Spring 2021

Analyzing Perspectives With Relevant Grade-level Texts To Improve Engagement In A Rural Fifth-grade Classroom

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ANALYZING PERSPECTIVES WITH RELEVANT GRADE-LEVEL TEXTS TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT IN A RURAL FIFTH-GRADE CLASSROOM

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of the Arts in Literacy Education.

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

Spring 2021

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To my parents, thank you for the bedtime stories and free-reign in bookstores that fostered an endless love of literacy.

To my teachers and professors, thank you for the knowledge you imparted, the faith in my abilities, and the encouragement when it was needed most.

And finally, to my past, present, and future students, thank you for the privilege of being your teacher; it is the highest honor.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

I never had any interest in teaching young students how to read. I always wanted to teach upper elementary and middle school students how to fall in love with reading; however, my teaching experiences in upper elementary and middle school classrooms revealed how many students claim they hate reading. It became a personal mission of mine to seek out the students with negative relationships with reading and do everything possible to change their minds - to show them how to fall in love with reading. I quickly discovered that many of these reluctant readers either lack understanding of comprehension strategies or were reading books in which they were not interested. As a result, my focus shifted to conversations around student interests and helping these students find engaging texts.

My Experience With Reluctant Readers

My first year of teaching in Denver, Colorado, brought a host of challenges, but one particular student was defiant, confrontational, and hated school, but was incredibly bright. He was in the advanced section of language arts and, on the first day of school, loudly announced that he hated reading. After the initial feelings of disappointment passed, I decided to make a valiant effort to find this student a text that he could successfully read and enjoy.

Many months and countless texts into the school year, I caught my reluctant reader reading his book under his desk while I was teaching. I could not be mad, nor

could I even muster a look of disappointment. Instead, after class, I asked what he was reading. He had found Donald Driver's memoir, *Driven*, and could not put it down. It was about a young black man's life, from being homeless and involved in drugs to a National Football League Super Bowl Champion wide receiver with the Green Bay Packers. For a young black man who loves football and was being brought up in a poor neighborhood, this book was a perfect match.

My Experience with Engaging Texts

As my professional career continued back in a rural Iowa school, my interest in engaging content and texts continued to grow. I noticed behavior disruptions declined if the students found the content engaging; the students' quality of work improved if they could relate to and connect with what was happening in the text; and the deepest discussions were often connected to the world outside of the classroom. The literacy curriculum being used in my classroom has a unit focused on elements of stories, and I read a class novel to the students. Every year, I am impressed by how engaged the students are with the texts. The fifth-graders read *Tuck Everlasting*, and there is ample discussion around choices and consequences. The students can relate to the text and are challenged to weigh the consequences of the characters' actions throughout the text. The sixth-graders read *An Elephant in the Garden* and focus on perspective and character change. Their engagement level and ability to sustain conversations improve immensely when the text is relatable and provides opportunities to critically analyze it.

Rationale

The significant lack of relevant text, authentic discussion, and reflection have

contributed to gaps in research and in the educational system. Engagement decreases significantly throughout middle school, and many students lack exposure to explicit comprehension instruction. Furthermore, traditional canonical texts are often outdated and irrelevant to today's students' lives hindering analysis, discussion, and reflection. All educators should be making an effort to address the lack of engagement, explicit comprehension strategy instruction, and relevant texts in middle school literacy classrooms. After all, the effects reach across content areas and impact informational text comprehension as well as literary comprehension.

The combination of professional experiences with reluctant readers, the successes witnessed in my classroom with relevant texts, and the active participation from students when analyzing perspectives led me to explore whether a literature circle format using relevant grade-level texts impacts engagement in a rural fifth-grade classroom. The objective of this case-study research is to discern whether fifth-grade students are more engaged when reading in literature circles with modern texts that allow for analysis, discussion, and reflection of promoted and silenced voices. The students will select and agree upon a grade-level text, and each of the literature circle roles will be modeled through the first chapter of the book. The students' roles will be focused on questioning the dominant voices in the text and analyzing which voices and perspectives are silenced. In addition to teacher observations and journals, the fifth-grade participants will take a survey with Likert-scale questions and participate in an interview to analyze their engagement and understanding of bias before and after reading the text through a critical lens.

Conclusion

The results of this case-study will prove informative and beneficial for all middle school literacy educators. Although not all texts students encounter can be riveting stories, educators should maximize text selection when possible and can equip their students with strategies and skills to improve engagement and active participation in discussions. The next chapter explores the literature and research on adolescent literacy, engagement, relevant young adult texts, critical literacy, and literature circles. Ivey and Johnston's published work (2013, 2017, & 2018) started the conversation around adolescent literacy instruction and the need for higher engagement, and McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2014) explication of critical literacy challenges educators to shift their literacy instruction toward analysis, discussion, and reflection of power relationships in texts, especially with the author. Furthermore, Sanacore's (2013) research around literature circles provides a foundational knowledge with effective strategies and protocols for successful implementation. The next chapter reviews an abundance of research while simultaneously establishing a gap that needs to be filled in order to fully prepare students for high school literacy challenges.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Adolescent literacy classrooms are notorious for their general resistance and negativity toward reading and writing. The transition between elementary and secondary school often leaves middle school instruction and adolescent learning in an institutional gap. This gap has perpetuated a lack of engagement especially due to irrelevant and outdated texts, a lack of explicit comprehension instruction with complex texts, and minimal class time for independent reading. If unable to connect it to their lives, adolescent students are not invested in their learning, but many texts and instructional strategies lack cultural diversity and relevance to the students' out-of-school lives.

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that middle school students' attitudes and feelings become more negative as they progress through grades five through eight. Some researchers attribute the negativity to an increase in text complexity paired with a lack of strategy preparation (Baker, 2002). The lack of preparation for complex text increases frustration and decreases engagement and interest levels. Adolescent literacy and comprehension are valuable and important topics for research and investment; however, critical literacy and motivation are not seen as current areas of instruction despite being closely related and potentially beneficial. Literacy leaders are concerned about the disconnect and feel these areas should be points of emphasis (Cassidy, Garrett, Barrera, 2006).

Despite the lack of recent research, there are effective strategies and philosophies around adolescent literacy and engagement that are well-known and implemented throughout the educational field. Primarily, students need time to read texts of their choosing, converse about those texts, and share ideas and reflections in a safe, respectful classroom (Baker, 2002; Jocius & Shealy, 2018). The freedom to choose texts should be paired with flexible demonstrations of learning to extend their construction of knowledge and deepen understanding (Baker, 2002; Jocius & Shealy, 2018). Utilizing critical literacy, teachers encourage discussion, reflection, and engagement by allowing students to analyze texts with prominent societal issues and relatable themes (Jocius & Shealy, 2018). Without the research to support these practices, there remains a significant gap in adolescent literacy instruction. The lack of student choice and engagement paired with insufficient comprehension instruction with complex text creates a deficiency in middle school reading classrooms.

Adolescent Literacy

Middle school is known for being a period of physical, mental, social, and academic transition, and this period of transition creates a host of challenges for students, teachers, and parents. One of these changes is the move from elementary to secondary schooling-from learning to read to reading to learn. The shift often involves a different school building, changing friend groups, new teachers, alternative schedules, higher expectations, and more challenging content. The multi-faceted adjustment to middle school and the increase in text complexity leads to academic struggles, especially in literacy classrooms (Fletcher, 2014; Biancarosa, 2012).

As students are reading to learn, they must effortlessly shift among well-developed strategies; however, research reveals an astounding lack of explicit comprehension instruction around these same strategies (Fletcher, 2014; Biancarosa, 2012). This increase in complexity and lack of direct instruction exposes deficiencies in fluency, vocabulary, and strategy-use (Biancarosa, 2012; Nelson, 2019). These gaps and weaknesses hinder comprehension and deep understanding of content. Similarly, Nelson (2019) emphasizes that when cognitive effort is used to decode and read fluently, students compromise their mental capacity to comprehend complex texts.

Effective literacy instruction integrates reading, writing, speaking, and listening around relevant texts in whole-group, small-group, and individual settings (Sanacore, 2000; Fletcher, 2014). Additionally, cross-curricular connections strengthen content knowledge and reinforce reading strategies making learning more authentic (Fletcher, 2014). Reading strategies such as activating background knowledge, deciphering word meanings, identifying main ideas, inferencing, making predictions, and questioning are critical to effective comprehension and require explicit instruction (Nelson, 2019). Fletcher (2014) and Sanacore (2000) agree that there must be a balance between holistic and skill learning partly because it requires students and teachers to maintain perspective on achievement and learning.

Students are not experts in educational pedagogy, but they might be an untapped resource in the world of middle school teaching as so much of the current research emphasizes student choice and relevance to their out-of-school lives. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) and Sanacore (2000) agree on the need for a wide-variety of choices, topics, and

difficulty levels in texts for adolescent learners. More specifically, students gravitate toward texts that represent popular culture and real-life situations. They often choose texts that are traditionally considered "off-limits" for school reading, but their connection is genuine and engagement is improved (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Adolescents prefer time to free-read texts of their choosing, and a teacher's modeled reading and a transparent passion for literacy help in encouraging students to read for personal enjoyment (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Sanacore, 2000).

As part of a balanced-literacy experience, middle school students prefer collaborative read-alouds with texts of personal interest (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Sanacore, 2000). The discussion around these relevant texts is necessary for comprehension and critical analysis. Because of changing demographics and family dynamics, these discussions and interactions with text must happen at school which requires allotted time in the students' literacy block (Sanacore, 2000; Fletcher, 2014; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). In conclusion, the inevitable transition period for adolescents needs to be met with intentional comprehension instruction, relevant materials, and adequate class-time for discussion and reflection.

Engagement

One of the greatest challenges of teaching middle school is maintaining a suitable level of engagement from the students, especially in a world of instant communication and immediate gratification. In order to promote active involvement, there must be a reevaluation of traditional literacy practices for teacher-led discussions and oral reading are not engaging for students because the students lack voice and choice (Ivey &

Johnston, 2013; Springer, Harris, Dole, 2017). Oral read-alouds and whole-class discussions are anxiety-provoking for weak readers and allow students to disengage. Many teachers use whole-class discussions as their only form of discussion and response, and their students miss the chance to construct meaning, converse, and work through the text in small groups (Albright & Ariail, 2006). Additionally, whole-class oral reading moves unilaterally forward rather than allowing for use of fix-up strategies, questioning, and re-reading (Frager, 2010). In contrast, guided and monitored silent reading allows learners to practice using strategies and reread when necessary (Frager, 2010).

Springer, Harris, and Dole (2017) recommend holding reading conferences at the beginning of the year to discover students' interests. Knowing what topics and preferences draw the students to texts is invaluable when seeking to improve engagement. Not all content will be engaging to all students, but Springer et al (2017) suggests creating interest with attention hooks (video clips, short stories, nonfiction connections, etc.) and a classroom environment that embraces new information.

Students become more involved in their learning when given the opportunity to critically analyze and evaluate texts of their own choosing (Afflerbach, Harrison, Alvermann, 2017). Given the opportunity to select their own materials, literacy instruction will likely be more relevant and interesting to the learners while simultaneously encouraging autonomy. Adolescent students engage with texts that have changing perspectives and narrators, strong details, relevance to their lives, and nonfiction connections (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Springer et al., 2017). As their engagement increases, they are more invested in their education and empowered by their

learning (Fairbanks, 2000; Springer, et al., 2017; Afflerbach, et al., 2017). In conclusion, active engagement requires student choice, relevance, and intentional learning opportunities to critically evaluate texts.

Relevant Young Adult Texts

Literacy engagement can be challenging when traditional texts are disconnected from the students' lives. However, a collaborative, open conversation around a text connects various perspectives and opinions among the students allowing them to work through confusing or challenging parts of the text together (Ivey & Johnston, 2017). One way to collaborate with read-alouds is to utilize modeled thinking with students and teachers to promote engagement and improve understanding. This shared experience can also be used to model and encourage close listening and close reading (Elliott-Johns & Puig, 2015).

Allowing choice and open conversations with texts encourages autonomy and genuine discussion. Students want to bring others into an influential text, and this opens the discussion to new perspectives, shared connections, and shared effort to work through textual and content challenges (Ivey & Johnston, 2017). In addition to valuable discussions, Rosenblatt's transactional literacy research focuses on students and the texts that draw them in, making them feel as if they are in the story; similarly, her research connects a text to the human experience and increases reader and text connections (Glaus, 2014).

Many traditional, canonical texts are too difficult and irrelevant to today's students' lives which makes them ineffective for instruction (Glaus, 2014). Ivey and

Johnston (2018) found that engagement and investment improve when students choose and read modern texts with relevant issues and without assigned tasks. When given freedom, students choose disturbing texts; however, reading these texts does not increase their risk of doing those "disturbing" activities. Rather, the students use the text to think and talk through the consequences and situations with trusted peers and adults (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). Furthermore, when adolescents read about characters dealing with real-life, modern issues, they empathize and think through the difficult situations with the characters, equipping them with valuable critical thinking skills (Ivey & Johnston, 2017).

In addition to critical thinking skills, students who feel connected to their text begin to be more open and sympathetic to other people in similar situations (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). Texts that involve the complexity of being human and the challenges of being a teenager encourage students to think and work through the issues and consequences presented in the text in a nonthreatening, low-risk discussion about fictional characters. Students are also more likely to invite their parents into a conversation around fictional characters and the relatable situations because it relieves the anxiety and pressure created by those difficult conversations (Ivey & Johnston, 2017). Similarly, when students are provided guidance and instruction with texts that have many perspectives and silenced voices, they are more likely to read critically and challenge the social and cultural norms presented. Complex texts about modern issues can be used as an avenue for critical analysis of perspectives, audiences, and voices (Gainer, 2013). Adolescent literacy engagement can be complicated, but when texts are chosen by the

students and have relevant, modern, real-life themes, students are much more likely to invest cognitive effort and energy into their learning.

Critical Literacy

It is well established that canonical and traditional texts are often irrelevant, dated, and disconnected from today's students' lives. Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, and Petrone (2014) explain that stretching connections in a canonical text too far can decrease engagement and directly undermine effective instruction. Furthermore, traditional texts are powerful tools that perpetuate privileged and oppressive ideologies, but analyzing why certain texts are revered above others can lead to critical conversations (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014). Being able to recognize privilege as well as oppression is a challenge for many young people, but with explicit instruction, traditional literary classics could be used to analyze and counter those values, beliefs, norms, and ideas that sustain this privilege; Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) refer to this as reading against the text. Students typically do not do this naturally, so the teacher holds a powerful role in modeling this strategy.

Critical literacy is a process that involves analyzing personal points of privilege and questioning societal and cultural norms in an effort to improve comprehension and awareness in the literate world (Lesley, 2001). This process analyzes the relationship of power between the author and the reader, asking questions such as in whose interest is this written, what is the purpose in writing this, and who benefits from this being written (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). This level of analysis requires active engagement to dismantle the authority of the text by questioning the content, delivery, and purpose.

McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) also encourage readers to examine the viewpoint of a text and reflect on the silenced voices to change the dominant narratives. Initially, educators must model and guide students through this process to ensure the effectiveness of this strategy.

Critical literacy is designed to undermine the common and familiar narratives and the ideologies that support them, particularly by putting a spotlight on ignored voices in the text (Enriquez, Cunningham, Dawes, Cappiello, 2019). As previously mentioned, adolescents prefer texts with many perspectives and challenging content which lends itself to the critical literacy framework. Enriquez et al (2019) recommend pairing texts on the same topic or theme and comparing perspectives, narratives, and stories to hear multiple voices. Students also need explicit instruction to effectively carry out critical literacy strategies. Borsheim-Black et al (2014) encourage educators to juxtapose two texts on the same topic with different dominant perspectives which will help students critically analyze the texts and the voices emphasized and silenced.

Literature Circles

Literature circles have been a popular literacy strategy for many decades and offer a valuable opportunity for students to critically analyze texts with their peers. Literature circles are student-led small groups that discuss and read the same text and come to discussions with notes and ideas to share from the text (Witt, 2007). There are specific roles for each reader involved, and the roles and communication skills necessary require explicit instruction and maintenance mini-lessons (Daniels, 2006). Sanacore (2013) recommends using questions and prompts to enhance and further discussions but warns

that role sheets are meant to be temporary supports for the students. Based on his experience and research around literature circles, Sanacore (2013) recommends the students use sticky-notes to track their ideas and written collaborative journals to record and discuss ideas within their group.

Literature circles depend on construction of meaning and diversity of ideas with classmates and a relevant text. This strategy allows students a chance to have authentic discussions and utilize higher-order thinking with their peers in a low-risk environment (Witt, 2007). As a result, readers develop communication and listening skills when they are working with texts and each others' perspectives and perceptions. Furthermore, literature circles allow more time for students to talk, less anxiety when talking, more choice and interest in texts, and increased accountability with their student-led work (Daniels, 2006).

Because the discussions are student-led and in smaller groups, they lend themselves to genuine conversations and a safe environment to question the text and the students' understanding of the text. Literature circles present a prime opportunity to critically analyze and respond to texts while utilizing complex thinking skills. Additionally, the critical nature of literature circle discussions lends itself to multicultural, historical, or political texts and challenging the dominant narratives-similar to critical literacy (Sanacore, 2013).

In order to take their thinking from personal to critical, students must be reflective and intentional; as the reflection deepens, the response becomes more critical and less superficial (Sanacore, 2013). As a result of his research, Sanacore (2013) recommends

the literature circle roles include a problem poser, perspective taker, difference locator, stereotype tracker, and critical lens wearer. Each of these roles deepens understanding and strengthens critical analysis of the text. Similarly, Ferguson and Kerm (2012) offer their revised literature circle roles: sensory image maker, inference maker, questioner, connector, and synthesizer. These are fashioned and modeled after the most effective reading strategies students are taught: visualizing, inference, questioning, connecting, and synthesizing. Regardless of the roles chosen, the students must have explicit instruction for each role and have ample practice communicating their ideas to their classmates.

Summary

Pre-teen and middle school students experience an immense amount of change in very few years. Their bodies, schools, friends, teachers, subjects, and relationships are perpetually evolving often leaving the students in an institutional, physical, emotional, and academic gap. Paired with a lack of interest in reading, students' comprehension and engagement begin to suffer and decline. A deficiency of explicit comprehension instruction, minimal student voice or choice, and irrelevant texts further compromise students' ability to construct meaning, engage in discussions with peers, and critically reflect on voices and perspectives in literacy classrooms. Many middle school students find shifting perspectives and narrators, strong details, and modern struggles engaging aspects of texts. Furthermore, texts that connect and relate to students' lives promote empathy and increase engagement. Using a literature circle format, critical literacy strategies, and relevant texts of the students' choice to question the dominant voices and

perspectives may impact engagement at a time when students are desperate for connection.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This is a mixed-methods case study carried out over two months investigating engagement in a fifth-grade rural literacy classroom. The research was informed by engagement and constructivism theories and worked to answer the question: Does challenging perspectives with a literature circle format using relevant grade-level texts impact engagement in a rural fifth-grade classroom?

The transition between elementary and secondary school often leaves late elementary and middle school instruction and learning in an institutional gap. This gap has perpetuated a lack of engagement especially due to irrelevant and outdated texts, a lack of explicit comprehension instruction with complex texts, and minimal class time for independent reading. Adolescent students are not invested in their learning if they cannot connect it to their lives, but many texts and instructional strategies lack cultural diversity and relevance to the students' out-of-school lives. This mixed-methods study was designed to impact engagement of rural fifth-grade students while providing choice in their text selection, explicit comprehension instruction, class time to read independently, and a critical literacy lens questioning the dominant narratives.

Instructional Context

This research study was informed by the engagement and constructivism theories in an effort to improve adolescent literacy instruction for all students. Engagement theory states that students must be actively engaged in their learning through meaningful texts

and tasks. This study was centered on engaging fifth-grade students through text choice, specific responsibilities in literature circles, and intentionally challenging the perspectives in the text. The roles in literature circles require meaningful and active participation, while reading texts that connect to the students' lives increases their desire to read independently. Additionally, the constructivism theory states that students learn by actively constructing meaning based on their own experiences. Literacy presents many opportunities to construct new knowledge from reading, but in order for the students to connect their experiences to the text, the text must be relevant, relate to the students' lives outside of school, and provide avenues to question the narrative. Construction of knowledge in literacy classrooms requires explicit strategy instruction to promote comprehension, encourage questioning of the text, and allow for reflection.

The literature circle roles are all grounded in literacy practices and comprehension strategies: the word wizard chooses vocabulary words and uses context clues; the summarizer identifies main ideas; the discussion director develops questions; the quote master selected powerful and meaningful quotes; and the diverse diary rewrote scenes or conversations from a silenced perspective. Each of these literacy practices supports the Common Core State Standard from fifth-grade reading literature: "RL.5.6 Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described" (English Language Arts Standards, 2020) Additionally, using a critical literacy lens and challenging dominant perspectives, the case-study research met this standard. As previously mentioned, students need a chance to question and reflect on the texts they read, and literature circles provide an appropriate setting for this to take place. The

students also met a Common Core State Standard from the fifth-grade speaking and listening strand: "SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly" (ELA Standards, 2020).

Case-Study Design

This research involved a mixed-methods case-study with Likert-scale questions and student interviews as primary data sources to measure student engagement with relevant texts, explicit comprehension instruction, and critical literacy strategies. The secondary data source was the researcher's reflections of the group work and discussion. The texts themselves and the literature circle roles were independent variables in the case-study, and these variables were used to measure the engagement of the students through their focus on the text while reading and their interest and participation in the discussions around the text.

In an effort to impact engagement in a rural fifth-grade literacy classroom, this research provides interesting, grade-level texts for the students to choose from. Additionally, the literature circle format required active participation, discussions, and questioning of the dominant voices in the text. One goal of this mixed-methods case-study was to engage the students in sustained conversations with their peers about silenced and promoted voices in texts. Another goal of this research was for the students to be focused on the text while reading silently and aloud.

Setting and Participants

The setting of this study is a rural fifth-grade classroom in North-Central Iowa.

The North Iowa Community School District includes four, small, farming communities and is made up of predominantly white, middle-class and working families. The school has around 450 students with pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade in one building. According to 2019-2020 data, more than 35% of the students receive free or reduced lunches. There are two sections of each grade with pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade in the elementary, sixth- through eighth-grade in the middle school, and ninth- through twelfth-grade in the high school.

For this study, all of the students in the available small group were given the option to participate, and those who expressed interest and received parent permission were chosen for the literature circle group. The participants include three females and four males with one reading below grade-level, three reading at grade-level, and three reading above grade level. The literature circles were done during a personalized intervention period without other students in the classroom. The remainder of the students were either receiving Title 1 reading interventions or special education services. The participants read the text at home or during free-reading time and completed their literature circle role-sheets (Appendix C) independently.

Prior to the case-study, the researcher compiled a diverse list of texts from which the students would choose. She wanted to ensure that the students were reading grade-level texts, but beyond that, there was no direct influence on the decision, and the students were encouraged to make a collective choice. The texts selected were *Rules, A Long Walk to Water, Blended, The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street, Darius and Twig, Front Desk, A Rhino in Right Field, Ms. Bixby's Last Day, The Unteachables,* and *A Good Kind*

of Trouble. The researcher also designed literature circle role sheets to use for modeling, guided practice, and independent practice (Appendix C). The role sheets were not meant to be a crutch but rather a resource and guide for the discussion.

The materials used for this case-study research included a Likert-scale survey prior to the study (Appendix A), teacher journals and notes throughout the study (Appendix E), an interview with the student in the middle of the study (Appendices B and D), and the same survey (Appendix A) after the study. The texts were provided for the students and were theirs to keep after the completion of the unit. The students' literature circle role sheets were collected for each chapter and referenced in the secondary data collection and analysis. The student interviews were done face-to-face with the students individually and transcribed after completion of the study (Appendix D), and the surveys were completed via Google Forms. All responses and data are associated with pseudonyms to protect the participants.

After receiving parental permission and permission from the North Iowa Community School District, the students completed the initial survey individually. After the surveys were completed, the students were given a list of grade-level texts and brief descriptions to choose their book. Working with the students, the researcher assisted in selecting two texts for two groups. The texts selected were *Blended* by Sharon M. Draper and *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street* by Karina Yan Glaser. The group reading *Blended* consisted of two females; the group reading *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street* consisted of one female and four males. The first chapter of the texts was read aloud in both groups focusing on who is narrating the chapter and how that perspective affects the story. The

students were asked to read chapter two independently, and each of the literature circle roles was modeled through this lens of critical literacy. The students and researcher discussed and analyzed each of the roles in reference to the second chapter. Finally, the students were asked to read the third chapter individually and complete one of the literature circle role sheets. Throughout the third week of the study, the participants and researcher completed the interviews together.

The students met with the teacher Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday to discuss the chapter and review role sheets. After observing the discussion, engagement, and interest-level of the students, the students placed their role-sheets inside a collective folder and were assigned the next chapter and a new role. The folders were designated by role and passed along to the next student with that role. Each folder contained examples of completed sheets for the students to reference as needed. When the book was finished, the students were allowed class time to complete the survey (Appendix A).

Ethical Considerations

The intention of this research was to impact fifth-grade literacy engagement by using relevant, grade-level texts and literature circles to recognize, question, and analyze the perspectives in the text. The participants of this study and their parents were given a letter of intent and consent form prior to the commencement of the research. The texts for the students were provided, and the students were encouraged to take the text home upon completion of the study. Although there were not any major risks, the students may have lost instructional time or free-reading time. Throughout the data analysis, reporting of

results, and discussion, the students' privacy was protected through the use of pseudonyms.

The North Iowa Community School District requires that formal classroom research include a proposal to be reviewed and analyzed by the superintendent. The proposal was submitted to the superintendent, presented to the school board, and approved prior to the commencement of research. Students must also have their parents' written consent in order to participate in the study. The NICS district policy requires that all study materials be available to parents for review before, during, and after the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Response to Research Question

This study was designed to measure the engagement of rural fifth-grade students as they analyze the dominant perspectives in relevant grade-level texts through a literature circle format. Between elementary and secondary school, many students struggle to expand their learning and maintain their engagement. This gap is made worse when students are expected to read irrelevant texts that are not easily connected to modern times and their lives. The shift from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* exposes a significant gap in comprehension strategy use. The combination of teacher-selected, outdated texts that students struggle to connect with and a lack of explicit comprehension instruction creates an institutional gap that requires exploration and remediation to resolve.

Before this research commenced, the participants selected their own text from a collection of modern grade-level titles. Through the literature circle roles, explicit comprehension strategies were modeled, and the fifth-grade participants were asked to analyze and challenge perspectives in the text. Relevant texts with non-traditional family dynamics allowed the participants to make connections that would have been otherwise impossible with traditional, dated texts.

Data Analysis

An analysis of the student interviews and Likert-scale survey results as primary data sources, in conjunction with the researcher's reflection and observation journal,

provided information responding to the question of engagement in a rural, fifth-grade classroom. Using literature circles and small group discussions, this study was designed to measure the engagement of fifth-grade students reading relevant grade-level texts with a focus on perspectives within the story. The compilation of information from the data sources revealed several themes around recognizing bias and analyzing perspectives, the importance of making connections to the text, and maintaining a productive level of engagement while reading independently and working collaboratively.

Student Interviews

During the course of the study, the participants were interviewed individually by the researcher. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed as a primary data source (Appendices B and E). Throughout the interviews, each participant stated that (s)he likes reading and considers themselves to be readers. All seven participants also stated that they prefer fiction over nonfiction and mentioned characters and suspenseful situations as primary reasons for preferring fiction. When asked to recount a time when they were "hooked" on a text, the participants used the following phrases to describe their engagement:

"I like to pretend to be the person."

"I really feel like I'm in the book."

"When I go home, I try to get all my chores done, so I can read my book."

"I can connect my life to the book."

"I just don't hear anything around me. If I can still hear things around me, I am not engaged in the book."

"I got mad at my teacher because she made me stop."

"You just feel what they are going through and feel bad for them. That's how you know it is a good book."

"I'm not engaged when I don't understand what is going on. When you are reading the words just to read the words."

Although the descriptors vary greatly, the participants clearly recognize when they are engaged and invested in a text. A few of the students also stated how their engagement often depended on their ability to make textual or emotional connections to the text. This could be attributed to their on and above grade-level reading proficiencies, but it is also indicative of their positive relationship with literacy.

The students were also asked about the author and the author's biases in a story. The students did not have a complete grasp of what this entailed, and they were hesitant to question the author's intentions. However, several of the students acknowledged that the author holds the power in the story and controls how the story ends. When the researcher inquired about how the participants' biases and opinions come out when they are reading, many participants stated that their biases are influenced by the characters because of connections made with the characters. The males shared that they tend to side with the male characters, and another participant mentioned that his empathy often influences who he sides with because he tends to side with whomever is upset. Their responses demonstrate that the students recognize what bias is and how it impacts their understanding. However, the participants' vague responses to how they are biased in their everyday lives shows that there is a lack of transfer between identifying bias in text

versus identifying bias in real life. The participants' full responses are attached in Appendix E.

Likert Scale Responses

The overall growth results from the Likert-scale responses were quite unexceptional from before the study compared to after the study. However, the results were generally high, show a positive relationship with literacy, and reflect the general reading proficiency of this group of participants. All of the participants, before and after the study, selected free-reading time as the reading activity they enjoy the most, and in both surveys, five of the seven participants also selected teacher read-alouds as another enjoyable literacy activity (Table 1.1). Prior to the study, four of the participants selected small-group reading as a preferred literacy activity. After the study, only one participant indicated that they enjoyed small-group reading; however, the researcher's observations noted that the students inquired if they could choose another book, read it in their group, and have discussions in small groups.

Additional survey questions were focused on connections (Tables 2.1-2.3), engagement (Tables 3.1-3.3), author's bias (Tables 4.1-4.2), perspective and reader's bias (Tables 5.1-5.4), and reflection on understanding (Tables 6.1 and 6.2). Of the three questions asked about connections between texts, the reader's life, and the outside world, the participants showed a change with making connections outside of school. According to Table 2.3, one "undecided" response changed to "agree". This could be attributed to the focus on perspectives or the intentionally selected modern texts that easily relate to the world outside of school. When asked about engagement with text, the results were

mixed. According to Table 3.1, the participants' responses indicate that none of them struggle to pay attention when they are reading. However, in Table 3.2, the students were asked if they pay attention to who is telling the story, and after the study, the responses indicate two responses shifted away from "strongly agree" toward "agree" and "undecided." These shifts could be the result of an increase in awareness around the narrator's role and power with a text. This is supported by Table 3.3 where the students' awareness of how the narrator changes the story improved after the study was completed.

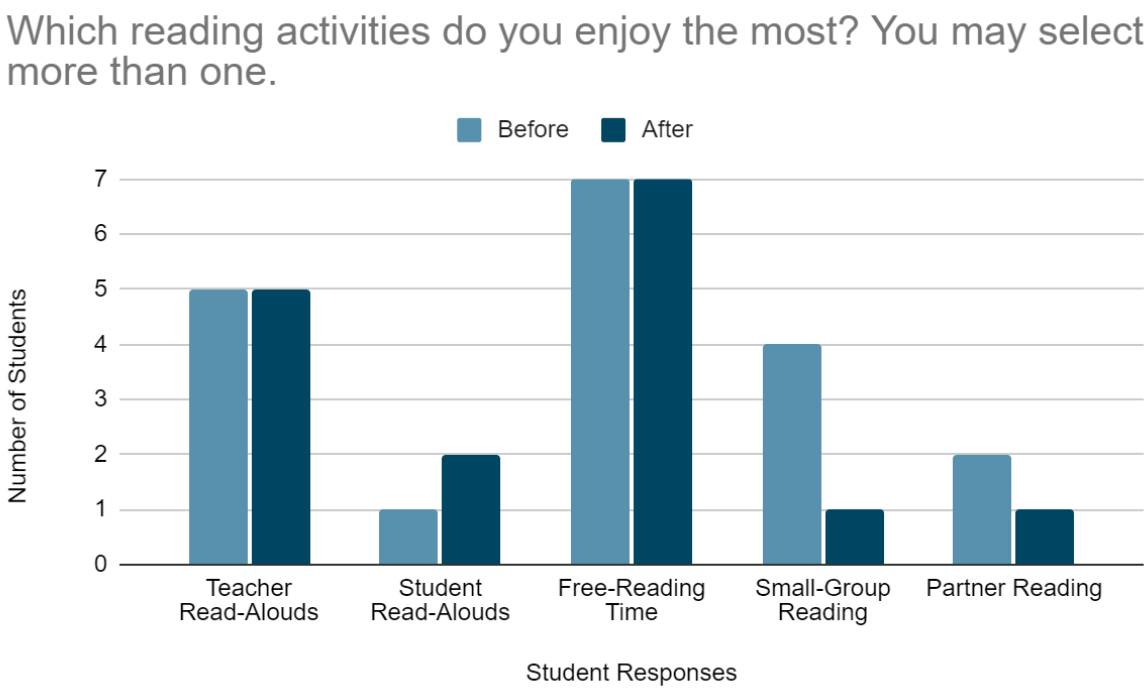
In Table 4.2, the data indicates that the students are more aware of how the narrator changes the story. On the contrary, the students are less comfortable identifying the author's reasons for writing a text (Table 4.1), but this could stem from an increase in understanding around perspectives and author's power. When asked about highlighted and silenced voices, the students had mixed results. For example, in Table 5.1, the responses around recognizing highlighted voices shifted away from simply agreeing, and one response went to "strongly agree" while the other went to "undecided." However, when prompted about silenced voices, one "undecided" response shifted toward "strongly agree" on Table 5.2 indicating that the students are more aware of which voices are silenced likely due to the focus on perspectives. Similarly, Table 5.3 shows that the participants recognize their own opinions about characters with responses shifting toward "strongly agree." This also supports the increase in metacognition and active thinking about their reading which are valuable comprehension and literacy strategies.

The last questions follow the same pattern of mixed results around reflecting on reading before, during, and after. The students showed improvement in their reflective

thinking before and during reading (Table 6.1). This could be attributed to their small group discussions and the strategy focus for each literature circle role throughout the study.

Reading Preferences

Table 1.1



Making Connections

Table 2.1

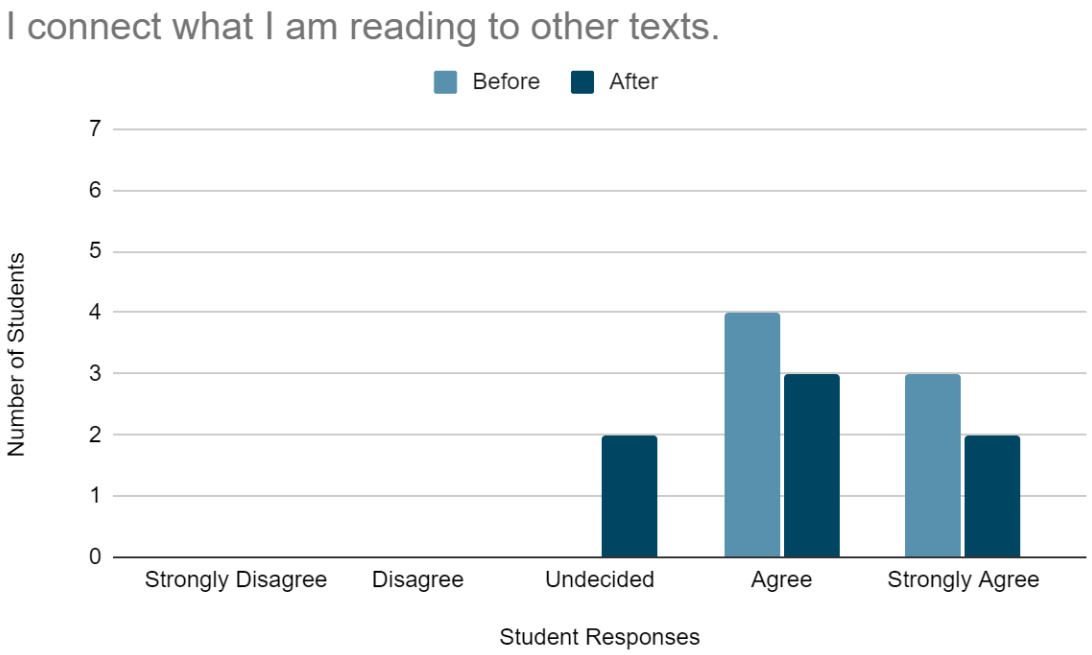


Table 2.2

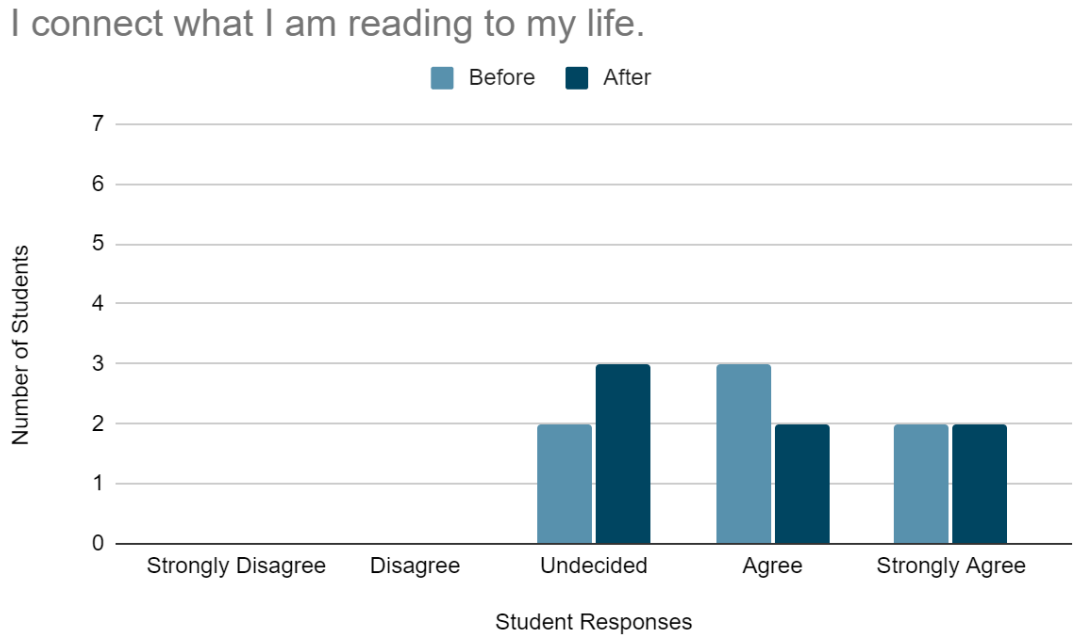
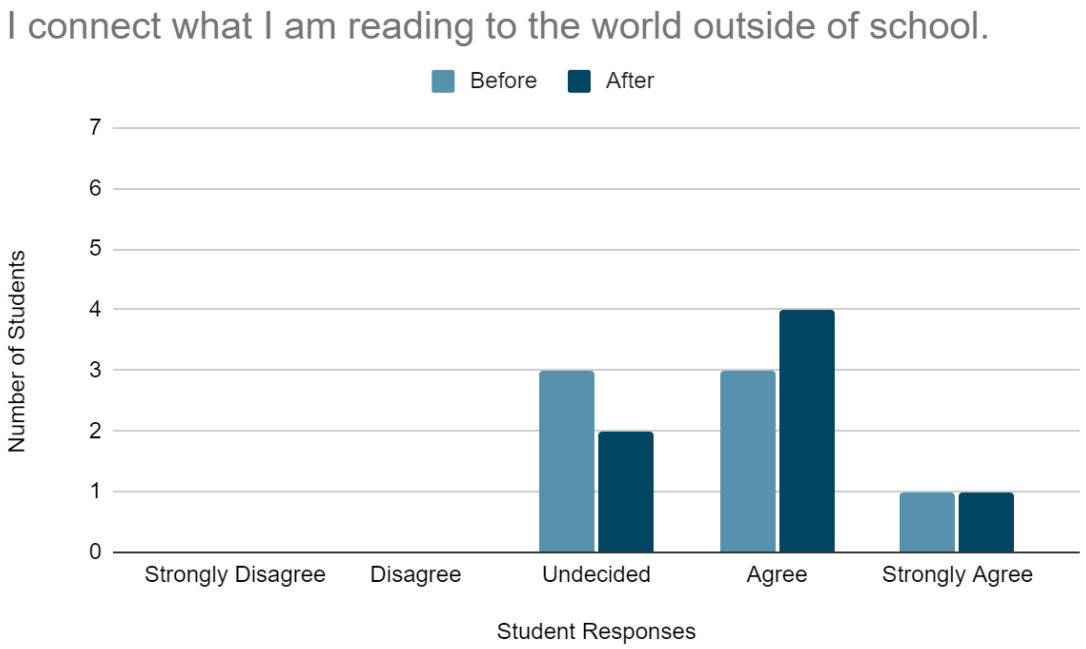


Table 2.3



Engagement

Table 3.1

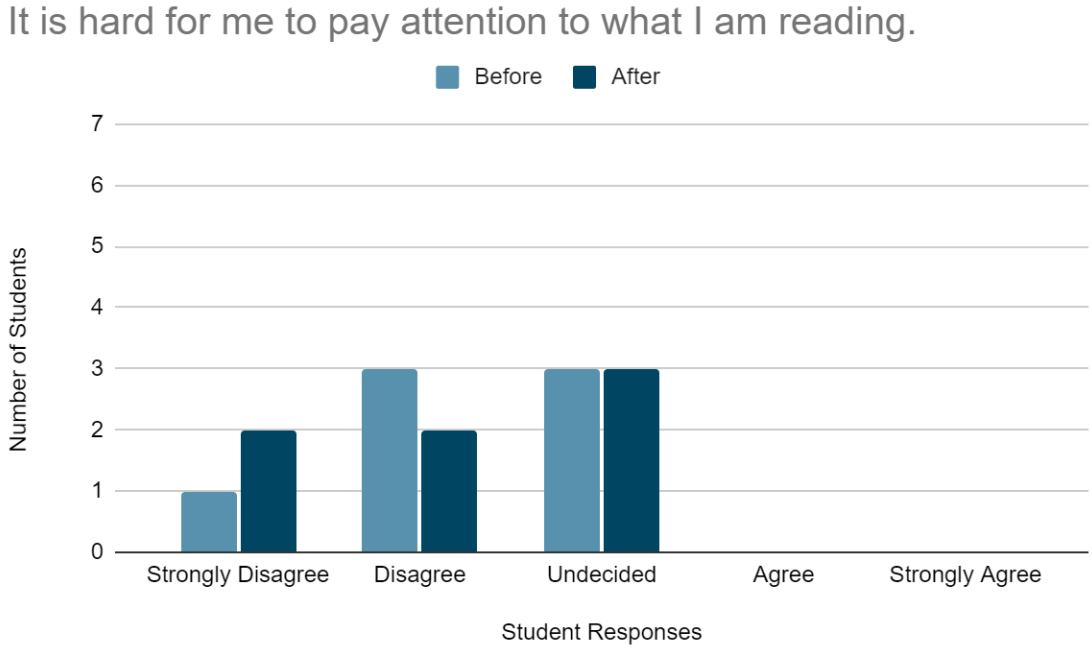


Table 3.2

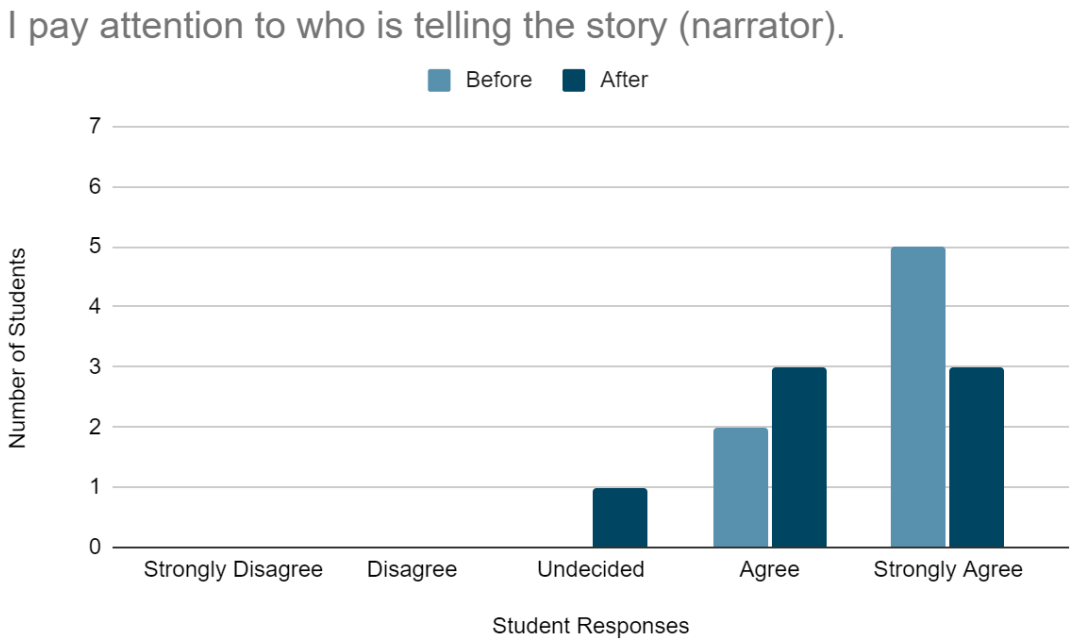
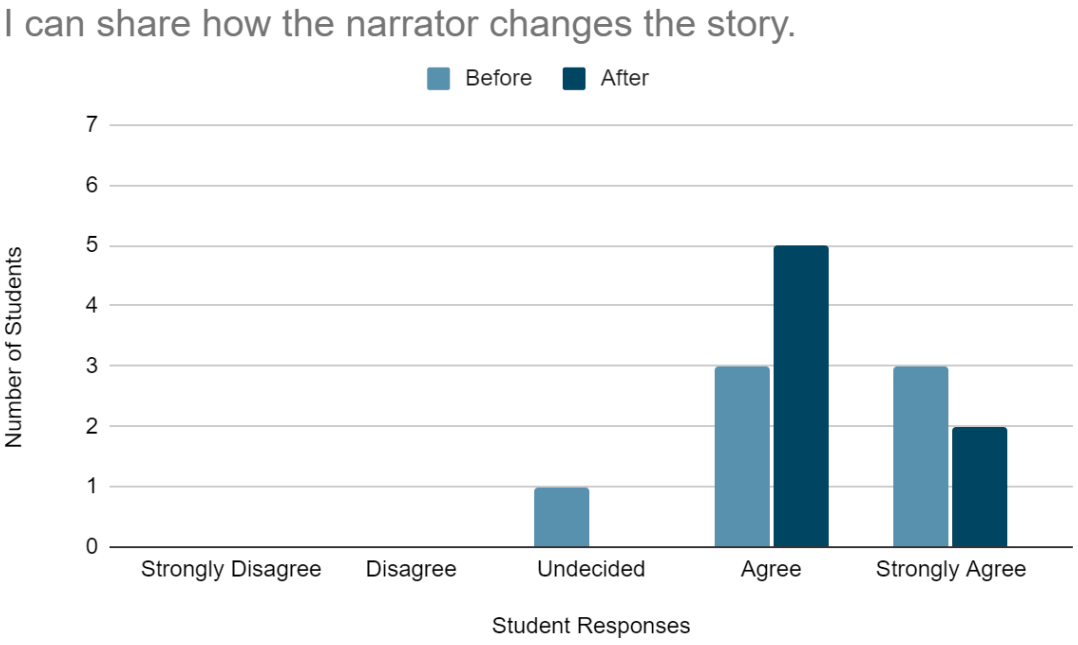


Table 3.3



Author's Reasons

Table 4.1

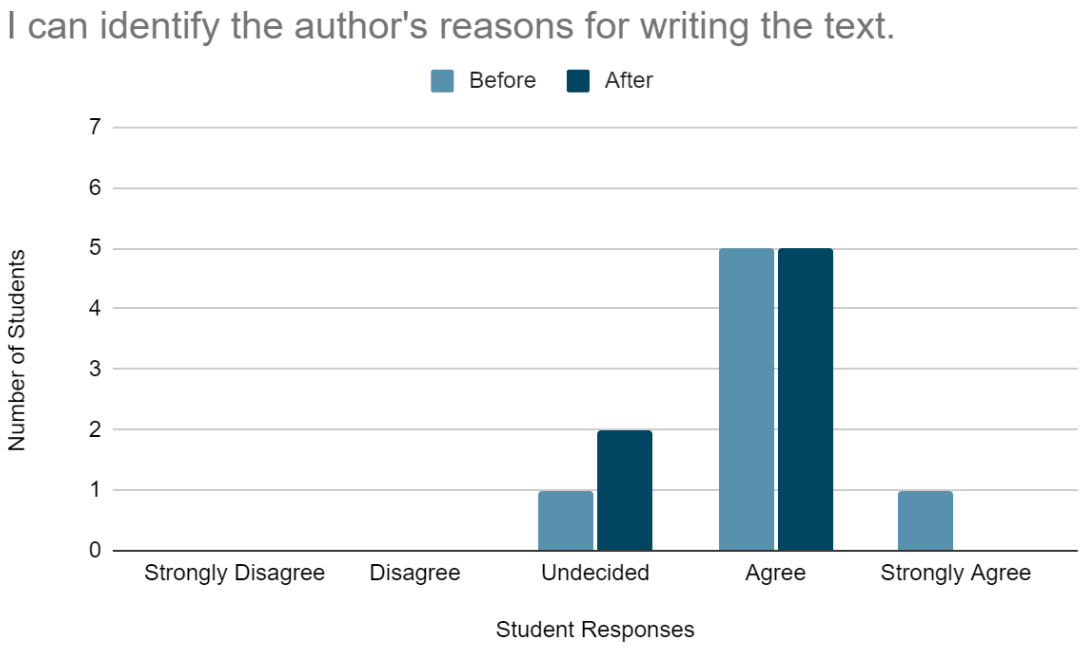
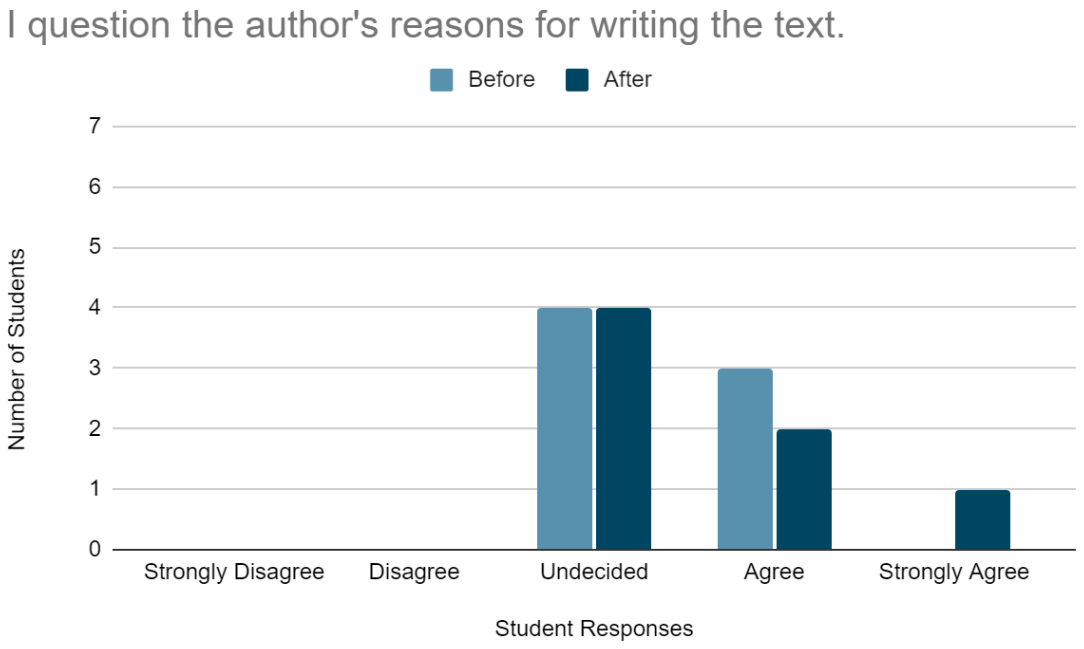


Table 4.2



Reader's Perspective and Bias

Table 5.1

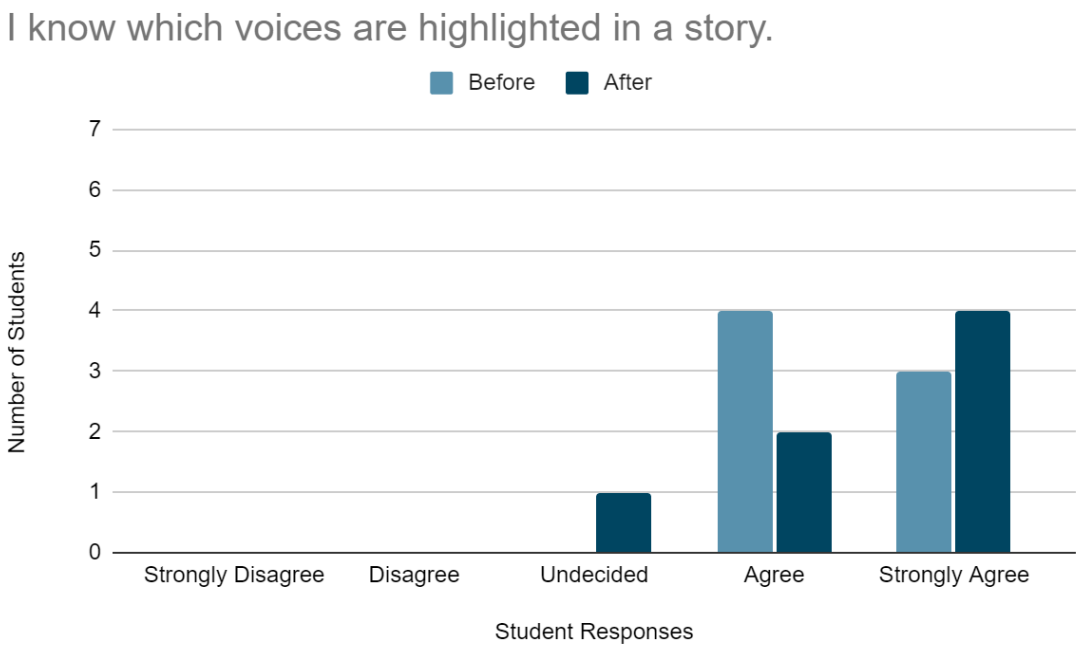


Table 5.2

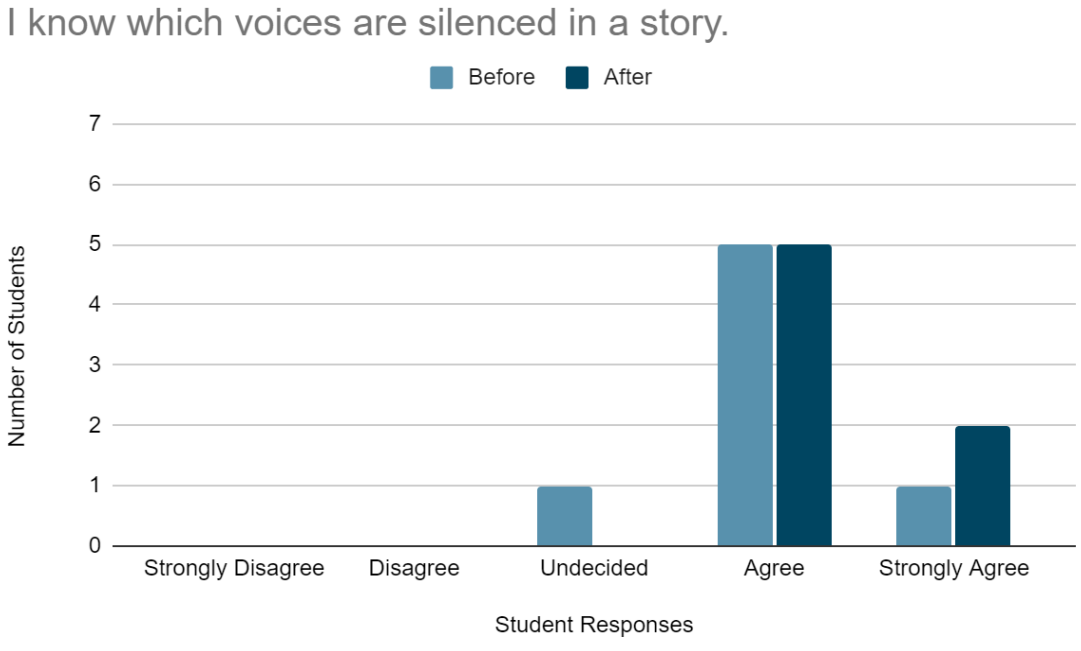


Table 5.3

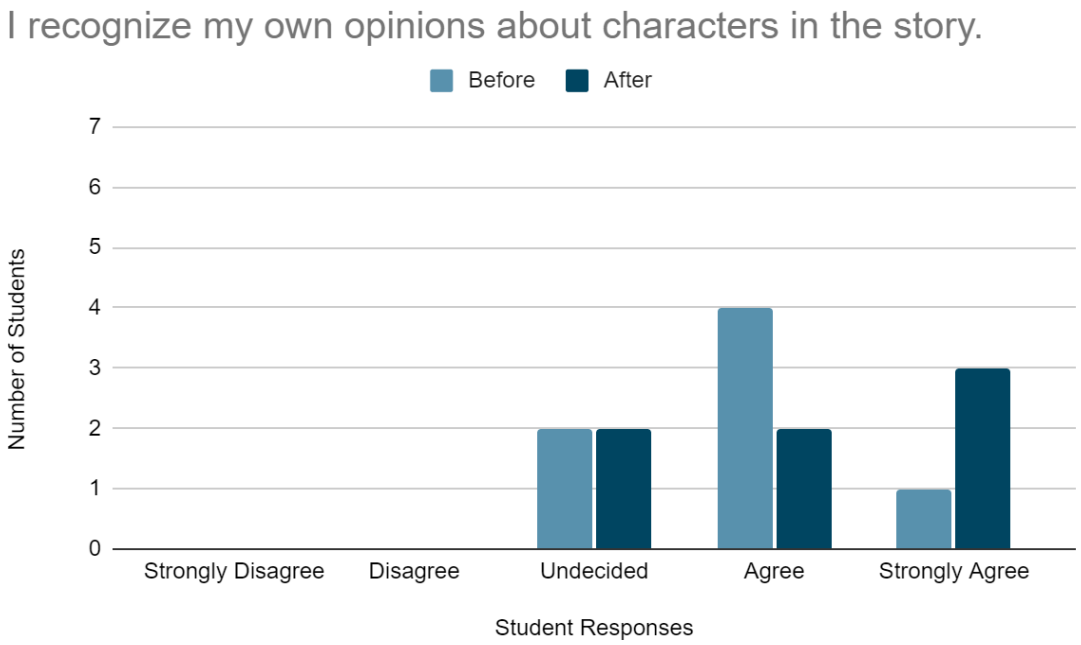
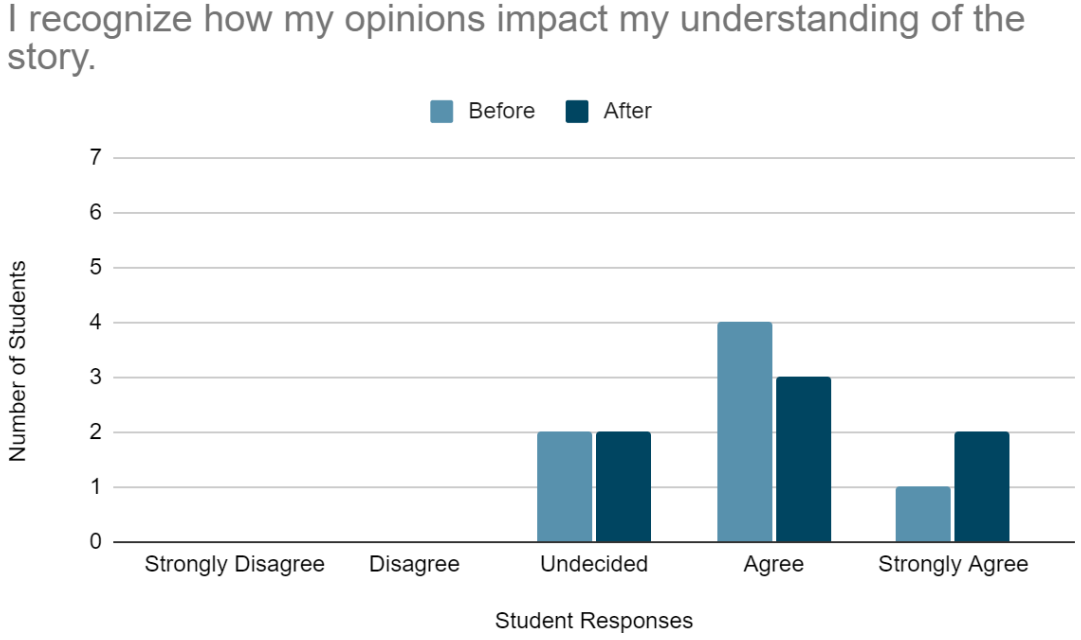


Table 5.4



Reflect on Understanding

Table 6.1

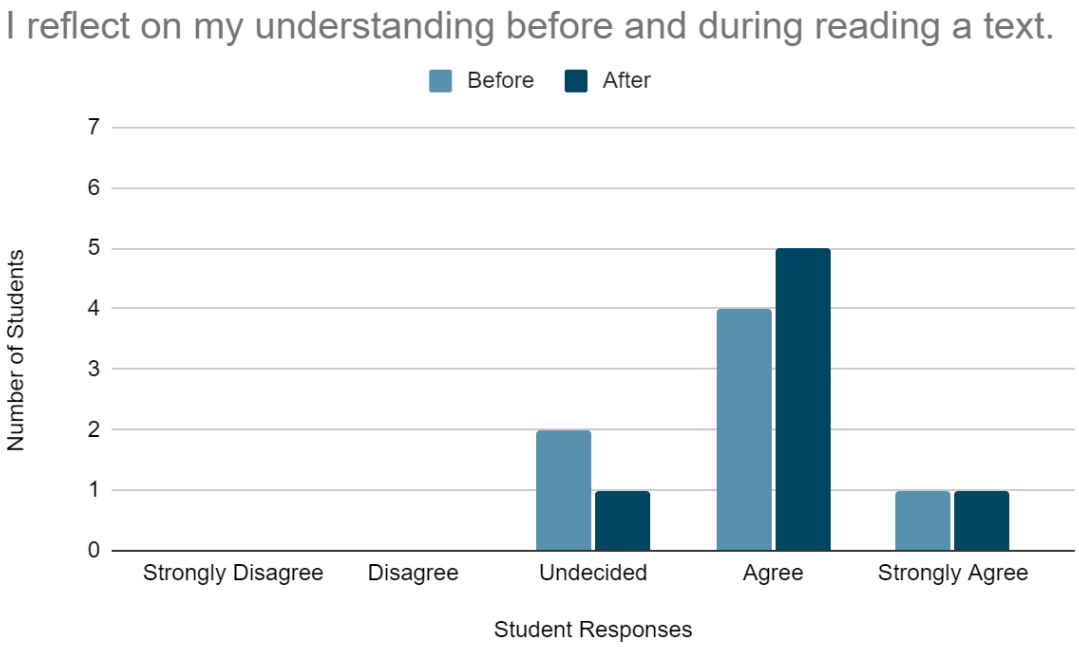
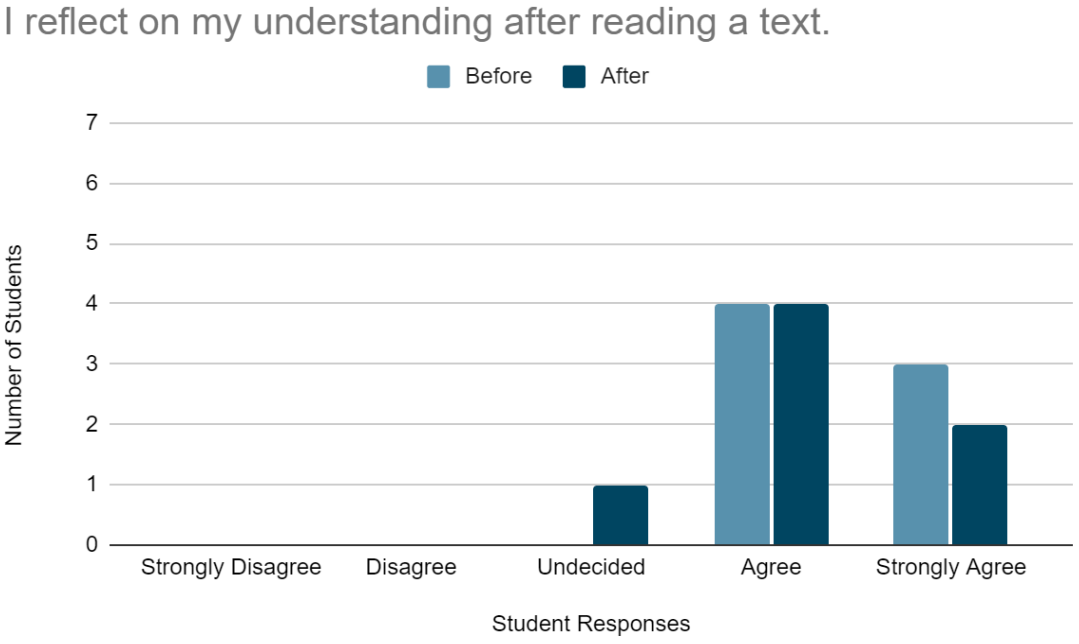


Table 6.2



Researcher's Reflection and Observation Journal

Throughout the study, the researcher kept a weekly log of general observations and personal reflections of discussions and comments made by the students. The reflection journal allowed the researcher to track connections and verbal discussions that were not captured in the student interviews and survey questions. The researcher reflected and recorded the content after the discussions at the end of each week. The information collected was perhaps more valuable to the study as it was collected in the midst of genuine conversations among the students about the text and the connections that were being made.

In the first two weeks, the students analyzed and selected a text, the texts were ordered, and the students completed the survey. During the second week, the literature circle roles were introduced, and the roles were modeled by the researcher using chapter two of each text. Then, the group reading *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street* chose their roles, and the group with two participants reading *Blended* combined the roles and swapped two at a time while the researcher maintained the role of discussion director. One of the students in the *Vanderbeeker* group was put into quarantine and participated virtually through Google Meets.

Each evening, the students were asked to read eight to ten pages. The *Vanderbeeker* group noticed and pointed out that the text alternates the perspective within the chapter by focusing on a different character and member of the family. The *Blended* group also noted that the chapters are labeled based on which parent the protagonist is currently staying with for that week. Additionally, the *Blended* group made several

text-to-self connections because both of the students in the group have divorced parents; one of the girls has a white mom and a Hispanic dad, similar to the main character in the story (Appendix E). The other has a step-brother with a white mom and African American dad - similar to the story. They also understand the emotional, physical, and mental adjustments of an "Exchange Day" where the child is "exchanged" between divorced parents (Appendix E).

In the third week, the roles and responsibilities were reviewed in both groups. The accountability that accompanies working in a small group encouraged the students to complete the work prior to the discussion to avoid letting down the group or stalling the discussion. There was confusion around the diverse diary role in both groups which was clarified and modeled using a scene from the previous chapter. By the end of the third week, the *Vanderbeeker* group decided to switch to sticky-notes instead of using the role sheets. They were still completing the tasks asked of them, just on a sticky note. The researcher noticed that if the students had inaccurate information or had read the wrong chapter, their classmates respectfully called them out and worked through the literature circle role together (Appendix E).

Four of the five participants in the group reading *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street* agreed that the various sibling perspectives made it easier to understand and more interesting because they could follow what was happening from more than one point of view. They shared that the conversations in the text were very realistic and familiar because the dialogue and plot sound like something that might happen at the participants' own homes. As the story progressed, the students made a text-to-text connection between

Vanderbeekers and *Sweet Music in Harlem* by Debbie A. Taylor which is a mentor text that was read aloud during general reading instruction. Both stories take place in Harlem, New York, and specifically in a "brownstone". The pictures in the mentor text helped the group visualize the Vanderbeeker family home.

Discussions among the participants began to shift toward who is telling each chapter, when does it switch, how do we know it switched, and how does that change the story. The participant in the diverse diary role often led these discussions, and the students commented that one sibling is the focal point in each chapter. For example, it allows them to view the situation and conflicts from that perspective. The researcher noticed that the one student who is an only child was very engaged in the story and the variety of perspectives with the siblings; the student even shared how he wishes he had siblings with whom he could connect.

In contrast, the other students with siblings made connections with the trouble-making and plotting that takes place in most households, as well as the pleasant, friendly times versus the seemingly constant fighting. In an effort to challenge their opinions of the characters, the researcher asked the students how the parents feel and their perspectives on the children fighting and plotting. The ensuing conversation among the participants was very reflective about the long-term effects of fighting between siblings and how efforts to help parents often cause more problems than they resolve.

The pair reading *Blended* reflected on the setting of their text as well. With the story taking place in Ohio, it allowed the students to make connections as Iowa and Ohio have similar climates and are geographically close to each other. The students pointed out

that their story takes place in a more suburban environment than their rural school environment.

Many of the scenes in *Blended* prompted in-depth conversations about the Black Lives Matter movement, peaceful protests, and what racism actually looks like. In one particular scene, the main character, Isabella, and her African American friend were told to leave a store in the mall because they were "stealing," when in fact they were simply looking at the clothes. When Isabella finds her dad, he explains to her that it happened because they are black and begins to open her eyes to the systemic racism they face every day. The students were appalled while reading this part of the story and maintained a quality discussion on what it meant for themselves here in Iowa. In another scene from the text, the main character shares how she never really feels like she fits in with her mom and her mom's boyfriend because they are both white. One of the girls reflected on her father being Hispanic and her mother being white and how it was similar to the main character, Isabella. She expressed that she, too, heard comments about her skin tone when with her white mom and even how people would look at her mom, step-dad, siblings, and her with weird looks because she did not appear to fit with a white family. The other participant has divorced parents, and she has the same Sunday "Exchange Day" ritual as the main character. The participant did note, more than once, that her parents do not fight or argue in front of her, contrasting her experience with the main character's experience in the text.

Over the holiday break, the students agreed to read chapters and discuss but chose not to use sticky notes. When classes resumed in January, the students used sticky notes

to track thinking, questions, connections, quotes, and words as they needed. Class time was spent reading and discussing together in their groups. For the final fourth of the book, the students were each given a character in the story to pay attention to throughout the chapter. On the sticky note, they were asked to record that character's involvement and perspective in the plot. By default, there were characters that were not mentioned which led to discussions around why the author did not include that character and how the chapter might have been different if that character had been included.

Aftering finishing the books, the participants in both groups asked if they could do the same small-group reading and discussion with another relevant book, another book by the same author, or the second book in the *Vanderbeeker* series. Their verbal request to continue working in small groups contradicts their survey response. In the survey, they indicated that after the study, they were less interested in small-group reading. This may require future research. The Vanderbeeker group shared that the sticky notes helped them keep track of their thinking, and the *Blended* pair suggested that the perspective of a sixth-grader with a white mom and African American dad made the book more interesting and engaging.

Results and Methods

The research was intended to analyze engagement in a rural fifth-grade classroom using small group discussion, literature circles, and relevant texts while focusing on perspectives within the narrative. The student interviews, Likert-scale survey results, and the researcher's reflection and observation journal served as data points in this study. The student interviews revealed valuable background information about the participants as

readers. All seven students shared that they enjoy reading and prefer fiction over nonfiction. The students also had their own measurements of engagement which indicated strong metacognition while reading a text.

Because the participants are strong readers with a positive attitude toward reading and because this is case-study research with a small population, the Likert-scale data did not show impressive growth or improvement. However, there were intriguing results that indicate minor improvements. For example, the students became more aware of their own biases about characters and how their biases impacted their understanding, and they also improved their ability to recognize silenced voices in a text. The focus of perspectives and using a diverse diary for a literature circle role served their purposes for increasing awareness and analysis of silenced voices. The participants indicated that they made more connections between the text and the outside world after this study. Through questions on their engagement and paying attention to the text as they read, the students showed minor improvements. The participants' responses to the questions focused on perspective and bias also improved.

Arguably the most notable evidence was the observations made by the researcher during the small group discussions. The students in both groups consistently and effectively made connections between their own lives and the books they were reading which led naturally to improved engagement further proving that texts must be relevant for students to be engaged. Additionally, the texts offered opportunities to analyze and challenge perspectives which allowed the students to read for silenced voices and highlighted voices. Small group discussions and the focus on critical literacy through the

literature circle roles enable students to improve their understanding of perspectives and analyze how those perspectives change the story.

Review of Literature

Each aspect of the study was coordinated with relevant literature around adolescent literacy, engagement, relevant texts, critical literacy, and literature circles. The literature informed the research, methods, results, and analysis of the study, and simultaneously exposed gaps where further research is needed.

The literature circle format allowed for explicit instruction around multifaceted strategies to improve comprehension. Nelson (2019) believes that determining word meanings, identifying main ideas, inferencing, making predictions, and questioning are necessary for effective comprehension and need to be taught directly. The roles of word wizard, summarizer, quote master, and discussion director all tap into the strategies discussed by Nelson. Each of the literature circle roles were modeled, guided, and released to the students prior to being done independently and utilized in small-group discussions.

Sanacore (2000) and Fletcher (2014) agree that effective literacy instruction integrates speaking, listening, reading, and writing with relevant texts. The small-group format of the literature circles promoted all four of these literary actions around a text of the students' choosing. By allowing them to choose from relevant texts, the students were more invested and interested in the learning because it represented their lives out of school and provided autonomy for the students. The participants enjoyed the small-group discussion format around a shared, relatable text so much that they scheduled and held

their own virtual meetings on online learning days and over the holiday break. Furthermore, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) and Sanacore (2000) believe adolescent students need a plethora of choices and topics to choose from-particularly those texts that represent real-life situations and popular culture. At the beginning of the study, the students were given ten to twelve text choices and the decision was purely their own; the text choices were all within the fifth-grade text complexity Lexile band.

Similar to the research of Ivey and Broaddus (2001) and Sanacore (2000), Afflerbach, Harrison, and Alvermann (2017) believe students are more involved in their learning when they read, analyze, and work with texts of their choosing. As done with this study, the students were given the opportunity to select a text that was relevant to their lives in an effort to improve their engagement. Additionally, in the student interviews, the students expressed that they are more engaged when there are differing characters, realistic details, and suspenseful story-lines. Ivey and Johnston (2013) and Springer, et al. (2017) published research that aligns with this finding. They believe that changing perspectives and narrators, strong details, and relevant connections within a text make it more engaging to adolescent readers. Throughout this study on engagement in rural, fifth-grade classrooms, the researcher found that students consistently make connections between texts that were read as a group and texts that were read independently.

Engagement increases when students have choice in the text they are reading. Students tend to choose texts that have different perspectives, shared connections, and a shared effort to work through the questions and challenges of the text (Ivey and Johnston,

2017). Similarly, Ivey and Johnston (2018) identify engaging texts as those with relatable conflicts, real-life issues, and complex emotions. In line with Ivey and Johnston's 2017 and 2018 research, a primary aspect of this study was to allow students to choose the text that would be used to measure engagement. The participants had ten to twelve titles to choose from, and each text had modern, complex conflicts that would draw in and engage the students. In the interviews with students, the participants shared their own experiences with being drawn into texts, and they understood that type of focus meant they were engaged in the book. This supports Glaus's (2014) research on Rosenblatt's transactional literacy study which was focused on students being drawn into engaging texts and feeling as if they are "in" the story. One student explained that whichever character he feels the worst for is typically the one he sides with in the story, which directly aligns with Ivey and Johnston's 2017 research about realistic problems creating empathy for characters dealing with those problems.

Similarly, the students frequently made connections between the text and their lives which stems from how relevant the texts were for the students. In *Blended*, the main character does not have a traditional family as her parents are divorced, her mom is white, and her dad is African American. In *Vanderbeekers of 141st Street*, the family is described as bi-racial, and they live in a Harlem brownstone with an elderly couple a floor above and a grumpy older gentleman (the antagonist) on the top floor. Both of these novels provide realistic family dynamics, and the main characters are around the same age as the fifth-grade participants increasing relatability and connections.

In addition to relevant texts, the study was designed to use critical literacy to engage the participants in discussions in a small group setting. One of the literature circle roles was a diverse diary. The student with this role was asked to choose an important scene from the chapter(s) and rewrite it from another character's perspective. The strategy focus forced students to identify who was narrating the story and to recognize and analyze how the story-line changes when the perspective changes. Similarly, Enriquez, et al. (2004) recommends that students compare similar texts and scenes to hear multiple voices. The role of the diverse diary challenged the participants to identify which voices were silenced and to analyze who is telling the story. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) encourage readers to do exactly that-examine the viewpoint of a text and reflect on which perspective dominates the story.

Similarly, McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) believe analyzing the relationship between the reader and the power the author holds allows students to critically examine a text. Based on the results of the student survey and responses in the student interview, the participants of this study all admit that the author holds the power because they control what happened in the story. However, there was no discussion around what that means for the reader or how it affected the reader. The participants may have been too young to challenge the dominant voices, but they were capable of challenging the perspectives of the characters telling the story.

Analyzing viewpoints and narration in a text through the diverse diary is one of the strategies modeled, guided, and released to the participants with the literature circle format. According to Witt (2007), literature circles are meant to be small reading groups

and discussions led by the students with a common text. This study mirrored that format with five roles based on five comprehension strategies-summarizer, discussion director (questioning), quote master (inferencing), word wizard, and diverse diary. In connection with Sanacore's 2013 research, the participants started with role sheets and shifted to sticky-notes to track their thinking, questions, memorable quotes, and unfamiliar words. Toward the end of the texts, the student participants expressed that they prefer the discussion and conversation around the chapter rather than the role sheets. Furthermore, at the completion of the study, the students asked to repeat this process with sticky notes and another shared text from the original options.

Summary

Positive and healthy relationships with literacy are foundational pieces for engagement. More specifically, the fifth-grade participants' engagement hinged on relevant texts, small-group discussions, and complex, critical analysis of perspectives and narration. Chapter Five will summarize the major learnings, explain the implications, and share the limitations of the research. The chapter will conclude with an exploration of future research and a reflection of the thesis process.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This project stems from a personal passion for reading and a professional drive to improve my literacy instruction. I have never wanted to teach young students how to read; rather, I prefer teaching upper elementary students how to fall in love with reading. Throughout the research design process, I knew I wanted to analyze engagement while reading relevant texts with adolescent readers. As my learning progressed and expanded, I was enamored with critical literacy but concerned it would be too challenging for the age of students I have in my classroom every day. Knowing applicability was crucial, my pursuits led me to analyze engagement in my fifth-grade classroom using relevant texts and critical literature circles.

Major Learnings

Throughout this project, my knowledge base and awareness increased around the primary components of the research. For example, relevant texts are crucial for buy-in and relatability among today's students. The complex relationships between characters and the use of modern conflicts are easily connected to the students' lives and experiences. Additionally, non-traditional families and a variety of sibling and family dynamics in contemporary literature represent the complex and ever-changing households of the students. In the specific texts chosen for this study, the main characters were within a year or two of the readers which also increases the students' engagement. Knowing

relevant texts have a positive impact on adolescent literacy engagement should change instruction and curriculum design for all ages.

Modern literature and complex character relationships also lend themselves to a focus on perspective and voice which involve complex thinking. Students must have basic comprehension strategies prior to analyzing perspectives within a novel. At the fifth-grade level, it is manageable and achievable for the students to challenge the character's perspectives. However, analyzing which voices are silenced and which are promoted is beyond the ability of upper elementary students and may be better suited for upper middle school or high school students.

Having a chance to discuss, analyze, and evaluate the perspectives of relevant texts in small groups creates sustainable engagement for adolescent literacy students. The small groups are low risk for anxiety, incorrect responses, and unpopular opinions and high reward for shared ideas, productive disagreements, and advanced conversations. Smaller groups also allow more student choice in the text and more time for classmates to share ideas and discuss the story. As much freedom as small groups promote, there is still room for accountability and leadership from the students.

Although the groups were structured around literature circles, the students did not feel like they needed the literature circle format to improve their comprehension or engagement with the text. Halfway through the text and study, the students requested we shift away from the role sheets and toward sticky-notes. The students' effort did not change after removing the structure of the role sheets because the sticky-notes kept them engaged. Although the students did not rely heavily on the literature circle roles, the

focused strategy practice was beneficial and kept the discussion focused.

Implications

The intent of this study was to analyze fifth-grade students' engagement in literacy classrooms. The results indicate that educators may need to collectively change mentor text, read-aloud, and classroom library choices to promote contemporary titles and complex, modern issues. Similarly, the students indicated in their surveys and in the researcher observations that they prefer small-group work rather than whole-class read alouds. However, it is important to note that exposure to literacy and providing the students the chance to hear fluent and expressive reading is an important aspect of literacy instruction. Finally, it was quite indicative that the text choice greatly impacts engagement for fifth-grade students in a literacy classroom.

Limitations

This research was conducted during the late fall and early winter of 2020 to 2021. The students, teachers, administration, district, community, and nation were still dealing with, reeling from, and powering through the coronavirus pandemic. There was one student in quarantine for two weeks when data was being collected. The students also had online learning days on Wednesdays which disrupted the regular school week. These unprecedented circumstances knowingly and unknowingly impacted the results of the study.

The participants of this study were strong readers which may have skewed the data and results. The persistently at-risk students were receiving special education services, and the at-risk readers were receiving small group interventions while the study

was being completed with the grade-level and above grade-level readers. However, the engagement level of the students is not dependent on their reading level, so the engagement factors should remain the same or similar regardless of the proficiency level of the participants.

In an effort to allow the students choice in the text they chose, there ended up being two different groups with two different texts. This worked well to ensure the students were given choice, but it divided the researcher's time between the groups. Additionally, the two groups were divided up with five students in one group and two in the other group. There were more perspectives and opinions to be shared in the group of five reading *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street*; however, there were more diverse experiences in the group of two reading *Blended*. The pair of students who read *Blended* were each responsible for two literature circle roles. The researcher maintained the role of discussion director throughout the case-study.

Future Research

This study involved a small population of students in a rural town for a six-week period. However, for the researcher, it created an interest and curiosity in classroom research that will extend beyond this particular study. Additional research might include a wider variety of reading levels to avoid the potential of skewed data with at and above grade-level readers. There may also be value in exploring relevant texts with different comprehension strategies such as QAR and double-entry journals to discern the level of engagement. Different groupings and formats could also be investigated, as the students' survey responses and their informal conversation around small group reading were

contradictory. Similarly, future research could measure the effectiveness of relevant texts by using the same strategy with a modern text and an outdated text. Finally, additional research would include a record of which responses in the Likert-scale questions belong to which student. The names would be protected, but tracking single increases for individuals versus multi-step increases would be valuable data to analyze and assist in moving learning forward.

Using the Results

I intend to share these results with my coworkers as they may impact their text choices for classroom libraries and for whole-group read alouds. Our literacy curriculum has many modern and relatable texts which promotes student engagement, but this research shows that students also need access to free-reading materials that are modern and relatable.

Reflection

Upon completion of this study, I had already mentally compiled a list of additional classroom research projects I would like to conduct on an informal level within my literacy classroom. I have also made more of an effort to talk with my students about their texts, to help them make connections, and to take the time to find engaging texts the students will enjoy. This research allowed me to reflect on my own instructional practices, how our curriculum uses modern texts, and how my students are learning using the texts and practices. In an effort to work with the students who hate reading and to help them fall in love with reading, continued research and reflection are necessary with literacy instruction, engagement, and relevant materials.

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Appendix A - Student Survey

Student Survey

Please read each statement and select the response that best fits you and your reading habits.

* Required

Select your gender. *

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male

Which reading activities do you enjoy the most? You may select more than one. *

- ☐ Teacher read-alouds with picture books
- ☐ Teacher read-alouds with novels
- ☐ Student read-alouds
- ☐ IDR time (free-reading time)
- ☐ Partner reading
- ☐ Small group reading
- ☐ Other: _____

What types of books do you like to read? *

- [ ] mysteries
- [ ] fantasy
- [ ] science fiction
- [ ] historical fiction
- [ ] realistic fiction
- [ ] adventures
- [ ] thrillers/scary stories
- [ ] books in a series (Harry Potter, Boxcar Children, etc.)
- [ ] picture books
- [ ] nonfiction - biographies
- [ ] nonfiction - history
- [ ] nonfiction - sports
- [ ] nonfiction - animals
- [ ] nonfiction - science
- [ ] nonfiction - geography/places
- [ ] newpapers
- [ ] magazines
- [ ] comic books/graphic novels
- [ ] Other: _____

It is hard for me to pay attention to what I am reading. *

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Undecided
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly Disagree

I connect what I am reading to other texts. *

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Undecided
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

I connect what I am reading to my life. *

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Undecided
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

I connect what I am reading to the world outside of school. *

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

I pay attention to who is telling the story (narrator). *

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly Disagree

I can share how the narrator changes the story. *

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly Disagree

I can identify the author's reasons for writing the text. *

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

I question the author's reasons for writing the text. *

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly Disagree

I know which voices are highlighted in a story. *

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

I know which voices are silenced in a story. *

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

I recognize my own opinions about characters in the story.

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

I recognize how my opinions impact my understanding of the story.

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Undecided
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

I reflect on my understanding before and during reading a text. *

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Undecided
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

I reflect on my understanding after reading a text. *

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Undecided
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

Appendix B - Student Interview Questions

Describe yourself as a student.

Describe yourself as a reader.

What kinds of texts do you find most engaging?

How do you know when you are not engaged?

Have you ever been "hooked" on a text? Tell me about that experience.

Biased means favoring one side/group/person over another. How are you biased in your everyday life?

When you are reading a text, do you recognize when your own biases come out? How does that impact your understanding of the text?

How might an author's bias change the story or how it is told?

Appendix C - Literature Circle Role Sheets

Name: _____ Date: _____

Book Title: _____ Chapter: _____

Quote Master

Job Description:

- Choose two quotes from this chapter and explain how each one promotes, silences, or challenges a voice in the text.
- Copy the quote with the page number, and use complete sentences in your explanation.

Page Number: _____

Quote: _____

_____

Explanation: _____

_____

_____

Page Number: _____

Quote: _____

_____

Explanation: _____

_____

_____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Book Title: _____ Chapter: _____

Word Wizard

Job Description:

- Choose two to three new, interesting, or challenging words from this chapter.
- Using context clues from the text and a dictionary, define the words.

Word: _____ Page Number: _____

Context Clues: _____

_____

Definition: _____

_____

Word: _____ Page Number: _____

Context Clues: _____

_____

Definition: _____

_____

Word: _____ Page Number: _____

Context Clues: _____

_____

Definition: _____

_____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Book Title: _____ Chapter: _____

Summarizer

Job Description:

- Identify the main ideas and most important parts of this chapter.
- Using complete sentences and the correct sequence, write a summary for the chapter.

Main Ideas:

- _____
  _____
- _____
  _____
- _____
  _____

Summary:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Book Title: _____ Chapter: _____

Discussion Director

Job Description:

- Answer the one question provided. Then write two or three more open-ended questions about this chapter.
- Consider whose voices are silenced, whose voices are promoted, and how it impacts the chapter.

Question: Whose voice is promoted in this chapter? How does that affect the chapter? _____

_____

_____

Question: _____

_____

_____

Question: _____

_____

_____

Question: _____

_____

_____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Book Title: _____ Chapter: _____

Diverse Diary

Job Description:

- Choose a conversation or important scene from this chapter and rewrite it from another perspective.
- Consider choosing a voice that is not heard, a gender or age that is not represented, a race that is not recognized, a different time period, etc.

Diverse Perspective: _____ Page Number: _____

Rewrite the scene or conversation: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D - Transcribed Student Interviews

Female 1

Describe yourself as a student.

- How I would describe myself is a reader. When I read, I like to pretend to be the person. Like I express what they say and feel and stuff. Like if they feel sad, I go into the sad voice. Sometimes I try to go into a boy's voice too.

What kinds of texts do you find most engaging?

- Fairy tale books; fiction

Have you ever been "hooked" on a text? Tell me about that experience.

- In here, it was the BFG book, the one you picked out for me. There were so many characters like giants and she lives in an orphanage and stuff.

Biased means favoring one side/group/person over another. How are you biased in your everyday life?

- So when I'm at recess, you want to hang out with your best friend. Sometimes you can invite other people to play too, not just one person. You can't just do two people with yourself and your friend. You can do some things with them. But there are more games you can play with others.

When you are reading your books and you are doing your voices, do you ever take one character's side over another's?

- Yes; when I get interested, I like to flip the page to peak. I read the first line, and then I go back and read to pick a side. Like he is doing that and he is making better choices.

When you are reading a text, do you recognize when your own biases come out? How does that impact your understanding of the text?

- Yeah when my opinion comes out I kind of think about the book and in the book what is happening. Sometimes I will say to myself like in my opinion I think this is going to happen

How might an author's bias change the story or how it is told?

- In writing, I make my own stories. In my book, they make their own stories. Sometimes I get more interested in their stories because I didn't make it. But sometimes the story gets boring when it doesn't have details.

Female 2

Describe yourself as a student.

- I like reading class because I like to read books and things. Sometimes writing because it depends on what we're writing about. I love gym class. Math sometimes when it's easy for me.

Describe yourself as a reader.

- A big reader. I love reading books. I love reading big books. I like reading because I can be in the book, and it relaxes me.

What kinds of texts do you find most engaging?

- Kind of like adventure, kind of like love-story

How do you know when you are not engaged?

- When I go home I want to read my book. When I go home and I don't want to read it, I know I don't like it.

Have you ever been "hooked" on a text? Tell me about that experience.

- Twilight. I really feel like I'm in the book, and when I go home I try to make sure all my chores are done so I can go read it.

Biased means favoring one side/group/person over another. How are you biased in your everyday life?

- I don't really know.

When you are reading a text, do you recognize when your own biases come out? How does that impact your understanding of the text?

- I actually do a lot more often than you think. I feel like I side with other people in real life. So if I do that in a book, I take a side.

How might an author's bias change the story or how it is told?

- I don't really know

Male 1

Describe yourself as a student.

- Good in some stuff, just not in social studies or in math sometimes. Do well in reading because I have a high Lexile and it's fun.

Describe yourself as a reader.

- Fiction books, funny books. Animal books

What kinds of texts do you find most engaging?

- Animal books and funny kind of things; because they are fun to read

Have you ever been "hooked" on a text? Tell me about that experience.

- Not really

Biased means favoring one side/group/person over another. How are you biased in your everyday life?

- Being honest.

When you are reading a text, do you recognize when your own biases come out? How does that impact your understanding of the text?

- Male classmates different than female classmates
- They like different things.
- Yeah because I can connect my life to the book.
- Sometimes I get a new book if it's hard to make connections.

How might an author's bias change the story or how it is told?

- Because of how they write it; if the person reading it wrote it, it could make it a big difference in the story.

Female 3

Describe yourself as a student.

- Sometimes a little bit confused and sometimes I get a lot of the stuff. I get bored sometimes too. Math is confusing to me right now. I like reading and writing and art.

Describe yourself as a reader.

- I like a lot of mysteries and I like to read.
- They're just so suspenseful.

What kinds of texts do you find most engaging?

- mysteries

How do you know when you are not engaged?

- I can hear a lot of things around me. When I first start reading, I can hear things around me. But like when I'm 20 minutes into it, if I can still hear things around me, I am not engaged.

Have you ever been "hooked" on a text? Tell me about that experience.

- I just don't hear anything.
- Definitely. Boxcar Children. If I hear my name like once or twice, usually twice, and then the second time, I say what?

Biased means favoring one side/group/person over another. How are you biased in your everyday life?

- Probably not very much. With my brothers, a lot of arguing. I usually side with myself, because Wyatt and Kaiden are taking each other's side.

When you are reading a text, do you recognize when your own biases come out? How does that impact your understanding of the text?

- Not really.
- Probably side with the main characters a little bit.

How might an author's bias change the story or how it is told?

- If you don't think one thing is good, but they do, they might put that in the book anyway.

Male 2

Describe yourself as a student.

- As a reader and math because I'm good at math because I love reading at school

Describe yourself as a reader.

- I am fluent, I can read fast. I can understand what I am reading.

What kinds of texts do you find most engaging?

- Mystery books, kind of like the TV show, suspenseful moments, sad moments, happy moments
- I like fiction and nonfiction the same

How do you know when you are not engaged?

- When I don't want to read that book anymore, when I don't like it

Have you ever been "hooked" on a text? Tell me about that experience.

- Yes I have, *I Survived the Shark Attack of 1922*. The kid was swimming in a river down in New Jersey, and the shark was behind him. I knew I was hooked because I wanted to keep reading, and I got mad at my teacher because she made me stop.

Biased means favoring one side/group/person over another. How are you biased in your everyday life?

- I take my mom or dad's side all the time. I take my mom's side because she takes care of us.

When you are reading a text, do you recognize when your own biases come out? How does that impact your understanding of the text?

- When I do that, I think in my head about what is going on. And there is that suspenseful moment when the girls are arguing with the boys and I took the boys side because he did it accidentally not on purpose.
- I think I would be more offended if I was a girl

How might an author's bias change the story or how it is told?

- It might change the book because it depends on what the author likes or wants it to be about

Male 3

Describe yourself as a student.

- Well there isn't really anything I like or that I hate. I like PE and to run
- Reading comes easy to me. Like I can read chapter books, I like reading

Describe yourself as a reader.

- I like *Diary of Wimpy Kid*, but they are kind of short. If they were longer, I would like them more.

What kinds of texts do you find most engaging?

- I like fiction. Nonfiction bores me to death.
- Sports books, I like the Lord of the Rings

How do you know when you are not engaged?

- When I like, read a page or two or three and I just start to know that this book is talking about what they are doing and there are no surprises. I like suspense and surprises

Have you ever been "hooked" on a text? Tell me about that experience.

- *Diary of a Wimpy Kid - The Getaway*. I read it for an hour straight. I kept re-reading it. When I was asked to read it to my younger brother, I read it to him and myself
- I felt bad for Greg. In the *Series of Unfortunate Events*, I feel bad for them. You just feel what they are going through and feel bad for them. That's how you know it is a good book.

Biased means favoring one side/group/person over another. How are you biased in your everyday life?

- I mean I side with whoever is crying or is sad because I want to help them out

When you are reading a text, do you recognize when your own biases come out? How does that impact your understanding of the text?

- That hasn't happened yet. Side with who it is easier to feel with
- Yeah that's happening with the book I'm reading now. Well he is biased with this Minnesota State player and he is really good and made the game-winning shot. He flunked a grade, and he had a report card before, but it wasn't in paper and it got changed by somebody. And the North Carolina head coach wanted him to go there. My opinion was that this wasn't his fault because I know the character.

How might an author's bias change the story or how it is told?

- Like if they are saying better things about one character than another. Like if he gets in a fight, you might like the other character more.

Male 4

Describe yourself as a student.

- Smart and kind. Because doesn't come super hard for me

Describe yourself as a reader.

- I like reading and it's fun. I read when I don't have anything else to do. I like reading before I go to bed at night.

What kinds of texts do you find most engaging?

- Sports books because I like sports because they are interesting to me
- I prefer realistic fiction, not like real, but not like where it wouldn't happen. If it's nonfiction, it doesn't get interesting sometimes. They just tell you a lot of facts. But I don't want it to be like made up either. I like when it's an actual story.

How do you know when you are not engaged?

- I'm not engaged when I don't understand what is going on, when you are reading the words just to read the words

Have you ever been "hooked" on a text? Tell me about that experience.

- Mike Lupica's books because it's close to the same thing every time, there are one two or three characters and how they go through conflicts and how they change through their sports

Biased means favoring one side/group/person over another. How are you biased in your everyday life?

- I like being with my family. I am biased toward my mom and dad and I am biased with them over everyone else.

When you are reading a text, do you recognize when your own biases come out? How does that impact your understanding of the text?

- I realize like when I'm trying to guess what is going to happen next sometimes there are a lot of clues and you have to make a guess.

How might an author's bias change the story or how it is told?

- When you guess something and the author comes out and tells something totally different, that's what the author is telling you based on his opinion of the people.

Appendix E - Researcher Notes and Reflection

Week of November 30th

- Students previewed and discussed several YA titles for book options
- Narrowed it down to four titles without assistance from me
- Reminded that two groups would be okay
- Five students chose *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street* and two students chose *Blended*
- Books were ordered for the students and survey was taken at the end of the week
- Students were emailed the Google Form link and completed on their own; encouraged to ask questions and for clarification

Week of December 7th

- One student in quarantine, participated virtually via a Google Meet
- Each of the five roles were discussed and reviewed (discussion director, word wizard, diverse diary, quote master, and summarizer)
- Some confusion around the diverse diary and quote master, clarified initially
- Read chapter one from both books aloud together
- Re-read parts of *Vanderbeeker's* chapter one to better understand characters and setting
- Asked to read chapter two for next day
- Modeled all of the roles for both texts using chapter two; diverse diary and quote master were clarified
- Examples were left in folders for reference
- *Vanderbeeker* students chose roles (one per student) and were given folders with sheets (attached examples)
- *Blended* students combined roles and swapped two at a time, while I maintained the role of Discussion Director
- Continued to read 1-2 chapters (*Vanderbeekers*) or 3-4 chapters (*Blended*) a night with changing roles
- *Vanderbeeker* text alternates the focused perspective within the chapter; students noticed and pointed that out
- Connections made with *Blended* as both students have divorced parents and one has a step-brother; understanding of "Exchange Day" and living between parents' houses

Week of December 14th

- Student still in quarantine
- Reviewed roles and responsibilities for each
- Accountability in small group discussions encouraged students to complete work prior to class
- Confusion around diverse diary that was clarified and modeled with a scene from a recent chapter
- End of the week, *Vanderbeekers* switched to roles on sticky notes instead of role sheets

- *Blended* asked to stay on role sheets for another couple of chapters
- Students still hold each other accountable if sticky notes are incomplete or not on the right chapter
- Students share that connections are easier because they have siblings and the conversations are realistic and familiar
- Make connections between setting of *Vanderbeeker* (Harlem) and other mentor texts (Sweet Music in Harlem) and between *Blended* (Ohio) and Iowa
- *Blended* chose to go to sticky notes
- Discussions and questions are focused on which character is the focus and how it changes the story
    - *Vanderbeeker* focuses on shift in sibling telling the story
    - *Blended* focuses on white mom versus black dad and the young girl in the middle
- *Blended* discussions and reflections on BLM and protests
    - Scene in the text where the main character and her black friend are asked to leave a store because they were "stealing" and the dad has to explain that it was because they are black
    - One student reflected on her father being Mexican and mother being white; she commented multiple times on the similarities between the skin color comments and funny looks with her mom and step-dad-like she did not belong in a white family (similar to the story)
    - Another student reflected on her parents being divorced and having her "Exchange Day" on Sundays as well; also has a brother with a white mom and black dad
- *Vanderbeeker* discussions and reflections on personality differences in families and reasons why people are the way they are
    - Student that is an only child seems to be really engaged in the story and the variety of siblings; shares that he wishes he had siblings to connect with
    - Other students with one or more sibling connect to the trouble-making and plotting with siblings, as well as the times they get along great and the times they are constantly fighting
    - Asked how the parents feel and their perspective during children's fights and plots to make changes during the story: reflective answers about long-term effects and how it causes more problems than it solves

Week of December 21st

- Decided to read chapters over Christmas break; come back for discussion but no sticky notes

Week of January 4th

- No longer using sheets, only jotting notes, questions, words, comments, quotes, etc. on sticky notes to share in group discussion
- Both groups prefer discussion when teacher initiated; questions prompt discussion and conversation

- Students read together and stop to discuss as they read
- *Blended* students continue to make connections to present day events
- Sticky notes are focused on specific characters and who is the focus, who is ignored
- *Vanderbeeker* is planning to finish the book over the weekend
- *Blended* has divided up the remaining chapters to finish next week as well

Week of January 11th

- *Vanderbeeker* finished, reflected on ending and characters' perspective
    - Students preferred the transition to sticky notes to keep track of thinking, but did not feel they needed role sheets
    - Asked if they could continue to read in their group with a new book
    - One student requested the second book in the *Vanderbeeker* series
- *Blended* finished later in the week and reflected on how it ended
    - Students asked for other books by this author and both agreed that everyone should read the book for the lessons that are taught in there
    - Students thought the viewpoint of a sixth-grader with a white mom and black dad might be helpful to kids and parents