levels and too difficult to read independently. This meant that

certain students in the participating group were able to read all of the texts independently, while others were not able to read them on their own at all. We used small group read alouds so that all students were still able to participate, but it also limited the amount of individual reading conferences students had.

### **Implications for Today's Classrooms**

There are some important implications for today's classrooms that have become evident as a result of this study. Educators can use some of the best practices from research incorporated into this study in order to benefit learners of all abilities in primary classrooms. These implications include having a designated time for reading as part of the daily schedule, using reading conferences to create discussions around text, allowing student choice when selecting texts, and having ample critical texts at various reading levels available for students to read.

This study suggests that increased achievement is possible when combining reading for pleasure, critical text, reading conferences, and student choice. The research has shown that student choice in the selection of texts increases student motivation and engagement (Atwell, 2007; Pilgreen, 2000; Sanden, 2012) and that became evident in this study as well. Students became excited to choose from a new selection of books, many of which grabbed their attention immediately. The books drew them in and motivated them to read more each week for the duration of the study. Educators who allow students to choose their own books will be allowing students to have a sense of control, choose books they are interested in, and increase motivation for aesthetic reading.

Having a designated reading time where students expect to choose and read their books for a certain amount of time each day has also proven to be successful (Sanden,

2012). By doing this, students come to expect and look forward to this time each day where they are allowed to read the books they have chosen for themselves. Students also increase their volume of reading through this specific independent reading time each day, which has many positive effects including improved comprehension and vocabulary, increased fluency, and more developed background knowledge (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.d.).

The importance of reading conferences is a third implication from this study. The use of dialogue surrounding texts combined with scaffolding and differentiated guidance from an educator has proven to be extremely helpful. Freire, Vygotsky, and Au all argue that discussion around critical texts is imperative, and that became evident during this study. Students were able to further develop their background knowledge, ask questions and receive answers from peers and their teacher, and gain a deeper understanding of what they were reading. These students were able to gain more knowledge related to their texts and become more competent in their literacy abilities. Reading conferences proved to be an extremely beneficial way to incorporate communication and discussion around critical texts in primary classrooms.

The fourth implication learned from this study is the importance of having a variety of critical texts available to students. Presenting the students in this study with new, critical texts gained their attention and interest immediately. Research (Delpit, 1988; Norton, 2013) has shown the importance of critical, multicultural texts in the hands of young learners. Pilgreen (2000) and Allington (2014) reinforce the ideas that these texts are relatable and interesting to students, therefore increasing their motivation and volume of books read. As the volume of books read increases, so does reading achievement

(Allington, 2014). As seen in my study, the lack of critical texts available to them from our classroom library at their own reading level was hindering some students. An implication, even for my own classroom, is making sure that the texts available for them to make selections from is varied, by content and reading level.

This study supported the research conducted on reading for pleasure, reading conferences, and critical texts in the primary classroom. It took it one step further by combining the three and analyzing the effects of conversations that second graders had surrounding these critical texts during reading conferences. It is important that educators recognize the need to combine these best practices in order to most successfully help all students. We must reinforce the importance of not only daily reading, but reading for enjoyment. Educators can share their love of reading with students, who will also hopefully come to love reading just as much. By making critical texts available to students, they will be drawn into reading and increase their volume of books read. This will help all students' achievement in reading and improve their literacy abilities, but the effects won't be as great without combining all these forces through reading conferences. This study has shown that reading conferences really are the heart of the literacy block. When all of the parts of the literacy block are in place, students can grow to be lifelong readers and bring aesthetic reading back into the primary classroom.

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