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**Book Groups and the Relational Engagement of Sixth-Grade Readers**

**A Dissertation**

**Submitted by**

**Kathryn J. Contini**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements**

**For the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Lesley University**

**Ph.D. Educational Studies**

**Individually Designed Specialization**

**May 6, 2020**

# Book Groups and the Relational Engagement of Sixth Grade Readers

Kathryn J. Contini

Graduate School of Education

Lesley University

Ph.D. Educational Studies

Individually Designed Specialization

## Approvals

In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who have made me the reading teacher I am today: to my father, Bill McMillan, who taught me to believe in the power of a good story; to Mrs. McMahan, my second grade teacher, who introduced me to *Ramona* and began my love story with the written word; to my sister, Andrea, my first reading student; to Camille, Reka, and Abby, and all the sixth-grade readers they represent, for touching my heart and teaching me how to be better; and to my niece Grace, who represents the future reading student, and for whom we all need to do better.

## Abstract

The purpose of this mini-ethnographic case study is to determine the factors that impact the relational engagement of middle-school readers in a student-facilitated book group. This is achieved by considering how students relationally engaged with texts, peers, and a teacher while participating in a student-facilitated book group for three months. As the understanding of academic engagement has broadened to include relational engagement, it is necessary to examine how this theoretical construct impacts reading instruction. While educators have long known learning is social, classroom success is most often measured by independent achievement rather than by social engagement. For these reasons, it is necessary to examine the perceptions of students to best understand what engages them. A qualitative, mini-ethnographic case study was conducted to explore the perceptions of ten sixth-grade readers from a single American school. Data were collected from student surveys, observational notes, and participant interviews and qualitatively analyzed. Data analysis revealed that the relational engagement of these sixth-grade readers increased when they found reading to be relevant and meaningful to their own individual experiences. Moreover, increases in self-efficacy occurred before readers' self-concepts changed and the level of autonomy they felt increased their level of participation. This study also found that relationships with peers were essential in the relational engagement of these sixth graders and that the role of the teacher was critical to creating a learning environment where relational engagement was supported. These findings contribute to the growing body of research examining how students, texts, and teachers each play a role in fostering relational engagement.

*Keywords:* relational engagement, relevance, autonomy, choice, social interaction, text, reading transaction, positive peer interaction, teacher role

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Across the country, middle-school reading achievement has been an area of concern for quite some time. The National Commission on Excellence in Education first brought it to light in 1983 with their report spelling out the risks facing American education. Since then, while there have been some marked improvements, reading achievement is still an area of concern. The National Assessment Governing Board (2018) revealed in its 2017 NAEP findings that only 37% of fourth graders and 36% of eighth graders scored at or above proficient on this national reading exam. While that number has significantly increased since the original 29% in 1992, it has fluctuated in the low to mid thirties for the past two decades.

Internationally, it does not look much better. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reflected similar findings and trends. American fourth grade readers were competitively ranked internationally, but their rankings dropped dramatically by the tenth grade (Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2008; Snow & Moje, 2010). The 2015 PISA results (OECD, 2018) reported 20% of students across the globe did not attain baseline-level proficiency in reading. That number has held steady since 2009. Notably, the United States' average reading score slightly declined in 2015 and American students scored lower than several of their international counterparts, such as Norway, Finland, Japan, and Canada.

While there are many contributing factors to this achievement dilemma, one that is often correlated with achievement is reading engagement. Snow and Moje (2010) suggested that declines in achievement stem from a lack of evidence-based reading instruction and a decrease in student engagement in school. Research also suggests that reading motivation and engagement are on the decline. Ivey and Johnston (2018) reported that less than a third of 13-year-old students read daily. And while the amount of reading assigned in school has stayed consistent

over the past few decades, the percentage of 17 year olds who report that they read only what is required for class assignments has doubled. Brozo and Gaskins (2009) reported only 31% of eighth graders in the United States regularly read for enjoyment. Since they also indicated that reading for pleasure impacts success in both academic and personal life, this statistic is concerning. Therefore, attention to engagement and motivation must be recognized as a 21<sup>st</sup> century dilemma (Brozo et al., 2014).

Researchers have also explained that interest, competence, and motivation for reading declines as students enter middle school (Whittingham and Huffman, 2009). Unfortunately, by the time students prepare to enter high school, many do not consider themselves readers and see reading as an assignment or chore they were forced to complete for middle-school classes. Alvermann (2003) referred to these students as “alliterate”. By her definition, while they can read, they are not motivated to do so because of a school-centric definition of reading. Ivey and Johnston (2018) also stressed that increasing students’ reading engagement impacts academic achievement and influences their social and moral development as well. They emphasized the potential risks associated with the decline in middle-grade reading engagement.

Yet these students are not solely responsible for their declining engagement. Hilliard (2003) and Knoester (2009) argued the challenge is not in providing student interventions, but rather with transforming classroom instruction so it becomes motivating for early adolescent readers. Lack of motivation is not a reflection of the student; it is a reflection of the institution. Hansen (2014) suggested reading instruction ought to better reflect the life experiences of students. Relevant instruction is vital.

Several scholars (Protacio, 2017; Snow and Moje, 2010; Wilhelm & Smith, 2016) argue that middle schools must re-evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of their instructional

reading practices. When instruction feels relevant for students, engagement increases. The notion that schools ought to provide students with relevant reading instruction is not a new concept. According to Bartolome (1994), student disengagement is problematic because students are no longer active participants in their own learning. She called for educators to demonstrate value for the student perspective in the classroom structures and pedagogies. Over twenty years later, Wilhelm and Smith (2016) echoed the need to bring back student perspective in order to bring the joy back to in-school reading. Doing so could be a starting point for increasing student engagement.

In an effort to honor student perspectives, education should have a more socio-cultural lens. If the student is to be the heart of instructional-design and decision-making processes, then their socio-cultural backgrounds and experiences need to be valued and reflected in those decisions (Moll et al., 1992; Protacio, 2017). In their seminal work, Moll and colleagues (1992) suggested schools tap into students' funds of knowledge. When students come to class, they each bring their own literacy practices and experiences, and those funds of knowledge impact their engagement with new material and practices. Therefore, by bridging the gap between school and home, students will feel valued at school and will become more engaged. Protacio (2017) echoed this by explaining how literary development and engagement were considerably impacted by social context, cultural background, and identity. When students identified with what they were reading, their level of engagement increased. In contrast, when students did not feel valued in either the curriculum or the structures of their schools, when they did not identify with school-style reading materials, they were less engaged (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007; 2010). In order for school-based reading to be engaging and meaningful, it must reflect students' social experiences and interests (Gee, 2010) as well as their cultural backgrounds (Protacio, 2017).

## **Relational Engagement**

Despite the large body of reading research conducted in the last three decades, little progress has been made in terms of reading achievement. One might argue that progress remains elusive because American education remains focused on test scores and not the test takers. Many educators and policymakers remain focused on the outcomes and not on what students are craving in the classroom. In fact, the 2015 PISA Assessment Report (OECD, 2018) noted students' sense of belonging in school, both with teachers and peers, declined from 2003 to 2015. As Bingham and Sidorkin (2010) argued, there appears to be a “fog of forgetfulness looming over education” (p. 5). Amidst all the objectives and accountability, the idea that education is primarily about human beings and relationships has been lost. Schools are a place where people – students, teachers, administrators – come together to meet and learn. However, the learning is often impeded by a sense of disconnect between school learning and students' lives. Teachers need to be aware of and attentive to (Romano, 2010) both students' needs and interests because, at its core, teaching is all about building relationships (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010).

Hence the classroom teacher is instrumental. The roles of the classroom teacher include supporter, facilitator, model, and creator of a classroom environment that fosters engagement. Teachers are often the ones responsible for the initiation of engagement (Jang et al., 2010). For some students, it is most essential that their teachers support students' understanding and foster self-efficacy. For others, it might be teacher as model for thinking and reading. A relational teacher honors students' perspectives and viewpoints (Margonis, 2010), allows opportunity for student autonomy, and provides a classroom environment that offers positive, social interaction. All students benefit when they feel connected to their teachers; the student-teacher relationship is a contributing factor to how engaged students feel at school (Davis et al., 2014). When students

believe their teachers care about them as learners and people, their engagement increases (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

Therefore, if education is truly to be an engaging, sociocultural experience (Moll et al., 1992; Protacio, 2017), and the teacher is the core facilitator of this experience, educators need to form strong relationships with students to best understand their social contexts and cultural backgrounds. These connections can spark a noted increase in students' relational engagement in a relevant-classroom environment. The construct of relational engagement is at the heart of relational pedagogy and meaningful teaching.

Suarez-Orozco and colleagues (2008) defined relational engagement as the degree to which students feel connected to teachers, peers, and others in their schools. Similarly, Davis and colleagues (2014) defined relational engagement as how students feel about their relationships with their teachers and peers, as well as their perceptions of their teachers' support with their learning. The cyclical nature of the relationships involved in relational engagement stem from continued positive interactions and emotional engagement, which have positive impacts on the behavioral and cognitive engagements that drive student outcomes (Davis et al., 2012; Davis et al., 2014). If improving student outcomes is the goal, as it has been for decades, then it is time to focus on the student.

### **Research Problem**

When the national report entitled *A Nation at Risk* (1983) claimed that American education was being eroded by mediocrity in the classroom, researchers and policy makers began to investigate ways to increase student achievement (Kamentz, 2015). The worry, as Driscoll (2004) explained, was that public education had lowered its expectations and was losing ground.

Since then, only small amounts of ground have been restored (OECD, 2018), while today's students are at risk for becoming increasingly disinterested in school (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

A growing body of academic research revealed that as students move from the elementary school environment to the middle-school environment, the gap between successful readers and struggling readers widens. Pitcher and colleagues (2007) related this gap to the decline in engagement and motivation. This is especially true in the area of literacy. According to Pressley and Allington (2015), positive reading attitudes in first grade declined steadily as students progressed through elementary school. By middle school, reading disengagement was the norm for students. Part of the problem appears to be a decline in readers' self-perceptions across the grades (Malloy et al., 2010). This decline further reduces their engagement, which then impedes their achievement. McKenna and colleagues (2012) noted a decline in both reading interest and students' perceptions regarding reading value. Clearly, this decline has worrisome implications for student engagement in the classroom.

It is important to note the considerable difference between in-school literacy engagement and out-of-school literacy engagement (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Wilhelm & Smith, 2016). One marked distinction is the role of relational engagement in out-of-school literacy (Ferlazzo, 2014; Moley et al., 2011; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). Many students regularly engage in literacy-based practices outside of school, especially online (OECD, 2018), but report a lack of interest in school-assigned reading and writing tasks. Moreover, policy-mandated curricula have had negative impacts on students who are already at risk for becoming disengaged (Gallagher, 2009). Gallagher (2009) argued for teachers to avoid the onslaught of standardization and instead be responsive to the needs of the students in their classrooms. Similarly, Wilhelm and Smith (2016)

reminded teachers that if their goal is to improve student outcomes, they need to foster the joy of reading and learning to the classroom. Schools need to teach to the kids not teach to a test.

While research shows the possible impact of a curriculum that supports choice, relevance, and student voice on student engagement (Carey et al., 2013; Protacio, 2017; Wilhelm & Smith, 2016), scholarship examining the complicated relationship between middle-school students and reading engagement has seldom examined it from the middle-school students' perspective. If students' relational engagement with texts is as instrumental as Davis and colleagues (2014) argue, further research is required to strengthen the understanding of how relational pedagogy and student voice can reignite the engagement of middle-school readers.

### **Research Question**

Building on the existing research regarding relational engagement in the reading classroom, this study examined how the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers was impacted by implementing student-led book clubs with student-selected texts. Since research shows that middle-school students are especially at risk for becoming disengaged in reading, investigating the ways social interaction, choice, and autonomy influence middle-school engagement is timely. Examining the sixth-grade perspective on reading engagement also provides insight into what specifically they find engaging about reading. Specifically, the research question was, "What factors impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers participating in a student-facilitated book group with self-selected texts?" The related sub questions were the following:

- How do student-peer, student-text and student-teacher interactions impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers?



- How do increased opportunities for choice, voice, and autonomy impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers?

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

The study was grounded in multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks characterized by the following perspectives: Social Learning and Self-efficacy Theories forwarded by Vygotsky (1962), Bandura's (1971) Social Learning Theory, Bandura's (1977) and Zimmerman's (2000) theories of self-efficacy, Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, and Rosenblatt's (1978, 1985) Transactional Theory.

A core conceptual framework that impacts relational engagement is Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) works describing how people learn in social contexts. Vygotsky said student learning is impacted by interactions with peers, teachers, and others. He encouraged teachers to provide meaningful opportunities for discussion and collaboration in the classroom. Vygotsky (1978) especially emphasized the impact of dialog in the classroom. He explained ways in which discussion-based classrooms could increase engagement and motivation because students felt like their contributions were valued. In Vygotsky's (1962) view, the teacher creates the classroom environment where these interactions occur. Learning and engagement cannot be extricated from the social context.

A second conceptual framework that reflects the construct of relational engagement is Bandura's (1971) Social Learning Theory, which described the impacts of social environment and social interactions on learning. Bandura (1971) explained that new behaviors and motivation were developed through experiences and observations of others rather than through punishment and reward. Behaviors were also impacted by feedback received from others. If feedback was positive, behavior would continue. Bandura (1971) also stressed the influence of modeling on

learning. When students were provided with models and exemplars, their behaviors often reflected the models. Finally, the element of self-reinforcement is essential. Social interaction increases engagement, but students must be able to engage independently as well.

Self-efficacy is a critical aspect of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977); self-reflection, self-perception, and cognitive processes influence behavior as well. Bandura stressed the role of goal setting and self-evaluation when he explained the “perceived discrepancies between performance and standards [which] create dissatisfaction that motivates changes in behavior” (p. 193). A perceived competence or a perceived discrepancy will affect both initiation and persistence. Self-efficacy can be assessed through four sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and psychological state. Each of these can be influenced by social persuasion, thereby allowing social interaction to impact self-efficacy. Bandura explained, “People process, weigh, and integrate diverse sources of information concerning their capability, and they regulate their choice behavior and effort expenditure accordingly” (p. 212). Therefore, socially-impacted self-efficacy may be a strong predictor of behavior.

Self-efficacy was further explored by Zimmerman (2000), who examined it in relation to the classroom. He defined self-efficacy as the capability to organize and execute action and to attain goals dependent on context. He also argued it was predictive of achievement. Importantly, the relationship between self-efficacy and affective measures such as emotional reactions, effort, persistence, and self-regulation must be considered. According to Zimmerman (2000), when schools foster students’ efficacy, there is a greater impact on achievement.

Self-Determination Theory also impacted this work. Ryan and Deci (2000) defined self-determination as an approach to human motivation and personality which stresses the importance

of “humans' evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation” (p. 68). Characteristics of self-determination, such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy, are necessary to support growth and positive social development. All three of these needs are reflected in the construct of relational engagement.

The connection between the reader and the text is a critical consideration when examining reading engagement; therefore, Rosenblatt's (1985) Transactional Theory also informed this work. This perspective considered the relational experience that occurs during reading and the ways these transactions support increased engagement with text. According to Rosenblatt (1978), reading is a coming together of a reader and a text. This relationship develops as the reader brings past experiences and current dispositions to the text. From this perspective, texts are “merely an object of paper and ink until some reader responds to the marks on the page” (p. 23).

## **Research Approach**

To examine how student-facilitated book groups impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers, a qualitative, mini-ethnographic case study was conducted to examine the relational engagement of ten sixth-grade readers from one suburban school as they engaged in student-led book clubs. The school is located in a predominantly affluent community; however, the population is increasingly diverse and students represent diverse linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants from my own English Language Arts classes. The decision to engage in insider research was intentional, not only for access but also for relational purposes given the desire to consider student-teacher relationships. It was important to note that the study began at the start of the school year while the student-teacher relationships were just beginning to form. Although conducting research in

one's own classroom presents challenges, in this case, it was necessary given the need to engage with the students regularly over a period of weeks. Flexible access and more time with the participants provided richer experiences and increased opportunity for observation of relational engagement.

In order to examine a construct such as relational engagement, various sources of data were collected. Survey data were collected using two pre-existing and validated survey instruments. Malloy and colleagues (2013) *Motivation to Read Profile-Revised* (see Appendix C) and Henk and colleagues (2012) *Reader Self-Perception Scale 2* (see Appendix D) were both administered at the beginning and end of the study. The pre-survey results provided initial information regarding the mindset of the participants in the study. The post-survey data were used to examine changes related to the participants' reading self-concepts, perceived reading values, and reading self-perceptions. These surveys were scored based on their provided, validated scoring methods to reveal students' self-concept, value, and self-perception levels. Descriptive data collected in a field notebook provided rich descriptions and observational data from book-group meetings. Semi-structured exit interviews were conducted to gain further insight into students' perceptions and experiences. Triangulation of data was achieved through the collection of three key data sources: surveys, observations, and interviews.

## **Researcher**

At the time of this research, I was in my seventeenth year as a sixth-grade English Language Arts teacher in the school where this study was conducted, a school where I had been teaching for my entire professional career. Therefore, this study was insider research. All participants in this study were students in my English Language Arts classroom during the 2018-2019 school year.

## **Researcher Assumptions**

Although I taught sixth-grade English Language Arts in the elementary school, I often felt like a middle-school English teacher. For seventeen years, much of my work centered on developing strong bonds with my students and getting to know them well so I could support them in the classroom. For example, I attended students' football games as a means to connect with my students and also to start conversations around Tim Green novels. I have been behind the scenes at the school play and then referred back to those shared experiences in classroom reading conversations. Relational teaching for me is, and always will be, a core value.

As a result, I began this research with several assumptions. First, I assumed when teachers have positive relationships with their middle-school readers, their students would be more engaged. Second, I assumed persistence and heart made it possible for a reading teacher to help a middle-school reader find a book that would help him/her feel connected to the text. Third, I assumed when students were given the opportunity to read self-selected, choice texts, they would be more engaged while reading. Fourth, I assumed when self-selected text reading became a valued part of the school day, student reading engagement would increase. Fifth, I assumed using an online forum to extend the reading discussion would give participants an added sense of voice while also engaging them due to its relevance in their digital lives. Finally, I hypothesized that sixth graders would be more engaged when autonomy was increased.

### Definitions of Key Terminology

**Alliterate Students:** students who are not motivated to read in school (Alvermann, 2003).

**Book Group:** a student led group that reads choice texts and then facilitates and participates in an engaging peer based discussion of the text. This may also include written conversations as well (Daniels, 2006).

**Engaged Reader:** one who has a positive interaction with texts and responds and reacts to their reading socially (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014)

**Reading:** both the efferent and the aesthetic response to text; the interaction between a reader and the content within the text being decoded (Rosenblatt, 1985).

**Reading Identity:** the idea a student has about the type and quality of reader that they are; this includes their self-concept and their self-efficacy around reading and drives their level of reading engagement (Brozo & Gaskins, 2009).

**Reading Motivation:** the extrinsic and intrinsic reasons for reading (Becker et al., 2010); a facilitator for reading engagement (Unrau & Quirk, 2014).

**Relational Engagement:** the extent to which students feel connected to their teachers, peers, family, and others in their school (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008).

**Relational Pedagogy:** education practices that encourage the social side of learning as well as emphasize the importance of developing positive relationships within the school structure (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010).

**School Literacy:** literacies that are based on traditional school practices around reading and writing such as pre-selected reading texts and essay writing to argue a thesis (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

**Self-concept:** the idea that when students believe they can do something successfully, such as reading, they will choose to do it more, expend more effort, and be more persistent around any challenges (Wigfield, 1997).

**Self-efficacy:** the belief that one is capable of doing something, in this case reading (Bandura, 1977; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

**Striving Reader:** a reader who struggles at times and who benefits from additional reading support in class (Harvey & Ward, 2017).

**Student Engagement:** the levels at which a student is behaviorally (actions), cognitively (thinking), and emotionally (feeling) connected and interested (Eccles & Wang, 2012).

**Thriving Reader:** an avid reader who makes gains with little support in class (Harvey & Ward, 2017).

**Transactional Theory:** the concept that when students read or interact with text there is a relationship going on between them and the text (Rosenblatt, 1985).

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the 1980's, researchers began formally investigating the construct of engagement. While the idea was not new, the need to better understand the construct had gained national attention. The country had staggering high-school drop-out statistics with no clear explanation for them. Natriello (1984) was one of the first to write about student engagement, or rather disengagement, in his work around school culture and student effort. His work around the construct focused on how engagement, behavior, and rules were interconnected. One year later, Mosher and McGowan (1985) remarked that although school was compulsory, engagement could not be legislated. In their review of the literature, they explained that engagement was hard to conceptualize, measure, or assess. Nevertheless, it was a driving factor in student success and social participation in school. Laws could regulate the structure of the system, but students' levels of engagement impacted the outcomes. Similarly, Finn (1989) found that as students progressed through the grades, they were increasingly disengaged with school. This was problematic. Researchers were finding that engagement and achievement were directly related (Finn, 1989; Natriello, 1984). The more engaged the student was in school, the better their educational outcomes (Mosher & McGowan, 1985). Therefore the concern was that rising disengagement was negatively impacting student achievement.

Decades later, researchers continued to find that the trend has continued. While theorists in the field struggle to precisely define the construct, teachers are faced with students who are increasingly more disengaged each year (Appleton et al., 2008). After researcher Yazzie-Mintz (2007) administered an engagement survey to high-school students, he reported only 72% of students surveyed found school engaging. When he conducted the survey again, Yazzie-Mintz



(2010) had similar results. In their study two years later, Fredericks and McColskey (2012) found 25-40% of early-adolescent students showed signs of disengagement that may lead to boredom, alienation, and low achievement.

Yet, not all students were disengaged. Research revealed that similar to the achievement gap, there also appeared to be an engagement gap. Yazzie-Mintz (2010) explained this gap existed along a continuum of levels of engagement. His survey results showed male students were less engaged than female students. Students of color were less engaged than white students. Students of lower socio-economic status, as well as those receiving special education services, also felt less engaged in school. The achievement and engagement gaps were impacting similar student groups in discouraging ways. Lower levels of engagement correlated with lower levels of achievement. If achievement and learning were the goals, then educational policy should consider refocusing the priority from accountability to a renewed focus on engagement.

### **Engagement is Relational**

With student engagement as the focus, researchers (Fredericks & McColskey, 2012; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010) called for a conceptual shift in education's definition of engagement. This twenty-first century research aimed to expand the view of engagement. Instead of just the traditional affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of engagement, new research began to explore engagement as a relational construct as well (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008).

This new work began by examining the social and relational aspects of engagement. Furrer and Skinner (2003) discussed this as the concept of "relatedness". They explained this relatedness was found in the social interactions between students and others. However, Furrer and Skinner (2003) argued relatedness, while important, was a contextual aspect of the

environment in which the other dimensions would flourish. In other words, affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagements would increase when students felt a sense of relatedness in their learning environments.

Building on this groundwork, which identified relational aspects as crucial to the engagement construct, Yazzie-Mintz (2007) surveyed 1,272 students from grades seven through eleven in one ethnically and economically diverse county. His survey was designed to examine the reciprocal relations between engagement and problem behaviors. While he found an association between engagement and behaviors, such as dropping out of school, he also focused on the important impact of relationships on engagement. He explained engagement was interactive and relational in nature. Offering a new idea, he explained how relational engagement increases students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagements also. According to Yazzie-Mintz, relational engagement is evident in students' relationships with the entire school community: the people, the structure, the curriculum and content, the pedagogy, and opportunities to participate. School engagement was completely dependent on interaction, perception, and collaboration. Therefore, engagement also had to be considered relational.

With relational engagement recognized as one aspect of the larger, complex construct of engagement, it needed its own definition. Suarez-Orozco and colleagues (2008) defined relational engagement as the "extent to which students feel connected to teachers, peers, and others in their schools" (p. 49) and pointed to a cyclical connection between these various types of engagement. In fact, relational engagement seemed to drive both behavioral and cognitive engagements, therefore impacting achievement. In addition, achievement and academic self-efficacy were found to improve student attitudes toward school, which in turn fostered increased relational engagement. The reverse was also true. When students felt more relationally engaged,

their cognitive and behavioral engagements improved, thereby improving performance outcomes. In defining relational engagement as its own dimension, Suarez-Orozco and colleagues (2008) emphasized the benefit of these cyclical connections for students.

Not all researchers were prepared to make relational engagement its own dimension though. Many acknowledged the relational nature of engagement and the need for social interaction to foster it, but were not quite ready to add a fourth dimension. Building on his early work, Yazzie-Mintz (2010) returned to this topic after three additional years of administering his *High School Survey of Student Engagement*. By now he had surveyed over 350,000 students in over 40 states. His survey identified the construct of engagement to include emotional engagement, cognitive/intellectual/academic engagement, and social/behavioral/participatory engagement. He once again emphasized what connected these together was the vital relationships between the student and the community, the school, adults, peers, instruction, and curriculum (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). He found that students' top three reasons for coming to school were social purposes, family purposes, and then academic purposes. Therefore, engagement needed to be social and relational for the other three types of engagement to grow.

That same year, other researchers supported Suarez-Orozco et al.'s (2008) argument that relational engagement was a fourth dimension of the engagement construct. Davis and colleagues (2010) forwarded a complex, four-dimensional view of engagement. In their four dimensional model, they included cognitive, behavioral, emotional or affective, and relational engagements. In contrast to previous definitions of relational engagement as a subtype under emotional or affective engagement, Davis et al. (2010) emphasized emotional and relational as two separate dimensions. Building on a foundation of motivational and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), Davis et al. (2010) strove to distinguish the relational from the

emotional. Their explanation of emotional engagement described students' positive emotions related to school activities, while relational engagement was students' feelings of being supported, pushed to learn, and accepted at school. For Davis et al. (2010), emotional engagement in school was dependent on relationships, including perceived teacher support and a sense of school belonging. This included "how students feel about their relationships with their teachers, and peers, and their perceptions of their teachers' support of their continued learning" (p. 266). Thus, while both relational and emotional engagements at school were critical, they were also their own individual dimensions.

However, these complex and crucial dimensions of engagement do not exist in isolation. Crick (2012) argued engagement is a "multidimensional construct influenced by place, time, cultural and social context, as well as factors internal to the person" (p. 677). She viewed engagement as a participatory paradigm impacted by the relational factors of the individuals within it. In order for students to be deeply engaged in learning, they must be intentional participants in the social processes taking place over time. Importantly, this required a shift in how educators understood learning. Learning should not be seen as a transmission or as an interpretation, but rather as participation; an experience in relation to others and the natural world. Therefore, real engagement necessitates active involvement in students' socio-emotional lives as they contribute to the context which supports students' relational engagement. Crick (2012) concluded that it would not be possible to fully understand the complex, multi-dimensional construct of engagement unless the socio-cultural context was also considered.

Other researchers agreed with Crick (2012) and explained how accepting the new dimension of relational engagement also meant examining the construct within various social contexts. By definition, when something is relational, it depends on social interaction. Davis et

al. (2012) also agreed. Their work focused less on the theoretical aspects of engagement and more on the practical. Davis and colleagues (2012) emphasized teachers are constantly striving to engage students because they understand that engagement is critical to school success. However, they also pointed out that engagement occurs on multiple levels and when teachers addressed those various levels, they were more successful. One of those levels was that of relational engagement, which defined as the “quality of students’ interactions in the classroom and school community” (p. 22). The relationships students have with teachers and peers drive engagement and learning (Davis et al., 2012). Therefore, if educators promoted relational engagement, they could promote optional academic engagement in school.

Promoting relational engagement requires an examination of the social context of the classroom, which further defines the dimension of relational engagement to include the socio-cultural perspective. Ivey and Johnston (2013) agreed engagement was relational, but they described it as a socio-cultural construct because it was directly connected to the interests and lives of the students. Their qualitative study looked at the work of four eighth-grade, middle-school teachers who wanted to increase the engagement of their seventy-one students by increasing classroom autonomy. These teachers chose to implement student-facilitated book groups in their English classrooms to examine the impact book groups on reading engagement. Throughout this year-long study, Ivey and Johnston (2013) gathered data from observing student groups, one-on-one informal conversations with students throughout the year, audio and video recordings of the book groups, and also year-end interviews with both the teachers and students. Analysis revealed that the book clubs impacted the students’ agency, happiness, social imagination, peer relationships, and reading engagement. One recurring theme was the emphasis on the relational aspects of learning. Therefore, they concluded that time spent relationally

engaging with text, relationally connecting with peers around text, and relationally engaging with facilitative teachers instead of directive teachers impacted their overall engagement in English class. Relational engagement was certainly socio-cultural for these seventy-one participants. If relational engagement was the classroom goal, then student- text, student- student and student-teacher interactions honored and reflected their interests and socio-cultural perspectives. Similar to Davis et al. (2012), Ivey and Johnston (2013) emphasized relational engagement as the most relevant dimension of the engagement construct due to the socio-cultural nature of the classroom.

The definition of relational engagement was evolving. One year after Ivey and Johnston (2013) described the importance of social context on relational engagement, Dominguez and colleagues (2014) emphasized the role of the teacher within that context. Others (Davis et al., 2010; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008) had included teachers in their definitions of the construct earlier, but Dominguez et al. (2014) extended this work. While they defined engagement as a “social construct that is essentially relational,” (p. 157), they also said teachers played a considerable role in creating the atmosphere needed for this social construct to develop. Rather than educators and researchers trying to see and measure engagement, they argued just looking for it meant they were part of it. Since the student-teacher relationship was a core element of the social context of the classroom, the teacher would be the one creating the learning environment where relational engagement could blossom. The teacher was also vital to developing and facilitating learning opportunities based on various interpersonal connections within the classroom context. Whether the connection was student-student, student-teacher, student-text, or student-self, the relational engagement occurred between the individual activity and the goals of the activity for the student. Examining that connection ought to be important for educators. Dominguez et al. (2014) explained, “The construct of relational engagement may help us see

hope for classroom instruction that is responsive and respectful of the multiple relations that support a sound education” (p. 158). By becoming more aware of the nuances of relational engagement, educators and researchers can have a stronger impact on students and learning in classrooms.

The addition of the relational-engagement dimension shifted researcher focus from the psychological aspects of the construct to the educational aspects of it. It also allowed researchers to bring the people and social connections that take place in schools every day into the equation and explained just how important those connections were. These connections become even more important in middle school. Suarez-Orozco and colleagues (2015) examined the relational engagement of early adolescents in school to explore how challenges outside of school significantly influenced adolescents’ ability to engage in school. They found that from social pressures to identity struggles, early adolescents were increasingly affected by social aspects of life. This impacted their participation and engagement in the classroom. If educators adopted a relational pedagogy and practice, then students could be seen as valued learners who contribute to the learning community in meaningful ways. Shifting in-school perspectives could potentially offset the impact of the outside-of-school challenges, therefore improving student investment in learning and relational engagement.

### **Relational Pedagogy**

In any research examining relational engagement, the importance of relational pedagogy must be considered. Bingham and Sidorkin (2010) argued, “Teaching is building educational relations” (p. 7). However, the concept of relational pedagogy is also not new. It dates back to the teaching of Aristotle, whose philosophy emphasized relations in learning. Vygotsky (1962; 1978) also argued that learning is social and occurs through interactions with peers, teachers, and

experts. The connections between learning, relational interactions, and relational pedagogy have long been established.

Relational pedagogy has also been referred to by other terms. Kutnick and Berdondini (2009) termed it “social pedagogy” and explained that social pedagogy was based on “positive within-group relationships that include interpersonal/mutual communication and supportive teaching/classroom activity that shifts classroom interaction away from traditional teaching practices/transmissions” (p. 72). However, their study identified a contradiction between the potential for social pedagogy and the pedagogic reality transpiring in schools. They suggested starting with the relationships within classroom group work as a stepping stone towards social pedagogy. They concluded that the relational and communicative nature of social pedagogy can enhance learning for all children.

Another term for relational pedagogy in the research is Margonis’ (2010) “pedagogy of relation” (p. 39). Margonis explained that students’ engagement in school is directly tied to social circumstances such as their own actions, their peers’ actions, their relationships with subject matter, and their relationships with teachers. Margonis argued for a focus on the pedagogy of relations so educators can find the “social relationships that would transform student resentment and apathy into engaged learning in the classroom” (p. 41). “Pedagogy of relation” can support transformations of this nature in schools and classrooms.

With transformations needed, the question becomes where to begin making changes. Romano (2010) called for the redefining of educational constructs in order to emphasize relational pedagogy. Within relational pedagogy, quality relationships foster engaged learning and thinking when they “foster the social construction of knowledge” (p. 155). However, in order to accomplish this, the very way schools define educational concepts and constructs needs



to reflect the relational perspective. Therefore, Romano (2010) offered an expanded definition of literacy as an example, defining it as a “complex and interactive process of interpretation that occurs within a social and cultural context where students live and learn in relation to one another” (p. 156). Despite specifying this as a literacy definition, since literacy permeates all areas of school content, this definition would appear to fit most aspects of relational pedagogy. Rethinking instructional practices with focus on relational interactions is important to developing relational pedagogy.

Another starting place could be rethinking school structure. For relational pedagogy to succeed, students and teachers need to be able to connect with one another. In schools today, class size is on the rise. Large classes do not support the ability to build strong student-teacher connections. Small class size needs to become a priority for relational pedagogy to work (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). It is only in smaller classes, and on smaller teams, where crucial student-teacher relationships can flourish and social interactions in the classroom can increase. Many students are attracted to colleges and universities that tout lower student-to-teacher ratios. Yet in many places, the exact opposite is happening in middle schools and high schools. Thayer-Bacon (2010) also suggested having two or more teachers in the classroom as this would increase student support and improve engagement. If social interactions in classrooms increase, then socio-cultural curriculums based on students’ funds of knowledge are also more likely (Moll et al., 1992; Thayer-Bacon, 2010). Opportunities to learn from diverse perspectives not only help all students feel more connected to the content, but they also open a world of understanding and broaden the perspectives of learners. Revisiting school structure can create more opportunities for relational pedagogy to flourish.

Since relational pedagogy can increase student understanding and engagement, educators need to embrace pedagogical transformations. Pijanowski (2010) asked, “How does one reach the ‘Kingdom of Relational Pedagogy’ from the ‘castles’ of traditional and progressive education? What guides the way within the dense ‘relational forest’?” (p. 103). Pijanowski (2010) suggested teachers start with the students in their classrooms. Student insight and perspectives can provide guidance for teachers as they navigate the “relational forest”. First, teachers ought to note how students associate and attach themselves to their world. These associations should be reflected in the practices and pedagogy of their individual classrooms. Pijanowski (2010) also focused on the value of listening to students. Listen, attend, and give voice to student feelings in the classroom. Through the cultivation and expression of student voice, students will not only feel more valued in classroom structures, but their engagement with the content will also increase. Traveling the “relational forest” may be the key to the “kingdom” where student engagement is plentiful.

If students’ voice is priority in relational pedagogy, then the traditional role of teacher needs to be rethought as well. For instance, the role of the teacher in a relational-pedagogy model is less of a dispenser of knowledge and more of a supportive, caring, and facilitative guide. Noddings (2012) referred to this as the ethics of care, explaining “[c]are ethics begins its thinking – as life itself begins – in relation” (p. 53). She argued the teacher, or carer in the school context, ought to listen, observe, and be receptive to the expressed needs of the cared-for (the student). The student’s role is to acknowledge and be receptive to being cared for. The positive reciprocity and mutuality of this dynamic benefits the relationship between the carer and the cared for, the teacher and the student. This concept of care is instrumental in forming

supportive schools, quality relationships with teachers, and relational pedagogy that is relevant and meaningful to the learner (Nieto & Bode, 2011).

McCormick and O'Connor (2015) asked how teachers could focus on these ever-important relationships with students when they were balancing many other demands on their time. In fact, they argued, "Relationships with students should not be overlooked because of concerns about curriculum and direct instruction" (p. 513). Instead they suggested teacher trainings and professional-development offerings examine these relationships to better prepare teachers for supporting students. This included pre-service teachers as well, as there were noted benefits to training new teachers in the advantages of relational pedagogy (Trauth-Nare, 2016). McCormick and O'Connor (2015) also considered it important that policymakers considered "teacher's emotionally supportive practices when creating and refining teacher evaluation systems" (p. 514). Perhaps if these crucial relationships were more reflected in future policies, it would provide a new direction for improving educational outcomes for all students.

### **Relational Pedagogy's Benefits**

No matter where one begins, with definitions, with schools, with students, with teachers, or with policies, relational pedagogy offers real benefits for real students. Stengel (2010) explained, "Every experience that purports to be educational has some notion of knowledge and some quality of relation intertwined at its core" (p. 151). So Stengel suggested educators shift their focus to relational pedagogy because "goals for students ultimately reside not in academic standards and instructional objectives but in who we are as persons" (p. 152). Relational pedagogy results in engaged students through interactions and relations with peers, the self, the content, and the teacher.

Engaged students are the core of relational pedagogy. With students in mind, relational pedagogy aims to best support student learning through affective, behavioral, cognitive, and especially relational engagements. As Davis et al. (2014) explained, there needs to be a learning context which supports “rigor, relevance, and relationships” (p. 268). Crick (2012) argued for “a set of pedagogical design principles which integrate the personal with the public, the process with the outcome, the local with the global, [results in] a more flexible and imaginative way of designing learning that is deep and engaging” (p. 612). Relational teaching can achieve increased engagement effectively because it recognizes the current relation rather than a fixed ideal (Noddings, 2010). By meeting students where they are and using the student-teacher relationships of relational pedagogy to support them, student interest and self-esteem increase alongside engagement. Relationships ought to be of central importance in teaching as they strongly support student engagement (Noddings, 2010). Relationships that support relational engagement are the key ingredients for crafting relational pedagogy.

In relational pedagogy, teachers are the primary force for supporting relational interactions and relationship building. When teachers create communities of learning that value students in the production of knowledge, they then exemplify the aspects of relational teaching (Trauth-Nare, 2016). Relational pedagogy leads to participatory education and to the construction of identity for both teachers and students. One of the best aspects of relational pedagogy is that the teacher is a learner too. Trauth-Nare (2016) wrote, by “teaching teachers how to leverage relational pedagogy, they will be prepared to support the type of learning that fosters critical engagement in the curriculum and the development of skills for constructing and evaluating knowledge within a collaborative learning community” (p. 332). Without relational pedagogy on the other hand, Trauth-Nare (2016) warned students could lack engagement, have

low self-efficacy, and exhibit a lack of agency. Instead, in a relational-participation model, students learn to discover new ways to understand the world, create new connections with others, and develop a strong sense of identity that allows them to sustain both engagement and interest in learning. As a result of teachers developing and implementing relational pedagogy, students reap the rewards. It is best not to forget that today's students are tomorrow's future. Relational pedagogy is therefore an investment in the future.

### **Relationships that Support Relational Engagement**

Expanding the definition of engagement to include relational engagement as a fourth dimension of the construct means understanding the nuances of the school relationships which support it. Relational pedagogy might increase relational engagement, but it does so with the support of various relationships and relational interactions. Students' relational interactions with their school communities, their families, themselves, their peers, their texts, and their teachers, all impact the development of relational engagement.

### ***School Community***

It is important to note that these relationships, student-family, student-self, student-peer, student-text and student-teacher do not exist in a vacuum. While these relationships support the development of relational engagement, they exist within the confines of a school community. Unfortunately, school climate is not always conducive to building strong relationships or supporting relational engagement.

For decades, researchers have suggested that educators need to build a bridge between outside and inside school to engage students. Almost thirty years ago, Moll et al. (1992) suggested schools tap into students' funds of knowledge. This concept supported the idea that if educators bridge the gap between school and home, students will feel more valued at school and

increase their engagement. Two years later, Bartolome (1994) wrote how student disengagement in school was problematic, and it was time to make students active participants in their own learning. He called for student perspective to be more valued in school structure, practices, and pedagogy. With the turn of the century, Gee (2001) argued learning at school could not take place in a vacuum. In order for school to be engaging and meaningful, it needed to reflect students' social experience. This research was known, yet it was often not reflected in classrooms.

Years later, students still do not believe their interests and values are reflected in the structure of their schools, the content of the curriculum, or many classroom practices. In a survey of high-school students (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007), results emphasized students want to be respected, acknowledged, and valued as part of the school community as well as a part of the decision-making process. They expressed wanting their ideas listened to and taken seriously. Students responded they would like a say in the topics they are learning about and the activities within the classroom. Three years later, when this survey was administered again, Yazzie-Mintz (2010) found only 57% of students agreed they were an important part of the school community. For example, one student responded, "Students need a voice, not another survey" (p. 24). Students are asking for schools to allow them to have more input regarding instructional design to ensure its relevance and value to their own experiences. Without including student voices within the school community, relational engagement breaks down. Bridges need to be built between educational leaders and students to hear student voices and foster relational engagement in schools.

Improving school climate and changing curriculum would require a shift in traditional school structure today. Romano (2010) wrote how schools are often so consumed by objectives

and initiatives to the point where they become “a conveyor belt system and too many students feel disenfranchised, disconnected, and dismissed” (p. 163). Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick (2012) described schools today as assembly lines in which “materials and parts are assembled to produce identical products over and over again - puts the focus on only those factors that are directly associated with a count- able output measure of achievement” (p. 758). They ask,

What about the processes, interactions, and relationships...? What about the consideration of other measures of achievement, success, and output? What about the differential ways in which students experience schooling? . . . Engagement is a complex process that does not happen the same way every time and with every person. Contrary to much popular criticism of schooling today, this is a good thing, (p. 758)

In those schools, with too little time and conveyor belt methods, relational education and caring relationships are a challenge (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). School becomes a space with little to do with the lives of the student. The disconnect between school practice, pedagogy, and student population is widening both the achievement and the engagement gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). This is certainly not the intent of educators, and yet it is the outcome of the current structure of education.

In fact, there is often a mismatch between students’ needs and school structure, especially after elementary school. Many traditional school structures, especially tracking (Nieto & Bode, 2011), were found to “contribute dramatically to students’ aversion to school” (Davis et al., 2014, p. 265). School aversion causes a decrease in student engagement and connection with school. This disengagement then causes student competence and their value of school to decline across the grades from kindergarten to high school with a noticeable spike in the decline in

grades six through nine. Other factors Davis et al. (2014) cited were large classes, lack of opportunities for socialization, and curriculum students found irrelevant. In order to address these issues, Davis and colleagues (2014) suggested smaller learning communities and interdisciplinary teams that organize teachers within the larger school setting to be student-oriented support teams. In doing so, schools could shift their focus from performance outcomes to caring about the whole student including engagement levels and school connections. Scholars typically agree there are two ways schools can positively impact student engagement: improve school climate and change the curriculum. Davis et al. (2014) suggested doing both.

This is especially important to consider because of the strong connection between school structure and student engagement. As one of the relationships which support relational engagement, school community plays a large part in student investment. As Skinner and Pitzer (2012) explained, engagement in school exists in four nested levels. Level one is the engagement with school as a pro-social institution. This includes the school and family connection. This is often the level families and students feel is lacking most. The second level is involvement with activities such as sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities. The third level is engagement in the classroom. This is where the student-teacher and student-peer relationships really come into play. Student relatedness, sense of belonging, and connectedness are factors at this level. The fourth and final level is the engagement in the learning activity. While the design of the curriculum is important, without student engagement with the curriculum, there is no learning. Yet relational engagement can be fostered at all four levels. If these levels are examined, school structure can be reconsidered in an attempt to improve student engagement across all four dimensions, including relational engagement.



## ***Family***

Since the first level of in-school engagement exists at a pro-social level, it is important to consider family as an influencing factor of student engagement. Since students' self-concept and earliest learning experiences happen at home, they enter the classroom with previous experiences and existing values that impact their engagement in school. Researchers know that students' families play supportive roles when it comes to school engagement. As Furrer and Skinner (2003) wrote, the quality of the parental relationship shapes the relationships students construct with peers and teachers. They added that the quality of parenting also affects students' perceived competence, self-regulation, and self-esteem, all of which directly impact relational engagement.

When these aspects are applied to literacy, family support fosters early self-concept development in emerging readers. Li (2012) cited family-reading support at home to be a significant factor in engaging young readers with texts. Howard (2012) agreed strong parental support of reading and access to texts outside of school correlated with stronger literacy skills. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) identified parents as contributing to the social contexts impacting student engagement. Starting with early experiences, the family shapes how a student perceives relationships. This in turn impacts the relationships they later form at school.

Quality familial relationships directly correlate with students' relational engagement. Santos and Alfred (2016) referred to this phenomenon as familism. While this concept has many dimensions, it implies a certain obligation for families to be supportive of school endeavors. When students perceive family support of school as strong, they tend to be more engaged in the classroom. When students perceive family support is lacking, they tend to be more disengaged. Santos and Alfred (2016) also stressed the importance of parents and families as role models. When parents visibly value school, then their students are more likely to value it as well. Santos

and Alfred (2016) also noted families who value literacy practices at home tend to foster the development of stronger literacy skills in their students. Parents who communicate expectations, model reading, provide access to reading materials at home, and discuss reading often increase their child's literacy engagement and achievement. Parent involvement in students' school communities and academic experiences is crucial for sustained engagement and long-term academic success. Families are the first teachers, and homes are the first classrooms, so clearly students' familial experiences impact their classroom experiences.

### *Self*

While early learning experiences and families initially impact students' reading identity, when it comes to relational engagement, students' self-perceptions and self-concepts are more considerable parts of the relational equation. After all, the students are the ones engaging and making the connections between their own experiences, their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and their current educational contexts. Students' sense of self and self-efficacy link their learning contexts with their levels of engagement. To succeed, students must have a good self-concept, a strong work ethic, and high expectations for themselves. While building home-school relationships promotes engagement, the relationships students have with themselves are even more crucial.

Alongside self-concept, self-efficacy also exists within the framework for engaged reading. A reader's self-efficacy, or belief that they can succeed as a reader, is a critical element due to its influence on self-concept and engagement (Wigfield 1997). Students, who believe they can be successful when reading read more, expend more effort and persist more when reading is challenging. Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy were more engaged and therefore

achieved more (Wigfield, 1997). Clearly self-efficacy and the reader-self relational interactions are important pieces to the relational puzzle.

Over the years several researchers have agreed self-efficacy and reading engagement are interconnected. While there are many components of a student's understanding of self, self-efficacy has been cited as one of the strongest factors of engagement (Alvermann, 2003). Defining self-efficacy as the belief that one is capable of doing something, in this case reading, Smith and Wilhelm (2006) explained that without self-efficacy, it is not possible to increase reading engagement or reading competence. Yudowitch et al. (2008) also stressed the relationship between self-efficacy and engaged reading, given that low self-efficacy is a powerfully disengaging factor for readers.

However, the reader- self relational connection is not just about self-efficacy. It is also about a sense of feeling valued and having a voice. When students feel valued, they develop a stronger sense of identity. Helping students develop a strong sense of self is critical for learning, and it supports students in becoming knowers who actively participate in the learning process (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). According to Eccles and Wang (2012), engagement is both a behavioral manifestation of motivation and an influence on both social and personal identity. In this way, students develop and express their own voice and learn from participating with others. Participating also helps students gain confidence, feel valued, and feel affirmed. Strengthening the student-self relationship allows students to better engage in relationships with others. This participatory paradigm is at the heart of engagement.

However, the participatory paradigm would be meaningless without student participation. These students, when they enter a social interaction and demonstrate relational engagement, are bringing their background knowledge and prior schema with them to this new participatory-

learning experience. Building off the earlier work of Moll and colleagues (1992), Crick (2012) also argued for educators to consider what each learner brings to the learning, including identity, story, values, and a disposition. Importantly, Crick (2012) explained how the learner's story and identity develop within the context of prior and current relationships. Identity then continues to evolve as students bring their personal-learning power to each interaction with teachers, school, and content experiences. Moreover, that power allows students to forge an individual purpose for learning. Purpose for learning is essential to relational engagement.

The student-self relationship clearly supports academic engagement, especially in reading. Afflerbach and Harrison (2017) found students who were more confident and had the tools to succeed looked forward to the reading task. In their literature review, they explained that students with positive self-efficacy were prepared to be more engaged "because they identified as readers" (p. 219). However, they also argued engagement needed to be viewed with both short-term and long-term perspectives. In the short term, students should have daily opportunities across the curriculum to grow engagement and enthusiasm for reading. In the long term, these engaging and enthusiastic learning experiences needed to be more consistent across the school years from K-12 to maintain engagement. The long term goals were more of a concern for these researchers. As they explained, after elementary school the student-self relationship often diminishes because of failure with academic tasks. When students are focused on protecting themselves from negative learning experiences, they exhibit diminished self-efficacy, decreased self-concept, and increased ego threat. This combination is disastrous for engagement. Therefore, improving student self-efficacy and self-concept is vital to improving relational engagement.

## *Peers*

As significant as the impact of students' self-concept and value for learning before entering the classroom are, peers also significantly impact students' self-concept and value. If students' relationships and social connections with peers impact value and purpose for learning, then value and purpose for learning reciprocally impact relational engagement. These are the classmates they compare themselves to; these are the classmates they try to emulate. Relational engagement best occurs when students are socially comfortable interacting with peers. Furrer and Skinner (2003) referred to peers as the "most potent influence on day to day behavior in school" (p. 150). Students who felt secure with their friends had higher self-esteem and were more emotionally and relationally engaged. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008) referred to peers as a "vital conduit" of school information (p. 44). They explained peers and their "social supports can serve to fan the embers of learning" (p. 80). A strong relationship exists between the feeling of belonging/relatedness with one's peers and engagement in learning (Davis et al., 2012).

Noting the impact of peer relations, social interactions with peers should occur in the classroom more often. A survey of adolescent students revealed students felt most engaged in classes where learning happened among peers. Students cited discussions, debates, group projects, presentations, role plays, art, and drama as examples of how positive, peer collaboration makes learning more engaging (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Students voiced that the teacher stand-and-deliver model was disengaging while the participatory or collaborative model was engaging. Other researchers cited the value of increasing opportunities for peer collaboration as well (Cha, Xu, & Rhodes, 2010). As Cha and colleagues (2010) wrote, relational engagement with peers most often happened in the classroom in the form of collaborative learning experiences. Working collaboratively with peers increased student interest, investment, and engagement.

Parsons et al. (2015) argued an increase in class time to work together with peers directly correlated with an increase in relational engagement as well as behavioral and cognitive engagements.

Another aspect of peer collaboration and relationship building occurs online. Li (2012) referred to them as peer social networks that happen both in and out of school. It is well known that technology and social media impact student-peer relationships. While they may be distracting and negative at times, these online social networks can also strengthen relational connections and give students a sense of a peer community, even when they are not in school. Perhaps this is the use of an online platform to recommend books to one another, or maybe it is an online game allowing students to strengthen their vocabulary through small group interactions. At times the connections forged through media can also strengthen relational engagement and student-peer interactions both in and out of school.

Students also reported feeling more engaged during times when they knew they had helped a classmate. This can also occur through online learning platforms as well (Li, 2012). Using a simple classroom blackboard or blog platform can encourage student-peer interactions around learning. Perhaps it is a clarifying question, a book suggestion, or a request for comprehension support. Afflerbach & Harrison (2017) explained when students were called on to critique, evaluate, and discuss texts they read with one another, they felt an increased responsibility towards their peers. When students knew they would be providing peers with feedback, they were more engaged because they were supporting a classmate's learning.

When positive peer interactions increase the relational engagement of readers, they also benefit reading performance. For example, in a qualitative study of peer collaboration and how it impacts cognitive achievement in the classroom, Kutnick and Berdondini (2009) found

positive relationships and positive conversations strongly support learning. In fact, when their participants collaborated with peers in a positive, social-learning relationship, they were more engaged and also more motivated. They wrote, “Collaborative learning students provide greater focus on interpersonal mechanisms likely to enhance conceptual/cognitive development and skills” (p. 73). However, a key part to their argument is that these interpersonal interactions “need to be positive” (p. 88). Kutnick and Berdondini (2009) suggested several strategies for relational training, such as teacher modeling and developing group norms. They argued relational training leads to improved peer relations within collaborative groups which in turn leads to strong educational outcomes for students. They wrote, “If relationships among children in a group are supportive, then many classroom-based problems are likely to be overcome” (p. 74). Positive peer-relational experiences are one possible way to improve positive school climate as well as relational engagement.

No matter the format, peer relationships and positive student-peer interactions especially strengthen relational engagement with literature when healthy conversation is involved. As Alvermann (2003) suggested, reading in the classroom is best when it follows a participatory model with the teacher serving as the facilitator and the students constructing meaning with their peers through discussion. Allowing for more student-peer conversation in socially-natured reading experiences increases both relational engagement and achievement (Ivey & Broadus, 2007). Some easy ways to increase student-peer social interactions in the reading classroom are literature circles, reciprocal teaching, student-facilitated discussion groups, partner reading, reader’s theater, and other collaborative options (Casey, 2008). Implementing relational reading practices in small ways can make a big difference.

Student-peer conversations can also focus on suggesting text titles to one another. Peer-based text recommendations often prove to have a strong impact on reading engagement as peer influence can be quite powerful, especially in middle school. When peers suggest books to read, students are more likely to take those suggestions. Teacher and family member book recommendations matter too, but there is something uniquely positive and influential about a suggestion from a peer (Dunston & Gambrell, 2009). Sharing text recommendations sparks conversations amongst classmates and increases relational engagement around these texts. Students should be encouraged to recommend texts to others as peer influence is a strong factor in choosing to engage with texts (Howard, 2012; Ivey, 2014). Ivey and Johnston (2013) wrote that when peers collaborate around reading, their reading engagement goes up. Increasing positive peer collaboration in school around reading can significantly improve relational engagement.

### *Text*

Aside from peer-student, there is another strong relationship that should be supported in the classroom. That is the relationship between the student and the text. When students feel texts and content are relevant to their own background or experience, they engage more with those materials. Relationally engaging with texts, in a way that connects reader to character or reader to information, increases student desire to keep reading. Rosenblatt (1985) explained the relationship between reader and text with her Transactional Theory. Rosenblatt's (1985) reader-text relationship develops when students interact with text and a transaction occurs between the reader and the words. Sometimes this transaction is efferent, or information based, while other times it is aesthetic, or pleasure based. Not all readers are created equal, so some prefer to read for efferent reasons while others tend towards more aesthetic responses. Either way, this



transaction improves a reader's connection to the written word on the page. This relational experience often results in the transformation of the reader and increases relational engagement with text.

There is a timeless relevance to the impact of Transactional Theory on relational engagement (Rosenblatt, 1968). Decades later, Bingham (2010) also explained there is a valuable relationship between student and text. When students open a book, they interact with the text by supplying their own interpretations. Bingham (2010) encouraged teachers to practice and to emphasize relating to text as opposing to reacting to it. Bingham (2010) also said, "The experience of reading a text also entailed interaction with something that is outside of one's self" (p. 33). Relating to text initiates more powerful engagement.

There is value in connecting with text on both the social and relational levels. Guthrie et al. (2012) argued it was the relational and social aspects which deepened engagement by improving reading identity and strengthening a student's sense of agency. This agency is what allows for thoughtful reader-text transactions. A relational connection with text also can increase a sense of community and a feeling of relatedness to those within the text (Davis et al., 2012). When readers feel connected to the characters in their texts, student-text engagement improves. Text relatedness can spark a dialogical relationship between reader and text which increases social engagement with characters. These connections between a reader and the personalities in a text are vital to reading development and achievement (Ivey and Johnston, 2013). Using text situations as an avenue, and fictitious characters instead of classmates, a savvy teacher can engage students in thinking about their own relationships with others. This then allows texts to provide opportunities to teach and to demonstrate caring about another's perspective. In that

light, a strong connection to text can improve other relationships that are crucial to relational engagement.

In order to make these student-text connections, students need a certain level of social imagination. With Rosenblatt's (1978; 1985) Transactional Theory as a foundation, Lysaker and Tonge (2013) investigated relationally-oriented reading. They identified the reading transaction as the foundation for the development of social imagination. Lysaker and Tonge (2013) wrote, "To use [the] social imagination is to connect to the reality of others by imagining their inner worlds or mental states" (p. 633). They considered social imagination crucial to students' social-emotional health. Social imagination allows students to think outside of their own experience and to embrace new perspectives. Relationally engaging with characters and texts sparks this. Relational transactions with texts foster social imagination within the student-text relationship which impacts relational engagement.

Social imagination has the power to support perspective-taking in the classroom. When student perspectives broaden, they improve how students engage with others around texts. This student-text relationship is an integral part of the engagement construct because engaging with text and engaging with others are interconnected. Lysaker and Tonge (2013) explained, "75% of children who have learning difficulties also have less developed social skills than their classroom counterparts" (p. 633). When self-efficacy is lacking during text interaction, students are less likely to socially interact with others regarding that text. Especially in middle school, when peer acceptance and perception are so crucial, text-based social interactions can be intimidating. When improving self-efficacy through the use of social imagination results in positive text interactions, then the social interactions around that text are also positive.

If relational teachers use supportive reading practices to support and scaffold these students' text transactions, then it can strengthen self-efficacy, foster social connections, and build relational capacities. Therefore, Lysaker and Tonge (2013) argued relational interactions with text “create[s] a web of relationships within which understandings of self and other, in and out of text, can occur” (p. 640). This web has the potential to improve the ever important student-peer relationship as students learn to better understand others' thoughts and intentions via characters in text. It also helps students connect with their teachers and see teachers as real people and readers who model their own relational experience with the text. Supporting student-text relational reading experiences supports relationships with peers and teachers, thereby improving multiple aspects of relational engagement.

Quality student-text relational interactions are also impacted by the behavioral dimension of the engagement construct. Behavioral engagement is supported because relational engagement increases student interest and focus. Years ago Newkirk (2000) first deemed this increased relational and behavioral engagement as “the reading state”. When students are actively engaged with a text, relationally, behaviorally, and cognitively, Atwell and Merkel (2016) said they are in the “reading zone”. Later, Lysaker and Alicea (2017) expanded this idea by examining the “flow” relationship between the reader and the text. This state, zone, or flow results in reader-text transactions that allow for deeper engagement and meet the reader's relational need for connection and companionship. Whatever the name, this phenomenon occurs when the reader-text relational engagement is so strong that students easily and regularly get lost in good text.

However, relationally engaging with a text at a deeper level not only requires behavioral engagement, but it also relies on cognitive and emotional engagements. Lysaker and Alicea (2017) explained it is imperative that readers bring the cognitive resources needed to sustain the

act of reading, the emotional resources required to respond to the reading, and the relational histories needed to inspire a relationship with the text. Just as readers seek connectedness to others in real life, their relational need for companionship drives relational engagement in a fictional world as well. In fact Lysaker and Alicea (2017) proposed texts could serve as vicarious social contexts for students where “readers dialogically engage and form relationships with multiple different others and try out new self-positions, identities, and perspectives” (p. 49). When behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagements are all present, the valuable reader-text relationship supports the presence of relational engagement.

### ***Teacher***

While the reader-text relationship is valuable, the research is quite clear that relational teachers also impact students’ engagement. Relational teachers embrace relational practices and ensure students have a sense of autonomy in the classroom. They also improve students’ interest in school by fostering a sense of belonging, social responsibility, equity, and connection (Davis et al., 2010). As Biesta (2010) explained, it is not just about each constituent in the relationship, but also about the quality of the relationships. “Education is located not in the activities of the teacher, nor in the activities of the learner, but in the interaction between the two” (Biesta, 2010, p. 13). Developing these aspects in connection with each other appears to influence cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement as well as achievement (McCormick & O’Connor, 2015). Hence while the student-teacher dynamic is so crucial to learning, it is also worth more than the sum of its parts.

While several valuable relationships support the construct of relational engagement, the student-teacher relationship has an essential influence on engagement. After all, teachers are often the ones delivering the content and deciding how often collaboration opportunities occur in

their classrooms. As Jang et al. (2010) explained, in order for “students [to] engage in the classroom learning there is almost always some aspect of the teacher’s behavior that plays a role in the initiation and regulation of the engagement” (p. 588).

There are a variety of teacher roles that influence the student-teacher relationship which is so vital to the relational construct. Furrer and Skinner (2003) identified teachers as attachment figures, pedagogues, disciplinarians, and also determiners of student engagement levels. Unfortunately, as class sizes increase and students began switching classes and having more teachers in middle school, the quality of these student-teacher relationships tends to decline (McCormick & O’Connor, 2015). Despite the decline in student-teacher connectedness from elementary to middle school, that connection is even more important as students age, since students need “support to take academic risks necessary to continually develop more advanced skills” in a socially focused world (McCormick & O’Connor, 2015, p. 512). Quality student-teacher relations allow students to develop coping autonomy, school value, and engagement.

One such role is that of classroom interior designer. Before even welcoming students into the classroom, the relational teacher first considers the learning environment and structure. Even the arrangement of the physical space is important. Kutnick and Berdondini (2009) explained the most effective relational teachers consider the layout of their classrooms and the organization of materials to be sure they are “providing greater opportunities for children to engage in group work, supporting relational activities in their everyday classroom activities and allowing groups to ‘get on’ without too much teacher direction and intervention” (p. 89). Environment and structure are more than just tables and cushions though. In the relational classroom, crucial structures also include clear, explicit directions, high interest, relevant class content, student-led actions with teacher scaffolding, and constructive feedback to improve

competence (Jang et al., 2010; Suarez-Orozco, et al., 2008). These structures support student goals and allow for student leadership while improving student outcomes. By increasing these practices, relational teachers can increase all four engagement dimensions including relational engagement.

There are times when this role is more behind the scenes, such as in creating an environment to support engagement. Yet the hands-on, supportive role is most crucial. According to the participants surveyed by Yazzie-Mintz (2010), students expressed needing at least one adult educator to connect with them in order to remain engaged in school. These students commented they would even go out of their way to sustain that connection because a caring adult at school was so important to feeling included and valued within their school community. Similarly, Davis et al. (2014) found students' perceptions of how supportive their teachers were to correlate with "academic and social outcomes including participation, satisfaction, self-efficacy, critical thinking. . ." (p. 265). Even in secondary schools, students still need to feel connected to and supported by their teachers. Strong student-teacher relationships can significantly impact how students perceive school. Therefore, this relationship is central to the construct of relational engagement.

In addition to being supportive, the relational teacher fosters relevance and positivity. Relevant and positive student-teacher interactions are essential to improving relational engagement. Lutz et al. (2006) discussed the way relational teachers could make their interactions more relevant. They explained that a relational teacher emphasizes achievable goals, provides supportive strategies, provides access to high-interest content and texts, encourages student collaboration, and incorporates real-world interactions. Being relevant increases student buy in. With students invested, the relational teacher then focuses on the positive. This teacher

“intellectually saturates the classroom with positive motivation” (Lutz et al, 2006, p. 5) and implements practices that support positive student interactions rather than undermining student engagement with negativity. Margonis (2010) explained positive, relational teachers are more open to hearing student viewpoints. They solicit student feedback more often, and are willing to listen to students’ negative school experiences as well as. They want to learn from their students in order to discover ways to counteract the negative with the positive. They give students a voice. This voice then drives the instruction in the relational classroom. Students are included as collective decision makers whose ideas, strengths, and interests drive the instructional practices. Students are valued stakeholders within this relational learning environment.

While emphasizing positive interactions is essential to building quality, positive student-teacher relationships, additional characteristics are required. If teachers hope to create quality relational engagement, they need to be supportive, positive, competent, and able to develop student autonomy. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) suggested when educators maintain a negative, deficit view of their students, these characteristics are thwarted. Rather than having a deficit view of disengaged students, teachers should see amotivation and disengagement as a challenge or puzzle worth solving. Teachers ought to respect and see students for whom they are as opposed to the ideal version they wish they were. If educators switch from a deficit-based to an asset-based perspective, they can support students in doing the same. To help achieve that goal, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) suggested teachers model coping and resilience, make learning relevant, provide choice, assign authentic work, and foster caring connections. If educators hope to develop relational engagement with all of their students, then they need to see the positive attributes those students bring into the classroom. When they do, these quality relationships will foster increased student engagement and result in increased learning.

When teaching is asset-based and student centered, relational engagement can increase. That is the entire premise for Jang et al. (2010). They investigated asset-based, student-centered class structures required to foster student autonomy. Their core argument was that student-centered classrooms are run by supportive teachers who do not mind relinquishing control. As the classroom guide rather than the classroom sage, relational teachers first identify student needs, interests, and preferences, and then they create goals, provide challenges, and scaffold classroom practices to connect those needs and interests to learning objectives. The supported-autonomy model also calls for acknowledgement of student perspective and allowing students to take initiative in classroom planning and activities. Teachers who support autonomy also use non-controlling language. Jang and his colleagues (2010) found a significant difference in engagement levels in classrooms where teachers changed their language to be more supportive and less controlling. Most importantly, teachers who foster autonomy value their students' role in learning, which in turn leads students to value their role in learning more. Once these ingredients are in place, so is the recipe for student autonomy in the classroom. Jang et al.'s (2010) study revealed the powerful connection between autonomy supporting classrooms and relational engagement. By increasing autonomy, supportive and positive educators can dramatically impact the relational engagement of their students.

Others agreed with Jang et al. (2010) that students who feel autonomous are more engaged. However, in order to encourage student autonomy, educators need to be less teacher-centered and control-focused. That begins with decision making. Teachers create the context for autonomy-driven engagement when they provide "prominent knowledge goals, real world connections, meaningful choices . . . and texts that are familiar, vivid, important and relevant" (Guthrie, 2001, p. 1). Autonomy-focused teachers also allow students to feel included in the



choosing of instructional choices. When teachers feel competent enough, and comfortable enough, to embrace their own vulnerabilities (Raider-Roth et al., 2008), they can use their teacher identity in the role of co-structor of knowledge and class facilitator. Teachers need to be guides and resources not the dominant voice in the discussion (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). When teachers' structures appear controlling and micro-managing, student engagement declines. In contrast, when student-centered instruction incorporates student input and voice, engagement increases. Teachers should create classroom contexts which welcome students' input and autonomy in the meaning-making and interpretations. If teachers drive the discussions and interpretation, they are not only doing all the work, but they also disengage students (Parsons et al., 2015; Trauth-Nare, 2016). A relationally-engaging teacher co-constructs meaning with students, values student input, and fosters autonomy.

Fostering student autonomy in the classroom requires a trusting student-teacher relationship. Trust begins by taking the time to get to know students beyond their classroom personas. Investigating student interests outside of school, and then incorporating those into classroom practices, creates more meaningful relationships which increase engagement in the classroom (Jimenez et al., 2009). In order to do so, teachers need to be aware of outside-school factors "that pre-shape attitude towards school" (Margonis, 2010, p. 47). On average, students are only in school for six hours a day, and only for 180 days a year. There is so much more going on in their lives outside of what transpires in the classroom. Considering the outside-school experiences of students, and incorporating student backgrounds into instruction, allows the relational teacher to have a greater impact and foster stronger relational engagement. Teachers who interact and take interest in students as individuals are more effective (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010) because students trust their perspectives matter within those classrooms. Teachers

who show interest, express understanding, listen, empathize, and look for ways to relate to their students have a stronger impact which results in improved student performance (Cho et al., 2010; Jang et al., 2010; Li, 2012). When teachers take personal interest in students, when they get to know them for who they are, this student-teacher interaction increases relational engagement and investment.

However, it is not just about students' interests and personalities. There are other aspects students bring with them into the classroom which a relational teacher ought to understand. However, that first requires teachers to reflect on their own identities and interests. When teachers allow their own perspectives and experiences to dominate the classroom with little regard for student backgrounds, disengagement ensues (Raider-Roth et al., 2008; Trauth-Nare, 2016). As Raider-Roth et al. (2008) described, there are so many socio-cultural forces shaping school dynamics, but if "teachers can learn to see the intersection of their students' relational worlds with socio-cultural forces as a critical context for student learning" (p. 450), then the possibility for student growth and engagement increases significantly. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008) called this being culturally responsive. A culturally-responsive teacher learns about students' cultural backgrounds and experiences and incorporates them into classroom practices and curriculum. Culturally-responsive teachers also possess all of the other prerequisite characteristics of a relational teacher prepared to foster engagement through supportive student-teacher relationships

While relational teachers must be supportive, positive, asset-based, autonomy-supporting, and knowledgeable about their students, there is one more essential characteristic. Relational teachers care. In their discussion of culturally-responsive and relationally-engaging educators, Nieto and Bode (2011) emphasized the importance of the Theory of Care (Noddings, 2010).

Students need to know they matter; they need to know their teachers care. Taken together, the combination can make a big difference in whether students feel their identities are valued by their teacher. On a nationwide survey of 13-17 year olds, three out of four said they would work harder for teachers who cared about them and understood them (Nieto & Bode, 2011). After all, teaching is a work of heart.

In an effort to illustrate the impact of the teacher's role, Varuzza et al. (2014) examined the relationships of young adolescent readers' motivation, preference, and engagement as influenced by their English Language Arts teachers' instructional strategies. Varuzza and colleagues conducted their study at ten schools across four New York communities over the course of one school year. The participants included eight sixth-grade teachers, nine seventh-grade teachers, 196 sixth-grade students, and 218 seventh-grade students. No teacher or student participant dropped out of the study. All 414 students completed a before and after *Motivation to Read Questionnaire* (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), a before and after Class Strategies Checklist, and a just an after Reading Behavior Survey. The 17 teachers completed a similar Class Strategies Checklist at the beginning and end of the study as well as a survey at the end of the year explaining their experiences with their classes. All surveys were administered during English Language Arts class time.

Once all data were gathered, Varuzza et al. (2014) conducted quantitative analysis. While some survey items collected open-ended responses, results were reported based on numerical measures and did not include the voice or story of the participants. Nevertheless, their findings echoed similar themes emphasized in qualitative work. Specifically, students were engaged by group work, fun yet challenging activities, interesting and relevant topics, positive feedback from peers and teachers, clear instructions, and teachers who stressed the importance of

reading. The findings of this study of sixth and seventh-grade students revealed teacher practices closely align with high levels of engagement and reading motivation. Varuzza and colleagues (2014) said successful teachers motivate and engage students through high interaction, challenging activities, and student discussions regarding what they read. Clearly the student-teacher relationship is instrumental in supporting relational engagement in the classroom

### **Relational Reading**

While relational teaching increases student engagement, it also increases positive connections between students and learning. As Varuzza and colleagues (2014) illustrated, increased relational engagement affects students' positive-reading perceptions. After all, reading is a relational act. Rosenblatt (1978) referred to reading as a "coming together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text" (p. 12). Clearly both the teacher-reader and the reader-text relationships exist, but there is also the reader-peer relationship as well. Vygotsky (1978) explained the value of the peer-to-peer dynamic in his Socio-Cultural Learning Theory. He explained learning cannot occur in a vacuum; students learn best through social interaction with others. Since learning is a social act, learning is best done with peers, teachers, and experts. He also explained, for adolescents in particular, where the needs for socialization and peer acceptance are heightened, a more collaborative learning environment is more engaging. Goodlad's (2004) work echoed the importance of learning with peers, especially in middle school. He defined middle school as a place that is all about friends, relationships, and the social needs of the students. Therefore, if increasing middle-school students' engagement in reading is the goal, the research explains that reading must be social and relational.

### ***Book Clubs***

One instructional strategy that incorporates Rosenblatt's (1978) relational reading, Vygotsky's (1978) social learning, and Goodlad's (2004) focus on relationships is the book club. In her practitioner piece, Capalongo-Bernadowski (2007) defined books clubs as a place where students can connect with others through reading. She provided practical advice for educators interested in implementing book clubs into their practice. She recommended book clubs be less about reading assessment and one right interpretation, and more about aesthetic and efferent responses. Book clubs should be a place where real-life reading is valued and where readers can make both reader-text and reader-peer connections. While some book clubs may be used more for fun, and others more for instructional purposes, they should be all about creating a place where students can drive the learning and their own reading experience.

Since book clubs allow students to drive their own reading experience, they can have a positive impact on students' reading attitudes. In order to illustrate this, Whittingham and Huffman (2009) set out to determine whether or not the implementation of independent book clubs could impact middle-school students' reading attitudes. They especially were interested in the areas of competence, interest, and motivation. Their study consisted of sixty, suburban middle-school students across two schools who volunteered to participate in book clubs that met one day per week before the start of the school day. These participants were then randomly divided into small groups which were facilitated by local university interns. These interns were also participants who read and discussed the books along with the students.

Similar to this research, Whittingham and Huffman (2009) conducted their study for just one semester with each weekly meeting lasting approximately twenty-five minutes. Although university interns were participant-researchers in these meetings, no data were collected or

analyzed from the meeting conversations. Instead, interns used each meeting as an opportunity to model reading enthusiasm, deliver book talks to their participants, and facilitate participant conversations about what they had been reading. Their meetings focused on individual texts students were reading and willing to share out about rather than discussing a common text. Rather than collecting observational data, these researchers prioritized quantitative data from administering reading-attitude surveys at the beginning and end of the study. The surveys were administered during book club meetings and consisted of ten questions with Likert-scale responses. The responses were then quantitatively analyzed.

Whittingham and Huffman (2009) found that participants felt they did not have enough access to a variety of reading materials at school. Secondly, analysis revealed that spending time in a book club environment had a positive impact on student self-worth in regards to reading. Thirdly, their participants demonstrated an increased interest in life-long learning and reading after their book club experience. However, for their proficient readers, the data did not reveal much change. As could be expected, proficient readers who volunteered for a book club were likely to demonstrate consistently positive attitudes towards reading. The resistant readers' answers, though, reflected significant change. Students who had low attitudes toward reading at the beginning of the study demonstrated the greatest change during the book club experience. The data supported the conclusion that book clubs could have a positive effect on students, especially those who are resistant to reading.

Studies have found book clubs to be equally engaging for struggling readers in urban middle schools as well. Parsons and colleagues' (2011) qualitative case study observed the work of an experienced teacher and graduate student as they implemented book clubs with a group of struggling, disengaged readers. Orwig, the experienced teacher, identified reading as something

his students felt was thrust upon them and had no meaningful connection to their lives. Implementing book clubs shifted the mindset of these readers. Books became dog-eared and the inspiration for heated debates about justice, guilt, and life. In their findings, Parsons and colleagues (2011) argued book clubs not only provide a space for students' voices to be heard, they also build student-text and student-peer connections. The student-text connection is a core goal of a peer-based book club and the heart of relational reading.

### ***Relational Engagement with Text***

As previously explained, one of the main goals of a book club is for readers to socially connect with text. Rosenblatt (1978) explained the important reader-text connection, or transactional reading, emphasized the value of both aesthetic and efferent responses to the text during reading. She referred to text as merely “an object of paper and ink until some reader responds to the marks on the page” (p. 23). Anderson (2019) echoed the ideas of Rosenblatt (1978) by expanding on the idea of aesthetic and efferent responses to include text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. These connections are what help form the relational reader-text connection and allow the reader to enter the zone where they thoroughly and completely engage with the text (Atwell & Merkel, 2016; Newkirk, 2000).

However, not all readers can find this reading zone independently. Many need teacher guidance or peer conversation to support text engagement. Therefore, Schussler (2009) explained that reading with a book club can help spark that relational, reader-text connection for students. In her case study of a small group of students at an alternative high school especially designed for disengaged students, Schussler (2009) implemented book clubs as an instructional method to engage students in connecting with the texts they were reading. She explained when a reader was relationally engaged with a text, there was a deeper connection that lasted beyond the short-

term. This connection was able to last because a bond with the topic was developed based on its relevance to the reader's life. This bond was then reinforced through student-peer interactions and facilitated by the supportive teacher. Book clubs helped these students find a way to re-engage with reading.

### ***Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors***

The reader-text connection is critical for relational engagement. Bishop (1990) wrote that readers are engaged with texts when they serve as mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors. In other words, engaging texts can offer a reflection of the reader's personal experience, offer a peek into an unfamiliar experience, or provide the opportunity to step into a whole other world. When texts offer readers mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors, they present powerful opportunities for readers to relationally engage.

**Mirrors.** The mirror relationship between the reader and the text allows the reader to bring their own experiences to the text in order to construct their own meaning through reader-text interaction (Parsons and colleagues, 2011). When readers connect with characters, engagement increases because students personally relate to the context of a book. Groenke et al. (2010) concluded when students connected the experiences of a character to their own experiences, engagement with the text increased. In their qualitative case study, they observed three educators as they implemented the use of more Young Adult (YA) literature into their secondary English classes. When these practitioners shifted their focus from canonical titles to YA titles, they found the students became more engaged. Texts written by 21<sup>st</sup> century authors have a tendency to relate more to students' own backgrounds and lives as opposed to those written in the past. Students were more relationally engaged with contemporary YA because they



found commonalities with the texts' characters and their own experiences. The connections between readers' lives and characters' lives sparked more investment in the reading of the text.

Connections to the texts are what readers are craving. Carey et al.'s (2013) qualitative case study of seventh-grade book clubs often found traditional in-class reading did not give students enough time to build these connections. Student participants reported they needed more time to just read in order to get into a reading zone (Atwell & Merkel, 2016). Once in the zone, without stopping to answer assignment questions, students began to connect to the characters in their books. Carey and colleagues (2013) utilized book clubs in order to provide opportunities for this more natural-reading experience. In their book club conversations, students shared what resonated with them about the characters from their texts. Their findings emphasized that book club discussions in classrooms increased opportunities for students to engage with the text in more meaningful and engaging ways.

Relationally engaging with the characters of the text encourages the reader to interpret, connect, and wonder. However, reading mirrors can also inspire social action. Jocius and Shealy's (2017) year-long literature-based social action project emphasized the power of book club conversations to inspire projects for change. Over the course of one school year, Jocius and Shealy (2017) worked with a group of third-grade readers to improve student-reading responses by implementing a variety of strategies. One strategy included four rounds of critical book clubs. These book clubs read contemporary titles that all shared common themes around justice and community. Not only did these readers relate to the context and wonder about the motivations of the characters, they also relationally connected with them. Their reading engagement increased because the texts mirrored real-life people and real-life situations. When texts mirror students' experiences and lives, they can be powerful instruments for fostering relational engagement.

**Windows.** While text and characters which serve as mirrors are often more engaging, it is also beneficial when they are a window into another's experience (Bishop, 1990). Books as windows allow students to relationally engage with text at a deeper level. Lapp and Fisher (2009) banked on that in their qualitative study of a high-school book club. As their book club was especially for students who were reading below-grade level, they strove to select texts to serve as mirrors and windows. Even for these readers, who were identified as struggling, their comprehension and their engagement increased when they were connecting with texts that gave them a window to new experiences and other voices.

When texts serve as windows for readers, they have a tendency to broaden student perspectives. Whittingham and Huffman's (2009) quantitative study of the impact book clubs can have on the reading attitude of middle-school students found when readers, even those typically disinterested in reading, can step into a text, their reading engagement increases and their perspectives expand. Relationally engaging with text at this level sparks deeper comprehension and richer conversation with peers in club as well. Hughes and Morrison's (2014) three year qualitative case study of sixth through eighth graders in social-justice-themed literature circles emphasized this same idea. They too found when students felt like they were able to experience what the character was going through, their interest and engagement with the text increased.

Ivey and Johnston (2018) referred to this as entering the social world of the narrative. Their two year qualitative study of eighth-grade readers and their parents emphasized the finding that reading engagement improves when readers take on the perspective of the character, negotiate the problems in the text, and weigh the different decisions with the protagonist. Weighing these decisions allowed their middle-school participants to relationally engage with

the characters' emotional lives, their choices, and their consequences. However, they also explained this type of reader-character relational engagement also required social imagination. The reader was required to imagine the characters' thoughts, feelings, and logic as if they were living their experiences. Relational reading goes beyond the words on the page and opens a window to a world of possibility.

**Sliding-Glass Doors.** Years ago, Rosenblatt (1978) wrote about transactional reading. She said when it occurs, readers will begin to live through the words. That visual likely inspired Bishop's (1990) image of reading as a sliding-glass door. Connecting with characters and living a text can also clearly be a sliding-glass door experience that takes readers beyond windows and mirrors. It is the true testament of relationally engaged reading when a reader can step into the world on the page.

In addition to increasing engagement, stepping into a text can also serve as inspiration for action. Perhaps it inspires social action, where readers are impelled to live the story by putting its ideas into action (Hughes & Morrison 2014; Tschida et al., 2014). However, stepping through the sliding-glass door of a book can also impact student character. For instance, Chisholm and Keller's (2014) qualitative study of rural, tenth-grade, heterogeneous book groups found that reader and character connections could foster student empathy. They argued when readers took on the perspective of the character, in addition to strengthening analysis, it also developed their empathy for others, both in the text and in real-life as well. They stressed these empathic transactions were hallmarks of relational engagement because they could increase understanding and lead to action for change, all while increasing students' reading engagement. Laminack and Kelly's (2019) recent practitioner text also emphasized the idea that reading can foster students' own character development. Laminack and Kelly (2019) said when readers connect with

characters, the connections help build empathy and cultivate compassion. Relational reading can have benefits for life outside of book clubs if it leads to compassionate citizens.

**Relevance.** The bottom line is no matter if the text serves as a mirror, a window, or a sliding-glass door, engaged reading requires students to relate in some way to the text. For that reason, educators who strive to foster relational reading should begin by selecting texts that readers find relevant to their own life experiences and which offer relatable characters (Anderson, 2019; Hansen, 2014 ). Whether within their own world or another, engagement increases when students see a piece of themselves in their reading. When students socially interact with texts they relate to because it feels relevant to their own experiences, students increase their student-text relational engagement (Chisholm and Keller, 2014; Parsons, et al. 2011).

And if this engaged reading is to spark engaged conversation, than selected texts should matter to the reader. Hence middle-school readers often select coming-of-age stories where a trusting adolescent character encounters the challenges of life's realities (Lapp & Fisher, 2009). Parsons et al. (2011) argued middle-school students want to read something worth talking about. They crave texts that offer powerful themes which relate and illuminate truths around social issues that mean something to them. Moley et al. (2011) investigated this in their qualitative case study of a middle-school reading program. They found the students who were most engaged were the ones who felt like what they were reading was important. Ivey and Johnston (2018) found middle-school students wanted texts where characters deal with race, drugs, sex and other dilemmas facing them in real life. Reading thought provoking texts provides the opportunity for reading to help students make sense of their world. If in-school reading is to be relationally engaging for students, it needs to reflect real-world experiences.

In making sense of the world, engaging texts can lead students to contemplate questions around privilege and injustice (Groenke, 2010). Relational engagement in reading can therefore inspire readers to become more engaged in their world and even become agents for change. Hughes and Morrison (2014) explained one of the most powerful aspects of YA literature is its ability to inspire readers to create social transformations as YA readers often select texts that deal with topics such as bullying, war, body image, and cyber bullying. As Smith and Wilhelm explained in their interview with Ferlazzo (2014), engaged reading of relevant texts can cultivate important life lessons. In that context, engaged reading can bridge the inside-school reading life of students with their outside-school life. When literature is selected around themes that matter, and literature discussions occur around social justice texts, then reading can empower students to become advocates for social change (Jocius & Shealy, 2017; Laminack & Kelly, 2019). Making reading relevant not only increases engagement, but it can also change lives.

Relevant text impacts relational engagement because of the social transaction happening between reader and text. This means books are more engaging for students when they are representative of their own experiences, socio-cultural backgrounds, and environments (Carey et al., 2013). Protacio (2017) pointed to Socio-Cultural Learning Theory as a way to understand this phenomenon. It is the representation of one's own social and cultural background in text that allows the reading experience to feel more relevant. Laminack and Kelly (2019) wrote when readers find reflections of themselves in literature, they are more likely to feel both visible and valued. The increased value increased engagement in the reading experience. Whether a text serves as a mirror, window, or sliding-glass door, relevant texts are essential to relational reading.

## *Choice*

If reading texts that relate to one's own experiences and background is crucial to sparking engaged reading, then student readers should also have the right to choose what they read. While the idea of total-free choice can be daunting, student choice can start small with independent-reading selections. Lapp and Fisher (2009) suggested teachers model how to make text choices for students. Through mini-lessons, teachers can demonstrate how to find authors with voices which resonate with the reader. When students know how to choose a relevant book, teachers are more likely to provide more choice. This is worth implementing as research has shown students' intrinsic motivation and reading engagement increase when given the choice of reading material. When students have no choice, their disengagement increases (Daniels & Steres, 2011; Moley et al., 2011). The reading experience will not be meaningful if the readers did not have a say in what text they read (Ranck-Buhr, 2012). Instead it will feel like a standard assignment or a chore. Ideally, there would seldom be an occasion where every student in the class is reading the same book (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). If engaged reading is the goal, students should choose their own text.

Another way to increase choice in the reading classroom today is to incorporate more book clubs. Whittingham and Huffman (2009) suggested book clubs offer important text choice which allows readers to choose what they read based on their own personal criteria. They often choose characters with similar struggles to their own and real-life issues which make the reading more relationally engaging. Several other qualitative researchers agreed book clubs spark more engagement in texts because students feel they got to pick them for themselves (Anderson, 2019; Hansen, 2014). With the power of choice, students tend to select texts with strong conflict and relatable yet admirable characters. They often also like texts which offer new perspectives

(Hansen, 2014). As Wilhelm and Smith (2016) explained in their findings from a recent qualitative study of students who read mainly dystopian and fantasy novels, when students choose a book they find engaging, students will discover new perspectives, see new possibilities, and identify more with what they are reading. With choice, reading engagement increases as does reading identity. When given choice, students will read what they need to be both a better reader and a better person. Books will help them grow.

### ***Autonomy***

Offering students more opportunity to choose texts is a strong move for increasing engagement, but it cannot be the only move. Even when a student is reading a desired title, if every book activity or question is teacher driven, then engagement will not increase. Increasing student autonomy with their text interactions increases their relational engagement. This supports the previously discussed idea that fostering autonomy is an important characteristic for relational teacher. Students who have a say in the texts read, the topics discussed, and the format of assignments are more engaged because they feel they have some control over their own learning (Lapp & Fisher, 2009). Students, who get to decide what to do with what they are learning and reading, see their reading shift away from a “have to” to a “want to” experience (Ranck-Buhr, 2012). Increasing student autonomy and decision-making around learning also increases relational engagement.

Similarly, Carey et al. (2013) agreed students crave the opportunity to make their own choices about their learning and reading. They want the autonomy to decide what they should focus on when reading and what to discuss after reading. Students, especially middle-school students, crave independence and ownership over their own learning. When ownership and decision-making are extended to students, students are more invested. Therefore, there is an

argument for educators to invite students to be co-constructors of the curriculum (Hansen, 2014). Just as the texts they read ought to echo their socio-cultural background and experiences, since learning is both social and cultural, those aspects need to be valued and honored in the activities completed with texts as well (Ivey & Johnston, 2018; Protacio, 2017). When educators make learning more social, they can also relinquish some of the control and decision-making to the learners as well. With student engagement and a desire to learn as essential goals, increasing student decision-making helps reach those goals. When students feel like they can be autonomous in a teacher-created learning environment which supports relational connections, their engagement increases.

### ***Conversation***

Another aspect of relational reading is the element of incorporating meaningful conversation. Book clubs provide one avenue for this. Students, who engage with texts they deem relevant, are even more engaged when provided with opportunities for meaningful conversations around the text. These conversations need to occur between the reader and the text first (Rosenblatt, 1978). These meaningful reader-text transactions, whether they are efferent or aesthetic, will then fuel the reader's conversations with others. In the classroom setting, conversations need to occur with both peers and teachers in a positive, student-facilitated manner.

**Peer Conversation.** While transactional reader-text conversations are important, it is mainly their peers who middle-school students want to talk to about their reading. Incorporating book clubs into the classroom is just one way to support this. As Whittingham and Huffman (2009) explained, just using the word “club” gives the experience a social connotation. Middle-school readers often express a need for more authentic conversations around text with their peers



in the classroom (Moley et al., 2011) and book clubs can ensure that happens. When seventh graders have the opportunity to talk to their peers about the books they are reading, their reading engagement significantly increases because of the relational connection amongst classmates (Carey et al., 2013). Acknowledging reading is a social practice is the first step. The second step is making more time for students to talk with peers during the school day because doing so can have a tremendous effect on middle-school reading engagement. Capitalizing on the middle-school students' need to socialize, teachers can implement literature cafes, book blogs and other forms of social media about books to engage their readers (Ferlazzo, 2014; Ranck-Buhr, 2012), or they can simply give them time to have a student-facilitated conversation about the text. Either way, time for student-peer conversations around text increase reading engagement.

Student-peer reading conversations have been found to have other benefits as well. Researchers found when students were fully engaged in meaningful text-based conversations with peers they were able to listen better, understand different viewpoints, and gain new insights (Chisholm & Keller, 2014; Parsons et al., 2011). Pittman and Honchell (2014), in their qualitative case study of struggling, rural sixth and seventh graders, agreed their middle-school participants' levels of engagement, enjoyment, and understanding increased due to social interactions around text. When students examine text through social interactions with peers, reader-peer and reader-text relational engagements increase.

It is widely known that middle-school students crave socialization. It is also known that reading is a socio-cultural experience (Protacio, 2017). Therefore, when socializing with peers around text is increased in school, reading engagement increases while improving the quality of the student-peer relationships. When book clubs offer safe, positive, student-peer conversations around texts, they also create a sense of belonging and peer acceptance (Whittingham &

Huffman, 2009). Reading that occurs in the context of social interactions, such as conversations and discussions amongst classmates, helps students to better understand themselves and others (Parsons et al., 2011). These relationally-engaging conversations also have the power to create empathetic understanding (Chisholm & Keller, 2014). During social book club dialogue, students often take on the perspectives of their group mates and shift their thinking through these interpersonal reactions to text. Due to this peer empathy, the social nature of book clubs creates a sense of community where discussing things is safe (Anderson, 2019). Students will often feel safer discussing serious and sensitive topics with peers in a book club because they feel connected. Peer connectedness and reading engagement are both benefits of a middle-school book club, and they are two of the core components that foster relational engagement in the reading classroom.

**Teacher Conversation.** Nevertheless, it is not just peers students should be talking to about books. Student-teacher conversations are also vital to the relational engagement construct of reading. However, when it comes to conversing with students about books, the role of the teacher should not be that of an assessor or assigner, but rather that of a facilitator and fellow reader. As the facilitator, the conversation is more about what the teacher can do to support the reader's actions. Lapp and Fisher (2009) said the teacher-facilitator is a supportive figure and not the literary sage who doles out the assignments and looks for the one right interpretation. Hughes and Morrison (2014) agreed and emphasized the importance of the teacher-facilitator being a guide not an authority. In the relational classroom where student choice and autonomy are commonplace, the teacher-facilitator role is instrumental. The power dynamics of the classroom will shift. In order to have meaningful conversations, students need to see the teacher more in the positive, teacher-facilitator role.

As the facilitator, it is also important for the teacher to model positive text-based conversations. In order for students to engage in meaningful discussions around text, the teacher has to first model what this looks like. Parsons et al. (2011) wrote the teacher ought to sit next to students, read with them, notice, wonder, connect, and question right along-side them. This allows students to see the teacher as both model and authentic participant. Another suggestion is for students and teachers to share book suggestions with one another (Daniels & Steres, 2011). Teachers can model doing book talks in the classroom, but students should then take responsibility for them too. Sharing this role helps students and teachers to connect and converse more around text.

Teacher-facilitators not only emphasize the value of text-based conversations, but they also provide diverse classroom opportunities for authentic student-peer conversations to occur. Students should not only be writing and responding to texts independently, but rather enjoying text-based social interactions with their classmates. Teachers should provide students with a chance to have meaningful dialogue about meaningful texts with the teacher and with peers. As a life-long reader, when an adult does choose to talk about a book with someone, one does not answer ten comprehension questions or write an analytical essay. School reading should not just do that either. Instead, as Moley et al. (2011) promoted, teachers ought to be giving kids the tools to talk about books in an engaging, social conversation. For instance, students could debate the actions of characters, role play pivotal scenes, converse about the various points of view in the text, or even rewrite and share a new ending for a piece. Either way, the engagement and conversation around the text ought to be social, authentic, and meaningful.

When reading is social and meaningful, students value it more. Therefore by increasing talk time and improving reading conversations with students, teachers can make talking about

texts a valued part of the day. Whittingham and Huffman (2009) suggested teachers model text talk by conversing with students about their own reading lives. Adults can explain their process, share thinking, and talk to students about their recent readings. When discussing and sharing reading is rushed or cut short, students sense a lack of value. If the teacher does not value talking about texts, the students certainly will not value it either. As Daniel and Steres (2011) emphasized, both administration and teachers need to ensure independent-reading time and sharing-about- your-reading time are always valued parts of the school day. With dedicated time, teacher conversations about books encourage the value in being a life-long reader. Carey et al. (2013) argued for teachers to not only be models for reading behavior in the moment, but models of reading for life. In doing so, teacher conversations about text demonstrate reading is not just a part of the school day; reading is a part of life. Modeling a value for reading is just another way student-teacher interactions impact the relational engagement of reading.

### ***Identity***

These text-based conversations with peers and teachers can also end up impacting a reader's sense of self. The social discourse which occurs in these book clubs has the profound impact of supporting readers. This support results in more confident readers who have stronger sense of reading self-concept and self-efficacy. This peer support has been found to increase the confidence of all readers, especially struggling ones. Lapp and Fisher (2009) explained socializing about reading with peers increases the engagement of reluctant readers in particular. There tends to be less fear of assessment and failing when it comes to talking to peers about text than when talking to teachers. Readers also feel safer asking questions of their peers as well. The support of one's peers who value reading often increases a student's value for reading as well, which indicates an improvement in self-efficacy.

Increase students' value for reading, and their interest in what they are reading increases. Increase their value and interest, and their self-efficacy also increases. Increase all three, and students often begin to identify as strong readers (Lapp & Fisher, 2009). Participating in a peer-based book club can have a tremendous impact on reader identity and self-concept. Book clubs improve positive reading identity because students see the experience as more conversational and less graded or academic (Carey et al., 2013). As these conversations develop and flourish, the connections with peers help readers critique the world around them more effectively (Jocius & Shealy, 2017).

Aside from the aforementioned importance of text choice, relevant conversation, and meaningful peer connections, book clubs also tend to build self-efficacy and reading identity because they are a low stakes environment (Anderson, 2019). In a book club, students tend to engage and participate more because they have less fear of judgment, discomfort, or of being graded. Because of the safety of the group, participants do not shy away from the tougher topics. Reading identity then strengthens based on the students' perception that the teacher believes they can handle talking about tough topics. Students develop stronger reading identity because they feel respected. Strengthening reading identity improves various relationships in the classroom to support relational engagement.

While improving relational interactions around text strengthens reading identity, it also works in reverse. Peer-led book clubs combat the challenge of students not seeing themselves as readers (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009) by strengthening reading identity and improving reading engagement through quality peer-text interactions (Protacio, 2017). Strong reading identity also helps readers to better understand themselves, their peers, and their family members. Most importantly, a strong reading identity in a book-club environment helps readers

to seek out new perspectives. This open minded, stronger reading identity occurs because students feel more respected and heard (Pittman & Honchell, 2014). After all, in the book-club setting, everyone's voice is equal. With an improved reading identity, students are more likely to reflect on personal experiences and how they impact their interactions with texts (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). Students who feel more connected to the reading experience that socially reflects their identity begin to feel more connected to the world, come to feel more secure and valued, and also find a sense of belonging and self-affirmation (Laminack & Kelly, 2019). Relationally engaging in a social-reading context strengthens self-concept and reading identity.

### ***Joy***

Yet for relational engagement to develop in reading classrooms, teachers need to help students rediscover the joy of reading. While YA book sales continue to soar (Groenke et al., 2010), so often in classrooms, students feel disconnected from text because it is a chore to read rather than a joy to read (Moley et al., 2011). Parsons et al. (2011) suggested talking about books needs to permeate daily classroom life in order to bring the joy back. Students should be able to read without quizzes, papers, or reports, but rather just to enjoy a good story. Students should be swapping favorite books like trading cards. Book sales reveal students are reading outside of school, so perhaps school needs to listen to the student perspective about books more often. In doing so, classrooms can reignite the joy of reading.

The joy of student-text relational engagement incorporates various forms of reading pleasure. Wilhelm and Smith (2016) reminded educators of the pleasures and joys reading can bring when examined through a relational lens. In their qualitative case study, they investigated a group of eighth-grade participants who self-reported as being passionate readers. Their findings identified intellectual, immersive play, and social pleasures as the three core factors of middle-

school readers' engagement. Intellectual pleasure is the joy of reading to figure out what happens next. This is contrasted with the intellectual chore of reading to answer the next question which so often schools require. Building on that intellectual response, Wilhelm and Smith (2016) also addressed the idea of the immersive play pleasure. This is when readers connect and live through the story with the characters, similar to the sliding-glass door idea (Bishop, 1990). The idea of both intellectual pleasure and immersive play pleasure in reading echoed the iconic ideas of Rosenblatt (1978) also. There is a relationship between the reader and the text that can bring about aesthetic and efferent responses, or intellectually and playfully pleasing responses.

Intellectual and immersive play pleasures reflect cognitive and affective engagement, while social pleasure reflects relational engagement (Wilhelm & Smith, 2016). There is a certain amount of social pleasure that comes with sharing books, recommending books, and talking about books with others, especially peers. However, there is also a social pleasure and joy in seeing oneself in what one is reading. This echoed Bishop's (1990) idea that literature can be a reading mirror. Wilhelm and Smith (2016) also connected this social pleasure back to Erikson's (1963) seminal work which emphasized the importance of adolescents being able to make a place for themselves in their social context. Reading texts which reflect students' socio-cultural contexts is a powerful experience. When reading brings about the joy of social pleasure, reading identity strengthens. These three reading pleasures restore the joy of reading for middle-school students (Wilhelm & Smith, 2016). When students find the joy in reading, they increase their reading engagement. Joyful reading supports the reader-text relationship which is essential to fostering relational engagement.

**Joyful Book Clubs Support Relational Engagement.** Many researchers in the literacy field suggest book clubs, which capitalize on the social pleasure of reading, are one way of

bringing joy back to reading. Reading should be an enjoyable, social opportunity, just as all learning should be (Vygotsky, 1962). Whittingham and Huffman (2009) noted book clubs in the classroom can combat the current middle-school trend that reading is a chore. Students find reading for a book club more joyful because they know this reading construct often removes levels, requirements, assignments, and lets them simply enjoy the book and then talk about it (Daniels & Steres, 2011; Pittman & Honchell, 2014). Anderson (2019) suggested book clubs make reading more joyful because they feel less like school's traditional definition of reading and more of a social opportunity. Book clubs, or text-based social circles, help students rediscover the joy of reading and increase their relational engagement with text. In order to increase student engagement with text, it is essential that reading be joyful.

### **Book Clubs, Relational Engagement, and the Research**

Clearly there is research to support the connection between implementing book clubs in the English Language Arts classroom and increasing student reading engagement. However, even upon deeper examination, while there may be some similarities, the research available did not yet offer a study that investigated how implementing book clubs foster relational engagement. The studies cited throughout this literature review discussed the complex relationship between book clubs and reading engagement, but the focus was either on engagement in general or more of a social engagement.

An illustrative example is research conducted by Pittman and Honchell (2014), who conducted teacher-action research examining literature discussion groups in the classroom setting. Their participants consisted of one English Language Arts teacher-researcher and 45 diverse seventh-grade readers divided into their two class sections. Although they had 45 student participants, they focused on sixteen struggling readers in the two classes. The teacher-



researcher was immersed in the study both as participant and observer with the aim to better understand her own teaching practice and how it impacted her students. By implementing literature discussion groups (LDGs), Pittman and Honchell (2014) hoped students would see reading as a more positive experience. The book clubs, or literature discussion groups, emphasized the value in the discussion and not just the reading of the book. These scholars conjectured LDG participation would increase the readers' engagement through the collaborative nature of the club. In addition, they hoped this form of instruction would benefit both struggling and proficient readers.

Pittman and Honchell (2014) collected various data sources, including reading interest surveys at the beginning and end of their three week study. These surveys consisted of true-or-false-style questions aimed to get to know their participants personally and to better understand them as readers. The teacher-researcher also collected student-created booklets where participants would keep their notes about their thinking while reading.

Once preliminary data were collected, Pittman and Honchell (2014) created the book groups. The researchers constructed diverse, heterogeneous groups which took existing social dynamics and student behavior into account while balancing the ratio of talkative and the non-talkative students in each group. The first group meeting was dedicated to understanding what LDGs looked like and having the students establish both behavior expectations as well as what about the book the group would discuss. A second meeting was dedicated to the design and construction of the student response booklets. The third and fourth meetings were used as practice LDGs using short stories, one listened to by the whole class and one was read in small groups. All 45 students then began reading the same teacher-selected novel that was deemed relevant and accessible for all students.

All of these meetings and book conversations were audio-recorded for analysis. After the book club meetings were complete, Pittman and Honchell (2014) met with students to conduct one-on-one, semi-structured student interviews. They also had gathered researcher-observational notes over the course of the study. All of these types of data were collected for triangulation purposes. All data were gathered during the regularly scheduled meeting times for these two English Language Arts classes. At the close of the three week study, Pittman and Honchell (2014) began to analyze their data for findings. They organized notes, transcribed audio recordings and interviews, re-read observational notes, and examined surveys.

Pittman and Honchell were most interested in the impact of the LDGs on their sixteen struggling readers, so they decided to only use open coding on the data from those participants. They then re-organized data, color-coded data, and began to identify themes. Two core findings emerged from this research. The first was LDGs increased student enjoyment of reading as noted by their engagement in group discussions. The second was LDGs increased reading comprehension as students were able to connect their reading to their own lives through discussion.

In conclusion, Pittman and Honchell (2014) discussed how LDGs benefit all students in the middle-school English Language Arts classroom but felt they especially benefitted the struggling readers by improving their comprehension. They explained the main benefit of a literature discussion group was the collaborative learning that occurred. Through these discussions, participants were able to co-construct their own meaning and interpretation of texts. Peer-led, text-based conversations allowed readers to negotiate perspectives and viewpoints, think critically about the text, discuss, respond, speak, and be heard. Literature discussion groups therefore provide autonomy and voice which middle-school students need to be engaged.

Despite all the studies available that examine the benefits of implementing student book clubs in the middle-school English Language Arts classroom, none offered exactly what I was looking to explore. Several studies described quantitative examination of the efficacy of book clubs but lacked the qualitative story of the student-participant. Qualitative studies found in the extant literature were mainly conducted with few participants. Some offered student perspectives following book-club experiences, but these were mainly teacher-directed with little choice or responsibility being given to the participants. Those that examined engagement, as opposed to motivation or achievement, did not specify the type of engagement other than reading engagement in social contexts. This exposed a critical area of need for research which would explore how implementing autonomous, student-facilitated book clubs would impact the relational engagement of middle-school readers.

This study examined how to foster relational engagement in the classroom through student-facilitated book groups. The autonomous, student-facilitated book groups described in this study provided sixth-grade readers with opportunities to voluntarily read and discuss books of their own choosing in a positive social setting with classmates and one teacher. As the researcher, teacher, and fellow book club participant, I allowed the students autonomy with text-selection and discussion-direction. This was done to investigate whether a social, positive, autonomous reading environment would impact participants' levels of relational engagement with text, peers and teacher.

## **Conclusion**

Thousands of years ago, ancient Athens was considered the school of Greece. Within that school, Aristotle, the esteemed teacher and philosopher, was discussing the idea that learning is relational. Since one of his best known pupils was Alexander the Great, one could infer his

relational pedagogy definitely led to strong student performance and achievement. Years later, John Dewey, an American educator and philosopher, echoed Aristotle's philosophy and emphasized the value of relationships in education. The 1960's introduced the ideas of Vygotsky who reminded educators that learning is a social process which requires interaction with others. In the 1980's, Rosenblatt and Finn also stressed ways learning is dependent on relational connections and social, participatory practices. Yet only within the last decade have experts expanded the construct of engagement to include a fourth dimension, relational engagement.

While the definition of the construct remains theoretical, the need for its application in educational environments today remains clear. Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) seminal works from decades ago told educators learning is a socio-cultural experience and learning improves through collaborative talk and interactions with teachers and peers. In fact, "taking a relational perspective on learning has helped us view the learning process as inherently embedded in the predominant relationships in school, whose health and functioning will shape the knowledge that children can construct" (Raider-Roth et al., 2008, p. 449). This perspective, which embraces relational engagement and pedagogy, starts with the understanding that the student is a person first, and this person learns most effectively through meaningful interactions with school, family, self, peers, text, and teachers.

Therefore, since meaning and learning exist in social practices, relational engagement is a vehicle to influence student outcome and other types of engagement (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017). As Rosenblatt (1978) explained years ago, students need to engage with texts at a deeper level and live through the words on the page. With that in mind, perhaps it is time to revisit pedagogy and practices with a relational engagement perspective (Bingham, 2010), especially

since student outcome, student growth, and student engagement are the lofty goals to which educators aspire. In order to accomplish those goals, and also to return the joy to reading, teachers ought to foster relational engagement in the classroom.

## **Chapter III: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This study sought to examine the factors impacting the relational engagement of middle-school readers in a student-facilitated book group. In order to examine this construct, I explored the observable aspects of relational engagement in a book group setting as well as the personal perceptions impacting the participants' level of relational engagement. In order to explore this topic, a qualitative mini-ethnographic case study approach was used (Fusch et al., 2017).

### **Qualitative Research Approach**

A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study. To gain insight and understanding into a social or human problem, it was necessary to develop a holistic picture of the book club experience through interaction with the participants in a natural setting (Creswell, 2007). As Creswell explained, qualitative research is an "intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material" (p. 35). This study incorporated student choice, student autonomy, and student voice while looking at factors that impacted the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers.

Qualitative research invites the researcher to become part of the natural setting as a participant and observer. This begins with the researcher's worldview, theoretical frameworks, assumptions, and an interest in a social problem. In this qualitative research, I acted in a researcher-participant's role, as I was also the classroom teacher of these participants. When the researcher is also the teacher, and therefore immersed in the setting as a participant, it allows for the possibility of better understanding the teacher's practice and how it affects students (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

There were several additional reasons for choosing qualitative research. First, qualitative research called for face-to-face interactions over time. In this study I met with small groups of students in face-to-face book groups weekly over a period of twelve weeks from late September to mid-December. These weekly sessions were student-facilitated conversations to discuss portions of the student-selected texts. At the end of each meeting, the student facilitator helped the group reach consensus regarding the next week's reading. These weekly book club discussions were a source of data as well as a means for observing students' relational engagement. This was similar to Ivey and Johnston (2013), who observed eighth-grade, bi-weekly, and student-initiated book club conversations to explore how students' agency and engagement were impacted by socio-cultural context and relationships.

Second, the qualitative research design gave more weight and value to participants' perspectives and construction of meaning. Since observations of student-facilitated conversations around self-selected texts and one-to-one student interviews were the primary sources of information, the students' stories were at the forefront of the data. This was essential to this study's design, as student voice and perception are core factors in relational engagement. Therefore, it was important to give voice to the participants' perspectives on reading engagement and the role relational engagement plays in it. Similarly, Anderson (2019) utilized one-on-one student interviews in her examination of what her eighth-grade students found most engaging about their English class. In her action-research work, she implemented choice book clubs into her eighth-grade curriculum throughout the year, and then interviewed her students about their experiences with this curriculum shift.

Third, qualitative research embraces an emergent design. In this case, it allowed me to begin with a flexible plan that slightly shifted once implementing the process with participants.

For instance, for the second session, a getting-to-know-you fish bowl activity was planned, but it was not fully finished because twenty-five minutes proved to be too brief to complete all the fishbowl questions. The five participants in each session had a lot they wanted to say about these comfortable, personal topics.

Finally, qualitative research examines multiple points of data, applies inductive data analysis, and draws conclusions which provide a holistic view of the setting. As Creswell (2007) explained, complex interactions between data sources through inductive data analysis allow the researcher to draw conclusions and develop a holistic account. For the ten participants in this study, reading surveys, observations of book club discussion contributions, and one-on-one interview data were gathered. From these data, conclusions were drawn that provided a holistic account of the role of relational engagement in the experiences of these two book groups. Pittman and Honchell (2014) applied similar methods when they examined the relational engagement of 45 seventh graders immersed in literature discussion groups for three weeks. They too collected surveys, observational data, recordings of literature group conversations, as well as one-on-one student interviews. These varied data sources were instrumental in providing them with a holistic picture of student engagement during their study's brief duration.

### ***Ethnographic Case Study Approach***

Within the domain of qualitative research, the mini-ethnographic case study (Fusch, et al., 2017) approach allowed me to examine the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers participating in a student-facilitated book group with self-selected texts. Mini-ethnography is a qualitative research design that occurs in a constrained amount of time. Constrained by time, this study had a brief duration of twelve weeks, from late September to mid-December during the 2018-2019 school year. Fusch et al. (2017) also said, "Mini-ethnographic case study uses data



collection methods from both designs yet bounds the research in time and space” (p. 926). This case was bound by the single school and grade level in which all participants were my students.

Mini-ethnography also explores the cultural interactions, relationships, and meanings in the lives of a group of people (Barbour, 2010) with the researcher as a participant in the context that is being examined (Anderson, 2019; Pittman & Honchell, 2014). The goal was to understand norms, values, and roles as they pertained to my participants. In examining the relational engagement of grade-six readers, I explored their values and self-concepts as they pertained to their reading lives and their participation in this study. The study of an abstract construct such as relational engagement benefitted from a broader collection of data. Yet, as I was also their teacher, I was directly involved in the student-teacher relational interactions. Therefore, the mini-ethnography component was vital to the design of this study. Mini-ethnography also allowed for the generation and study of theory in a real-world setting, my sixth-grade classroom. A descriptive approach such as mini-ethnographic case study resulted in a broader perspective and clearer understanding of the topic.

The mini-ethnographic case study approach provided a rich and holistic account of what factors impacted the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers in a student-facilitated book group. This was examined in the context of the elementary school day during the fall of a new school year. The ten students were just starting the sixth grade and meeting a new English Language Arts teacher. The collection of data was within the bounded system and specific context of one, sixth-grade classroom over twelve weeks, and it occurred during the course of the regular school day. Interviews and surveys were combined with observations and artifacts of the book club meetings. Since this specific mini-ethnographic case study examined relational

engagement in a real-world, sixth-grade classroom, this study could be relevant to researchers and practitioners alike.

### ***Epistemological Position***

From the social constructivist perspective, the mini-ethnographic case study method was an ideal choice for this research since it was heavily dependent on the participants' perspectives. The very nature of the construct of relational engagement in reading is based on interactions with others, the text, and the self. By definition, these interactions were prime examples of socially constructed ideas and concepts. According to the social constructivist approach (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Vygotsky, 1962), learning is both inherently social and a product of human interaction within cultural context. This social constructivist view explains how participants constructed meaning through their social interactions. This was a logical epistemological framework on which to base this research study since it examined factors impacting the relational engagement of grade-six readers in a student-facilitated book group.

Therefore, within this socially constructed paradigm, my responsibility as teacher and researcher was to listen to my student participants. The social construction of knowledge took place through student-student, student-teacher, student-text, and student-self interactions. As an ethnographic part of this cultural context, my job was to observe student interactions and examine evidence of relational engagement within this social setting. This included taking context into account and understanding the social and cultural influences on my participants (Yin, 2015). The social constructivist approach was the ideal paradigm, and a powerful research foundation, for basing a study on the relational engagement of grade-six readers within a student-facilitated, socially-oriented book club.

## **Research Setting**

This research was set within a large suburban and culturally diverse Massachusetts community. The school district was regionalized across two towns and included six elementary schools, one junior high school, and one high school. Five elementary schools were in one town, and there was one in the other. Parents had school choice over which elementary school their child attended, and the six schools varied by educational philosophies. The school in which this research occurred was the one school in the second town which mainly consisted of students from that particular town rather than from across the entire district. In fact, the student population of this school was approximately 80% hometown and 20% neighboring town. In this school, literacy instruction happened both with systematic, research based instructional programs as well as workshop style instruction. Reading was a core value of the school from preschool to grade six. There were roughly 500 students in the school from preschool to grade six, and there were 69 students in grade six alone.

## **Participant Selection**

This study's sample came from the three classes of grade-six students in this elementary school, which were also the three English Language Arts classes I taught daily. Prior to sampling, I excluded any students with whom I already had a prior familiarity or relationship. I also eliminated any possible participants who were siblings of former students. Additionally, I eliminated any students who I had already spent several summers interacting with in my role as co-director of the town's recreation department summer playground.

To protect students' anonymity, I avoided using participants' names or identifying characteristics. With that said, other students in sixth-grade were aware of the book clubs because they occurred during lunch and recess. Because this book club took place at an agreed

upon free period during the school day, it allowed for increased access for student participation. This is not unlike a study conducted by Varuzza et al. (2014); their book club research was also conducted during the school day within the middle-school English Language Arts classroom. Doing so maximized participation and equitable access to the experience and ensured better understanding of the students' engagement from the beginning to the end of the experience. By conducting the study during school hours, both Varuzza et al. (2014) and I were able to successfully complete our studies without any participants dropping out.

Prior to contacting possible participants, I gained permission from both the district and the school administration to conduct this research project within the context of my own grade level, in my own classroom, and with my own students. I then finalized both a parent consent letter and a student assent letter which informed the potential participants of the purpose of this study. These letters were mailed home in early September to all sixth graders in my building who met the above stated criteria. After the letters were sent home, I offered an informational session for interested parents and students to address any concerns and answer any questions. However, no parents or students attended. Despite that, ten students brought in signed consent and assent letters. Once these letters were received, I now had to consider how to select my participants. The original intent had been to include six or seven participants in one book club. While ten participants seemed like too many for one book club, I was conflicted as their classroom teacher with how I could turn down just a small portion of the eager volunteers. After thoughtful consideration of the ten participants, I chose to keep them all but to divide them into two book groups based on their text selections. The purpose for this was that the ten participants represented a diverse mix of genders, ethnicities, ages, reading abilities, and reading interests. If I randomized the selection and narrowed the group, I risked the possibility of losing the diversity

of the student sample. I then met with all ten participants individually to ensure their understanding of the process and their right to leave the group and study at any time. With all ten assenting, the selection process was complete.

### ***Participants***

All participants in the study were sixth-grade students ranging in age from eleven to twelve years. All were students in my English Language Arts classes, though this book group was held during their recess time. As is standard practice, rather than identifying participant names, pseudonyms were created to protect their anonymity (Heath & Street, 2008). Participants selected pseudonyms during their one-on-one semi-structured exit interviews. Since ten participants were too many for one book group, after the first meeting when all ten met and text selection input was gathered, they were divided into two separate groups based on what text they most wanted to read.

**Group One.** Group one consisted of five readers including Amy, Brian, Ethan, Lynn, and Rose. They were a diverse group of readers based on information they self-reported on the pre-survey of Malloy and colleagues' (2013) *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile-Revised* (see Table 1). These five participants all happened to be from the same homeroom, but they were grouped together based on their high interest in reading the book *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018). They then agreed to meet during recess on Tuesdays for their book club meetings.

**Group Two.** Group two consisted of five readers including Bob, Cara, Jeff, Mackenzie, and Mustafa. They also were a diverse group of readers based on information they self-reported on the pre-survey of Malloy and colleagues' (2013) *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile-Revised* (see Table 2). These five participants were from two different homerooms, but they were grouped together based on their high interest in reading the book *Miscalculations of Lightning*

*Girl* (McAnulty, 2018). They then agreed to meet during recess on Wednesdays for their book club meetings.

**Table 1**

*Participants Group One: Self-Reported Descriptive Information*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Type of Reader
Amy	12	female	Asian/Asian American	good reader
Brian	12	male	Caucasian	good reader
Ethan	11	male	German	poor reader
Lynn	11	female	Multi-racial / Multi-ethnic	very good reader
Rose	11	female	Caucasian	good reader

**Table 2**

*Participants Group Two: Self-Reported Descriptive Information*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Type of Reader
Bob	11	male	Asian/Asian American	good reader
Cara	12	female	European	ok reader
Jeff	11	male	Hindu/Indian	good reader
Mackenzie	11	female	Caucasian	ok reader
Mustafa	11	female	Asian / Asian American	good reader

***Relational and Ethical Issues of Insider Research***

As a teacher-researcher, I must also be referenced as the eleventh participant. Insider research, especially within my own school, my own classroom, and with my own students had

the potential to be problematic. When looking at a theoretical construct such as relational engagement, insider research was preferred, as there needed to be a certain level of an established rapport and trust with participants (Heath & Street, 2008). Starting this project in early fall with unfamiliar students who were new to my classroom environment meant relationship building was happening already. Therefore, when the book club first met, the relationships between members were new, but there was already a blossoming rapport. Albeit developing and changing over time, this existing comfort level created an environment in which relational engagement could be examined. If the study had been done with participants in another setting where there was no semblance of a starting relationship, then the book group time would have been spent more on developing the initial relationship rather than looking at the impact of relational engagement on the book club experience.

Aside from the relational aspects, there were other benefits to conducting insider research. One such benefit was simply access. As a sixth-grade English Language Arts teacher in the building, I certainly had access to students, space, and materials. Another benefit was time. Outsider research would have limited the amount of time I could spend in the setting with participants. As a teacher-researcher, I was fully immersed in the school culture and was able to spend more time observing the book group. This strong immersion within the social context was essential for doing a mini-ethnographic case study based on a social constructivist framework (Fusch et al., 2017). Also, my presence as a staff member was beneficial for developing a rapport with the participants while avoiding the feeling of intrusiveness or obligation. This rapport and relationship was a critical component to examining the construct of relational engagement.

## **Design**

My research was designed to be conducted in a multi-step process. This process would include a preliminary group meeting with all ten participants for text selection and the administration of pre-surveys, observations of weekly meetings with two separate groups consisting of five participants, collecting participant reflections and post-surveys, and finally conducting semi-structured one-on-one interviews. This design also reflected the work of others in the field such as Ivey and Johnston (2013) and Pittman and Honchell (2014).

### ***Group Meetings***

The most essential aspect of this study's design was the student-led book group meetings. As the teacher-researcher, I mainly led the first two meetings as student participants made decisions regarding texts, expectations, and group norms. However, once the participants established the ground rules, the remaining meetings were student-facilitated. During meetings, I only interjected when needed, to add to the discussion, or when next book choices needed to be presented. This was similar to Parson et al. (2011) where they created weekly independent book clubs for their middle-school readers as well. In their study teachers were fellow readers and discussion participants, not facilitators or instructors. Their teachers read, questioned, and wondered right alongside the student readers.

**Initial Meeting.** After participants' parents had consented, and any and all questions were addressed, my research with students began with administration of surveys, text selection, and getting-to-know-you questions. At the first meeting, all ten participants were present. We met in my grade-six classroom and sat around a large cluster of desks pushed together to serve as a conference style table. During this opening meeting, I reviewed the assent letter with participants and reminded them of the completely voluntary nature of their participation. I then



asked for any preliminary questions. As there were none, I began to preview for the participants how the groups would generally function, and how once they were split into two smaller groups, they would be able to create their own norms for how their group would be run.

I then administered two initial surveys (Henk et al., 2012; Malloy et al., 2013). The students were handed paper copies of both surveys. As I read the questions aloud, the students followed along selecting their responses of choice. Pencils were provided as well as index cards or rulers for tracking purposes. Student participants were provided with clarification on questions as needed. They were reminded to be completely honest as their answers would have no impact on their performance in my English Language Arts class. Conducting initial surveys connects to the work of Whittingham and Huffman (2009). In their quantitative study, they conducted initial surveys with sixty middle-school students to establish benchmark means for their participants' reading self-concept and value. While Whittingham and Huffman's (2009) survey was created by them to match the goals of their study, the purpose for implementing them was the same for this study. I also wanted to establish a benchmark for participants' reading self-concept, value, and self-perception.

Once surveys were completed and collected, various middle-grade fiction texts were placed in the center of the table. These texts were representative of a variety of reading levels and genres. Participants were given several minutes to read the back cover or inside book jacket flap summaries. After a few minutes of perusing the texts, students were each asked to rank their top three choices of texts. On an index card, they wrote their name and then text titles with their choices ranked one through three. One was the book they most wanted to read while two and three were still books about which they were highly interested. Once their selections were made, the initial session time ended and participants were sent to lunch. Student choice in text selection

was crucial to this design. This is similar to Ivey and Johnston (2018) who spent two years in a middle school conducting over 256 interviews of eighth graders to see how text selection and book clubs impacted their reading engagement. They found students were more engaged when they chose their texts because they chose texts most relevant to their own experiences. That was also my thinking for the use of student choice regarding text selection.

I then sat down with the index cards and began to consider how to group the ten participants into two groups of five. I began by writing their names in my notebook. Then next to each name, I wrote their first choice, second choice, and third choice titles. I then looked for common interest across the selections. It soon became clear that five students had listed *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) as either a first or second choice, while some of the others had not listed it at all. Those members interested in *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) would become group one. In looking at their names and reported information, those five represented a diverse group of both thriving and striving readers. Then I noted that the other five students had listed *Miscalculations of Lightning Girl* (McAnulty, 2018) as either a first, second, or third choice selection. Again, I noted the diversity of those participants in gender, ethnicity and self-reported ability. Similar to Pittman and Honchell (2014), I also ended up with two groups balanced with talkative and non-talkative students. However, unlike in their study where that was done purposefully, my balance was a coincidence born from the text-selection process. Text selection was my only factor in creating groups. The two groups had been determined.

**First Meeting in Small Groups.** With their groups determined, students were notified in person the following day regarding their group placement. Books were then ordered with priority shipping, so the second meeting could be held week two. Week two's meeting had three selected goals. These goals included facilitating a getting-to-know-you activity, supporting student

conversation to decide on group norms, and ensuring participants set a reading goal for week three. Group one met on Tuesday while group two met on Wednesday, but both meetings ran similarly. During this second meeting, a fishbowl of questions was presented to the group. Each participant could draw a question from the bowl. Once it was read aloud, the student either opted to pass or chose to answer the question. Once the first person had passed or shared, any other group member who felt comfortable doing so could offer an answer. Many responses were provided, and it soon became clear which participants enjoyed sharing and which preferred listening. Unfortunately I had to limit the number of questions asked for the sake of time. Questions that remained were included in later sessions.

The conversation then moved to group norms. Here the groups determined how their student-facilitated discussions would run. Despite five different members meeting on two different days, they generated the same norms, almost word-for-word. Their selected norms also reflected the norms of their English Language Arts classroom. While their wording slightly differed, their intent was the same. First, each week they would have a different student facilitator. A rotation for the next five meetings was quickly established and noted. Second, they chose not to have prescribed or pre-established questions, but rather they would let the conversation flow organically. Third, they would all come to book club prepared with the agreed upon pages read. Fourth, they would be respectful towards all group members. Fifth, no spoilers would be given if participants read ahead, though participants strongly discouraged reading ahead. Sixth, I would be just another participant and have no more authority in the conversation than the rest of the participants. Selected texts were then distributed as well as hardbound notebooks for collecting thoughts and ideas while reading. I then informed participants that their ideas for future texts would be included with the choices for the second and third titles the group

would read. Finally, groups decided on how many pages to read by the next meeting before the time ended, and then they were dismissed to lunch.

**Further Meetings.** With these norms and expectations established, student facilitators led the rest of the group meetings. Student facilitators would launch the conversation in the manner of their choice. Often meetings started with the asking of a question, the sharing of a favorite passage, or the highlighting of a dramatic scene from the pages read for that meeting. Group members would then continue to add to the conversation and build off of one another's ideas. When participant conversation got off track, as can be expected in any book club, the facilitator would bring the conversation back to point with a new question or topic. I only redirected when the student facilitator could not regain the flow of the conversation. While participants conversed with one another regarding their questions, thoughts, and reactions to the text, I was noting observations of the content, the flow, and the level of student engagement in the conversation. This strategy reflects Lapp and Fisher (2009). In their case study of one eleventh-grade high school English teacher and his students, they found allowing students to facilitate and moderate their own book club discussions increased engagement. They explained the importance of all students being facilitators at some point, so that all students could experience a leadership role in the classroom. That same intention was echoed in my study.

**Further Text Selection.** Each group tended to complete an entire text within three to four group meetings. Therefore, every three weeks, the groups were presented with new text selections. Based on student suggestions, participants were presented with texts to preview and a text-selection sheet. On this sheet were images of text covers as well as brief summaries of the texts. Students then ranked their top three choices as they had done in week one. The challenge with honoring further text selections was the need to keep the two groups consistent for the

purpose of this study. For the second round of texts it was not a challenge as *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) was an overwhelming favorite in both groups. However, for the third book selection at least one member of each group had not demonstrated the same level of interest in the title. In this case, majority ruled.

**Final Group Meeting.** For both groups, the final December meeting was held the week right before the December vacation. After the groups had their final conversations about their third and final texts, I asked for general comments regarding their book club experiences. This discussion would later be extended during the one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Due to the richness of the conversations, it was decided to save the administration of the second round of surveys for the participants' one-on-one times with me. These were scheduled to begin the very next day anyway. Finally, pizza was provided for each group, and the conversations soon shifted from reading to general areas of social interest. Group one's pizza luncheon focused on suggested additional titles they should all read. During group two's pizza luncheon, members Jeff and Bob brought out some cards, and their final time together was spent showing Mustafa, Cara, and Mackenzie how to play Mao. Each participant was relationally engaged, and it was interesting to note the increased comfort level participants had with one another.

### ***Instrumentation and Data Collection***

The data collection during this study was a four step process. The first data were the initial surveys and initial text-selection index cards. The second data were the observation notes from the weekly meetings and discussions of the book clubs. Though the face-to-face meetings were not audio recorded, a field notebook was maintained during the meetings. These notes included rich description, which explored and examined threads of conversation topics, student-student and student-teacher interactions, participants' body language and facial expressions, as

well as any additional evidence of relational engagement. However, like Heath and Street (2008) reminded, these field notes strictly described what occurred in the meetings and avoided what did not occur. As a mini-ethnographic work, it was important to follow this fundamental rule of data collection in an attempt to elude making value judgments about what was or was not occurring. The third part of the data collection process included collecting post-surveys (Varuzza et al., 2014; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009) as well as student written reflections on the completed texts. The fourth part was semi-structured, one-on-one interviews at the end of the December prior to the start of school vacation (Heath & Street, 2008).

**Surveys.** Once the ten participants were selected, several initial pieces of information were gathered. Students participated in a fishbowl style getting-to-know-you activity within each group's first meeting. The purpose of this activity was to explore students' reading interests without conducting a third survey. Questions included asked about reading likes/dislikes, reading influences, genre preferences, and reading experiences (see Appendix A). Due to time constraints, not all prompts were asked during this face-to-face meeting. Additional prompts were later added to the semi-structured interview protocol.

Also, students completed the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile – Revised* (Malloy et al., 2013) as well as the *Reader Self-Perception Scale 2* (Henk et al., 2012). These survey tools not only provided helpful background information on the participants, but they were also beneficial for considering and creating motivating reading experiences for the participants. While the Malloy et al. (2013) tool included both a multiple-choice survey with a Likert scale and a conversational survey, the conversational survey was not implemented. The questions on it were reflected during the getting-to-know-you activity as well as the interviews. The Henk et al. (2012) survey was based solely on multiple-choice questions with Likert scale answers. The

same multiple-choice surveys were also administered after the last meetings of both book groups. These post-surveys would reflect participants' reading self-concept, value, and self-perception in mid-December and would be compared to those from late September. Similarly to Varuzza et al. (2014) and Whittingham and Huffman (2009), conducting both pre-surveys and post-surveys demonstrated students' reading self-concepts and values both before and after their book club experiences. By using already field-tested survey tools, validity and reliability of this data were strengthened.

**Observations.** Observation data from group meetings were kept in a field notebook. This notebook was multi-columned and reflective in nature. The notebook was divided initially into two sections, one for each book group. The pages within each section were divided into five sections, so noted observations could be recorded in columns, one per participant. Then my own reflections were added beneath these five columns at the end once participants had been dismissed from the twenty-five minute book group session. In addition, sketches of the general flow of each conversation were also included in the thick description of the field notebook (Geertz, 1973). These notes were later coded for findings. The intent of the various sources of observational data was to look for patterns in the engagement of the participants. Unlike Pittman and Honchell (2014) who found their observational data to be secondary and chose not to code it, my observational data was just as equally important as other data because it provided a description of the social context in which this study took place (Heath & Street, 2008).

For students who wanted to extend the conversation, an online discussion forum in the form of a Google Classroom page was available for participants for the duration of the study. As the initial group facilitator, I posted the first few online prompts. Student responses in the online forum were minimal and mostly focused on page number reminders. This online discussion

forum was also reviewed during data analysis; however, due to the infrequency of participant use and posts, it was decided not to include this as a data point.

**Reflections.** After each book was completed, student reflections were also collected and analyzed. At the close of the final conversation regarding that text, students composed reflections in the form of an exit ticket. Each group completed three books from September to December, so each participant submitted three book club reflections. Student reflections were open ended, and while they had the choice to reflect in words or images, all ten participants chose words. These reflection opportunities were intended for students to have the chance to quietly and confidentially tell me how the book group process went for them and what they thought of the book. Perhaps because the reflection process was so open-ended for students, these reflection sheets provided limited data and insight. Open coding was then used to analyze these data sources for themes.

**Semi-structured Interviews.** Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted using methodology from Josselson's (2013) *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry: A Relational Approach*. The protocol questions (see Appendix B) were intentionally open-ended in nature, in order to allow participants to share their experiences and reflections. Clarifying and elaborating probes were also utilized to encourage the participant to explain or elaborate. Another grade-six literacy teacher vetted the protocol to ensure question clarity. Face-to-face interviews were audio recorded with consent from each participant. I then saved, password-protected, and later transcribed these digital, audio recordings. The transcripts were then saved and password-protected as digital files on a separate external hard drive. All names and identifying information were omitted from any transcriptions.



The purpose of these interviews was to understand the experience of these sixth-grade readers. It was also intended to give them a chance to share their self-perceptions of reading and reading engagement. Finally, the interview process allowed me to closely examine self-awareness and self-understanding of the participants' reading experiences. While the surveys were numerically scored and then reviewed to identify specific elements of the construct, the interviews were designed to reveal the voices of the participants. This is similar to Moley et al. (2011) who captured the voices of two eighth-grade readers in their qualitative case study. By focusing on the interviews of these two subjects, they were able to emphasize their participants' voices and perspectives regarding reading engagement. As Josselson (2013) explained, it is critical for participants to voice their understanding of the social and educational context in which they are stakeholders.

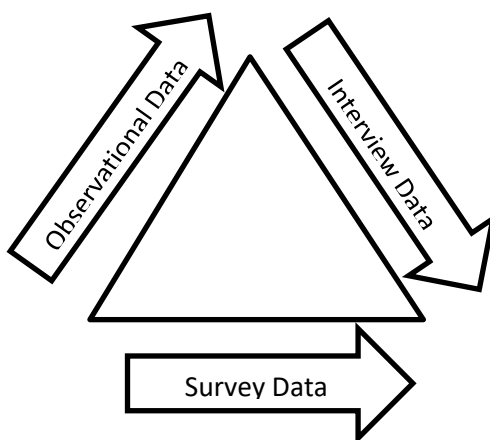
The interview probes in this study contained questions regarding the participants' reading experiences in the group. These probes were open-ended and broad in nature to be relevant to all participants. Follow up questions were posed that were more individual to participants to best understand each particular experience. Questions about the experience as a whole such as, "What aspects of being in this book group did you like/dislike and why?" and follow up probes tried to get to the heart of the experience for each participant. The protocol also asked questions regarding relational interactions such as, "How would you describe your interactions with the other members of the group?" Follow up questions were asked to enrich the understanding of each participant's perspective. Finally, questions were included to examine participants' emotional responses to the book group experience; for example, "How did you feel about being in this book group and why?" (Appendix B). Similarly to the qualitative work of Smith and Wilhelm (2002), open-ended questions with follow-up probes helped participants to share their

honest perceptions of what they liked and disliked during this experience. These questions were entry points into learning more about what they found engaging with others in these social book clubs.

**Triangulation.** The purpose for collecting survey, observational, and artifact data was to triangulate it with that from the semi-structured interviews (See Figure 1). As Creswell (2007) explained, triangulation of data is essential to the validity of the data. This process allows for cross verification from two or more sources. Themes that emerged in the observational notes from group meetings often also appeared in interview responses. Interview responses often echoed information gleaned from the survey results. The process of triangulating these three types of data supports the consistency of findings from these various research instruments. In addition to validation, triangulation also allows for the deepening of understanding of these results and themes. Especially considering this study was insider research, it was essential to be sure that multiple data points were used to allow for triangulation to occur (Josselson, 2013).

**Figure 1**

*Triangulation of Data*



**Authentication.** Data collection was a recursive, iterative, and multi-step process. A field notebook was maintained throughout the study, and artifacts including student written

reflections were collected monthly following the completion of a text in a book group. Data were collected and transcribed during book groups, and preliminary coding began while data collection was still in process. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify preliminary findings. These were then presented to participants for member-checking. In addition, participants also reviewed transcripts and artifacts to be sure they were a fair representation of their thinking. Following member checking, a few revisions were made based on participant feedback. An unbiased third party colleague was also consulted to be sure transcripts were accurate and that notes, observations, and reflections were as objective as possible.

### **Data Analysis**

Once data were collected, a systematic procedure for data analysis was implemented (See Figure 2). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) suggested one such road map. The first step was to read and review all data to explore and identify big ideas. These big ideas then helped to organize analysis and thinking around all the data. Second, codes or descriptors for each category were developed guided by the theoretical perspectives that framed this study. In order to generate these descriptions, data were reviewed, color-coded, and re-read with a reflective lens. Rereading the data with a reflective mindset encouraged me to re-check my codes for accuracy and clarity. When I went through it yet again, I was reading to ensure the data were in the right category. These varied iterations also illuminated possible findings within these codes and themes. Next, I re-read and re-coded data a final time. While it would have been ideal for thorough coding to be occurring while data were being collected, to create opportunities for member-checking during the data collection phase, most of the coding occurred after the

completion of book group meetings with the participants. Only preliminary codes were noted prior to participant member checking.

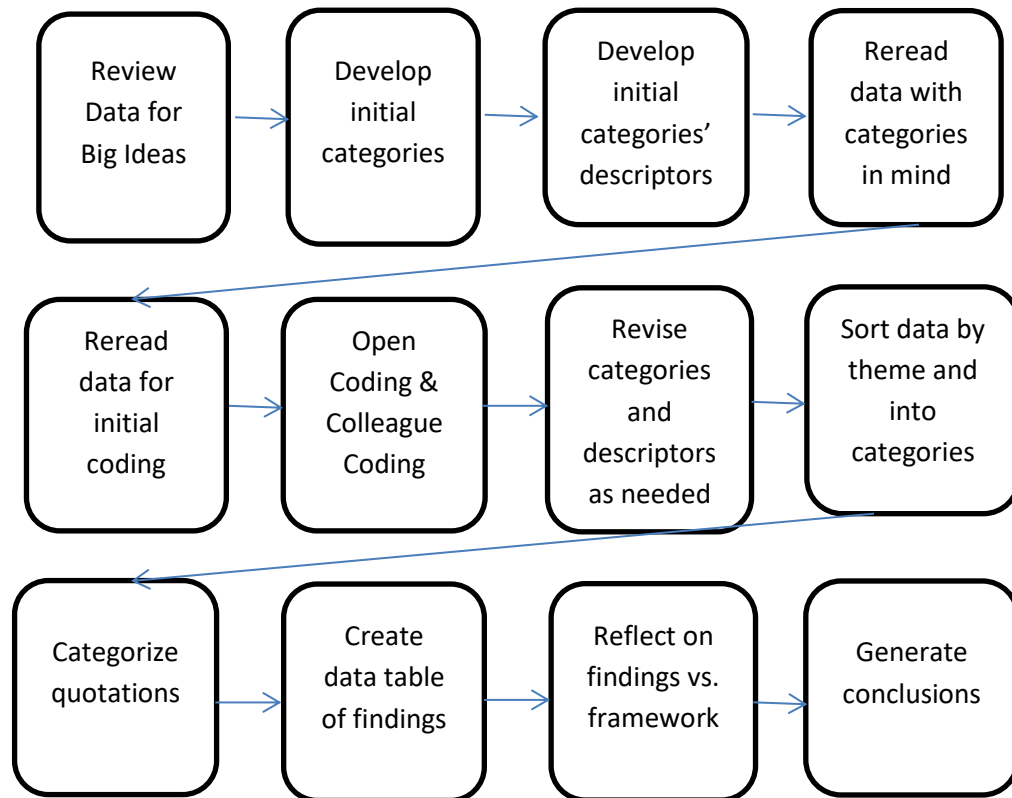
All interview transcripts, field notebook entries, student artifacts, and conversational responses were coded using an open-coding method and analyzed to identify recurring themes (Josselson, 2013). Quantitative surveys were scored and reviewed for descriptive information to add to the rich description of each case. Survey scores were then categorized based on ranges provided by Henk et al. (2012) and Malloy et al. (2013). When the range was not provided by the tool, such as in the subset of social feedback data from Henk et al. (2012), the range scores were determined using direct proportions. These data were then compared to findings from the qualitative data. I worked with a colleague at times to co-code segments of the data to establish inter-coder reliability and to confirm the accuracy of my codes. This coding process was similar to Chisholm and Keller's process (2014). For the data analysis portion of their case study, they focused on selected excerpts from literature circle discussion transcripts in one tenth-grade English classroom in a rural high school in Appalachia. These transcripts were then coded and re-coded for themes exploring ways students interacted and displayed empathy through their book club interactions. Various reiterations of the open-coding process illuminate the stories the data are telling.

Once all data had been analyzed, a color-coded data summary table was created to better understand the big picture of the findings and the extent to which they represented the big ideas generated at the start of data analysis. I collected, sorted, color-coded, annotated, and categorized quotations illustrative of my findings as a means of ensuring participant voice. I then revisited this color-coded table and re-read it weeks later to ensure I still felt confident with the categories and the findings illustrated. Most importantly, the categories, themes, and

theoretical frameworks were flexible throughout to be sure the process was authentic (Heath & Street, 2008).

**Figure 2**

*Data Analysis Process*



***Validity and Applicability***

Throughout this study, several steps were taken to ensure what Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) referred to as credibility. Credibility of the research included clarifying researcher bias from the beginning and including reflections in the field notebook to monitor subjective perspectives and biases. Great efforts were also made to focus on observations of what did happen rather than what did not happen (Heath & Street, 2008) in order to avoid value judgments when possible. I also repeatedly checked my interpretations of the interactions in the setting for

validity by utilizing a peer-debriefing process. This process included asking a non-biased third party colleague to review my field notes and to ask questions to help me identify and examine my assumptions and consider alternative ways of looking at the data.

With regard to the credibility of data collection and analysis, careful steps were taken. Open-coding was used to examine the themes and findings of the data (Creswell, 2007; Josselson, 2013). Since there was little existing research in the field examining relational engagement in schools, let alone book clubs, it was important to generate codes from the gathered data. In addition, member checking was used to be sure transcripts were valid and honest representations of the audio recorded semi-structured interviews. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and to ensure the transcripts were valid representations of their thoughts and voiced opinions. I then asked participants if their words accurately reflected their thoughts and opinions about our time spent together in this reading group experience. Any changes were noted and recorded in the transcripts when revisions were made or when a minor inaccuracy was identified. This safeguarded the integrity of the data in hopes that I did not misinterpret or misrepresent the students' ideas and reflections.

In an effort to ensure that findings from this study were relevant to other teachers and students, thick description of this mini-ethnographic case study was included (Geertz, 1973). Thick description was also a vital component to this mini-ethnographic research. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) suggested, "Richness of descriptions included in the study give the discussion an element of shared or vicarious experience. . . it is a vehicle for communicating to the reader a holistic and realistic picture" (p. 113). Seeing as I was both the classroom teacher and the researcher, and this study was a mini-ethnographic case study in design, it was critical to include thick description in the analysis process. Creswell (2007) explained that the use of thick

description in case studies allows for readers of the study to see how these findings might be transferrable to other settings and if they are applicable in other contexts. In other words, my experience with my ten participant case study group could be applicable to other teachers in other schools.

### ***Reliability***

Careful steps were taken to ensure reliability as well. A detailed account of data collection and analysis was provided. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy by the participants. I also reviewed detailed field notebook entries to verify I had captured the book group conversations honestly and authentically. Screenshots of online discussions were collected and reviewed; however, since there was minimal online participation they were not coded. Member-checking also contributed to the reliability of this research. Coded transcripts were stored for further review and a colleague was asked to co-code transcripts. Inter-coder reliability was established. The addition of a second coder reduced the potential bias that might occur when a single researcher codes and analyzes data collected from her own students.

### ***Believability***

During this study, I was well aware that conducting a mini-ethnographic case study with my own students might draw criticism from the field. Some may question the validity and credibility of case study research, while others may question the study of one's own students. Therefore, as Bachor (2002) suggested, steps were taken to protect the believability of any findings from this study. First, thorough description of the setting, context, and participants were used to contextualize my findings. Second, the process by which data and evidence were

collected, stored, reviewed, and analyzed was clear and transparent. Evidence verification and confirmation was also evident. It ought to be clear how findings and conclusions were reached.

### **Summary**

A qualitative, mini-ethnographic case study was implemented in order to better understand the role of relational engagement in a student-facilitated sixth-grade book group. This case study was bound within a single school and grade level where the research was conducted, and where I also worked as the classroom teacher. Since I was both a book club participant and the English Language Arts teacher in the setting, the study was also considered mini-ethnography. Insider research was beneficial to address issues of access, time, parent comfort, and rapport. Purposeful sampling ensured that the participants were not students with whom I had already developed a relationship with either them or their families. Participant information has been kept confidential and any identifying information has been omitted from the study.

Data were collected in a recursive, multi-step process, beginning with preliminary surveys and a getting-to-know-you session. Face-to-face and online book discussions occurred over the course of twelve weeks and in regards to three texts that were selected by group consensus. However, the participants rarely chose to participate in the online book discussion, and so that data were not analyzed or coded. After book group meetings concluded, post-surveys and discussion artifacts such as student reflections were collected. Finally, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each student participant one-on-one. Both the preliminary and secondary surveys were quantitatively scored, ranged, reviewed, and compared to student responses and other qualitative data sources. Qualitative data were analyzed using an open-coding method. Multiple iterations of coding were performed on the researcher's field



notebook, the student reflection sheets, as well as the transcripts from interviews. From these codes, themes were derived to provide key findings. Steps were taken to ensure validity, applicability, reliability, and believability.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this mini-ethnographic case study was to examine how implementation of student-led book clubs using student-selected texts could impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers. This study was conducted over a twelve-week period from September to December of the 2018-2019 school year. Participants were ten sixth-grade students from three sixth-grade English Language Arts classes in a New England suburban school district.

Examining the sixth-grade perspective on reading engagement provided insights into middle school students' relational engagement with reading. Specifically, the research question for this study was "What factors impact the relational engagement of sixth grade readers participating in a student-facilitated book group with self-selected texts?" Data analysis yielded the following findings:

- The relational engagement of these sixth-grade readers increased when they found the reading to be relevant and meaningful to their own individual experiences.
- For these ten students, self-efficacy for reading increased before self-concepts changed.
- For these sixth-grade participants, increasing the level of autonomy that they felt in their reading classroom increased their level of participation.
- Relationships with peers were essential to the relational engagement of these sixth graders.
- For these ten participants, the teacher-created learning environment fostered relational engagement.

### **Mini-Ethnographic Bounded Case Study**

In this study, data were collected from September to December during the 2018-2019 school year in my own sixth grade English Language Arts classroom. As I was both the instructor and the researcher, this study was also designed as mini-ethnography. The ten participants were my students-of-record for that school year and I was their reading instructor. However, during the book club sessions for this study I was researcher and fellow book club participant. The research was conducted in a large suburban New England school district. This district served approximately 5700 students across six elementary schools, one junior high school and one high school. There were approximately 450 sixth graders across the district, and seventy in the school studied. The participants included in this study represent 7% of the sixth grade population of the one school and 2.2% of the sixth graders across the district.

### **Process**

In order to understand these participants' perceptions on reading and relational engagement, a multi-step process was followed in this study. The first step of the process was the administration of two reading surveys, one to measure self-concept and value of reading, and one to measure four aspects of reading self-perception. The second step was the collection of observational data during the three months of book club sessions. The third step was the administration of the post reading surveys after the final meeting of the book clubs. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted one on one with each participant following the final book club meeting. The participants' descriptions and the findings presented here were born of those sources of collected data.

## Participants

This study's ten participants were diverse in terms of their reading abilities and how they perceived themselves as readers. Data collected during the initial session with all ten participants included a text-selection opportunity as well as responses to getting-to-know-you questions which revealed insight into their reading interests and their genre preferences. Based on the participants' rankings of various texts presented, they were divided into two groups. They remained in those two groups for the duration of the study (see Tables 3 and 4).

**Table 3**

*Group One: Pseudonyms, Reading Interest, and Genre Preference*

Participant Pseudonym	Reading Interest	Genre Preference
Amy	likes reading books	realistic fiction
Brian	loves reading	historical fiction
Ethan	does not spend spare time reading.	graphic novels; joke books
Lynn	reads a lot	pretty much anything
Rose	reads a decent amount	realistic or historical fiction

**Table 4**

*Group Two: Pseudonyms, Reading Interest, and Genre Preference*

Participant Pseudonym	Reading Interest	Genre Preference
Bob	reads a lot	adventure books
Cara	is not really a fan of reading	realistic fiction
Jeff	loves to read	science Fiction
Mackenzie	takes a while to finish reading something	realistic and historical fiction
Mustafa	loves reading	fantasy

### *Participants' Reading Self-Concept and Value*

While the ten participants were diverse in reading interests, their survey results showed diversity in other areas also. For instance, analysis of data collected from the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile-Revised*, or MRP (Malloy et al., 2013) revealed a range in self-concept and value among these ten readers. For this survey instrument, scores ranging from 32-40 were strong, scores from 25-31 were average, and scores less than 24 were low. These distinctions were then applied to the results for the ten participants in this study. Based on the preliminary survey, four readers had strong self-concept, four readers had average self-concept, and two readers had low self-concept. Also, six readers had strong reading value, three had average reading value, and one had low reading value. By the end of the study, six participants reported strong self-concept, four reported average self-concept, and none reported low self-concept. Also, eight participants reported strong reading value, two reported average reading value, and none reported low reading value (see Tables 5 and 6).

**Table 5**

*Group One: Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile-Revised Results*

Participant	Self-Concept		Value		Full Survey	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Amy	30	33	30	34	60	67
Brian	29	31	33	33	62	64
Ethan	14	29	22	25	36	54
Lynn	36	33	37	36	73	69
Rose	33	37	36	36	67	73
Mean	28.4	32.6	31.6	32.8	59.6	65.4

*Note.* Self-concept max. score = 40; Value max. score = 40; Full Survey max. score = 80.

**Table 6***Group Two: Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile-Revised Results*

Participant	Self-Concept		Value		Full Survey	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Bob	34	33	36	35	70	68
Cara	24	27	25	31	49	58
Jeff	26	26	33	33	59	59
Mackenzie	30	33	31	32	61	65
Mustafa	33	34	35	35	68	69
Mean	29.4	30.6	32	33.2	61.4	63.8

*Note.* Self-concept max. score = 40; Value max. score = 40; Full Survey max. score = 80.

### ***Participants' Reading Self-Perception***

The ten participants also demonstrated diversity in reading self-perception as well as the four aspects of self-perception: progress, observational comparison, social feedback, and physiological state. Analysis of data collected using the *Reader Self-Perception Scale 2*, or RSPS2, (Henk et al., 2012) revealed a variety of factors impacting the self-perception of these readers. These factors included how students felt about progress made in reading (Progress), how students felt about themselves as readers compared to others (Observational Comparison), how students felt about themselves as readers based on social feedback (Social Feedback), and how students felt while reading (Physiological States). Based on Henk et al.'s (2012) data analysis guidelines, raw scores in these four areas were noted differently in terms of high, above average, average and low results. For progress, scores of 74 or more were high, scores ranging from 66-73 were above average, scores ranging from 60-65 were average, and scores that were 59 or less were low. For observational comparison, scores of 39 or more were high, scores of 34-38 were above average, scores of 28-33 were average, and scores of 27 or less were low. For social

feedback, scores of 35 or more were high, scores of 31-34 were above average, scores of 28-30 were average, and scores of 27 or less were low. Finally, for physiological states, scores of 50 or more were high, scores of 44-49 were above average, 35-43 were average, and 34 or less were low.

These score range distinctions were then applied to the results for the ten participants in this study. In the area of progress, at the start of the study, one participant scored low, five participants scored average, three participants scored above average, and one scored high according to the pre-survey results. By the end, one participant still scored low, no one scored average, six participants scored above average, and three scored high in progress. In the area of observational comparison, in the beginning, four participants scored low, four scored average, two scored above average and none scored high. On the second administration of this survey, two scored low, four scored average, three scored above average, and one scored high. As for social feedback, on the initial survey two scored low, three scored average, three scored above average, and two scored high. By the second administration, one still scored low, two scored average, four scored above average, and three scored high. Finally, for physiological states, on the preliminary survey, one scored low, no one scored average, one scored above average, and eight scored high. By the end of the study, these results were identical (see Tables 7 and 8).

**Table 7**

*Group One: Reader Self-Perception Scale 2 Results*

Participant	Reading Progress		Observational Comparison		Social Feedback		Physiological State		Full Survey	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Amy	71	77	31	38	32	36	52	60	186	211
Brian	65	68	27	28	28	30	53	52	173	178

**Table 7** (continued).

Ethan	53	57	13	25	27	28	17	29	110	139
Lynn	77	76	34	33	35	34	54	57	200	200
Rose	73	69	36	38	35	42	59	60	203	209
Mean	67.8	69.4	28.2	32.4	31.4	34	43.8	51.6	174.4	187.4

*Note.* Reading Progress max. score = 80; Observational Comparison max. score = 45; Social

Feedback max. score = 45; Physiological State max. score = 60; Full Survey max. score = 230.

**Table 8**

*Group Two: Reader Self-Perception Scale 2 Results*

Participant	Reading Progress		Observational Comparison		Social Feedback		Physiological State		Full Survey	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Bob	65	72	29	34	28	33	56	58	178	197
Cara	61	66	29	31	28	31	47	47	165	175
Jeff	65	71	26	22	27	27	54	57	172	177
Mackenzie	72	79	27	40	32	40	50	60	181	219
Mustafa	64	66	32	28	33	33	58	58	187	185
Mean	65.4	70.8	28.6	31	29.6	32.8	53	56	176.6	190.6

*Note.* Reading Progress max. score = 80; Observational Comparison max. score = 45; Social

Feedback max. score = 45; Physiological State max. score = 60; Full Survey max. score = 230.

***Group One Participants' Reading Identities***

**Amy.** Amy, a thriving reader, reported that she had previously enjoyed being in a different book club, so she wanted to be in this one too. Her survey results revealed that she had both an average self-concept as a reader and an average value of reading before the book club began. However, Amy's self-concept and the value she placed on reading were stronger following her participation in the book club. For her reader self-perception, she specifically demonstrated growth in the areas of observational comparison and social feedback. Amy



explained that she is an avid reader who loves realistic fiction more than other genres. She most enjoyed the book club experience because she “really likes listening to other people’s opinions”, and “it felt like a little community”.

**Brian.** Brian, another thriving reader, self-reported that he “really, really loves reading.” He chose to participate because this experience would include something he already loved, but perhaps it would also allow him to improve his reading. His survey results reflected that. His initial survey results showed that he had an average self-concept and a strong value for reading. While his second survey’s value of reading score remained steady, his self-concept increased. As for his reading self-perception, he increased in the areas of observational comparison, social feedback and especially progress. He enjoyed the book club experience because he could have a say in the choice of the books, and he “liked how everyone got to share their opinions”.

**Ethan.** Ethan, a striving reader, reported that he was the type of reader who could get bored easily with books. He preferred texts that engaged him with images, such as graphic novels, or jokes and humor. He explained that he “dislike(s) those really long books that go on forever.” Nevertheless, he chose to participate in this study because he said, “I was interested in how the whole dissertation process works.” Ethan’s initial survey results showed that he had a low self-concept as a reader and a low value of reading. While his value of reading only increased slightly by the end of the study, it still increased from the low to average range. His self-concept score increased significantly, also moving him from the low to high average. In self-perception, he increased in the area of observational comparison. Out of the entire experience, Ethan enjoyed talking with his peers about books the most because it felt like “one big conversation”.

**Lynn.** Lynn, a thriving reader, self-reported that she “reads a lot...and really fast”. An avid reader of fiction, Lynn explained that she makes time for reading in her already busy schedule of activities because reading is so important to her. Lynn chose to participate in this study because it “was just more books. And I thought it would be fun to be part of a book group that actually worked out.” Her initial survey results showed a strong self-concept and a strong value for reading as well. However, unlike most of the other participants in the study, her self-concept raw scores slightly declined from the pre-survey to the post-survey. However, she still remained in the strong self-concept and strong value range. Her reading self-perception declined by one raw score point in progress, social feedback, and observational comparison; however, all areas remained consistent. She explained that the most enjoyable part of participating in this study was “being able to talk to everybody and just see the different point of views and what everybody thought about it.”

**Rose.** Rose, a thriving reader, reported that she reads a “really decent amount” and is an avid reader of fiction. However, she enjoys reading pretty much anything “as long as the writer did a good job”. She also reported that she enjoys when books teach her something in a fun way. Rose chose to participate in the study because she thought “it would be cool to like just go to a group and like talk books”. Rose’s initial survey showed a strong self-concept and a strong value of reading. Both of these measures appeared to have increased between the pre-survey and post-survey, with a four point raw score increase in self-concept in particular. Her self-perception scores showed an increase in the areas of observational comparison and social feedback specifically. She enjoyed that the group “was a bunch of people that knew different stuff”, and that she “learned a bunch of new stuff.”

### ***Group Two Participants' Reading Identities***

**Bob.** Bob, a striving reader, reported that he likes reading because “it takes me on adventures around the whole world”. A reader who constantly has two or more books piled on his desk at school, Bob loves action books that keep him on the edge of his seat. When asked, Bob replied that he chose to participate in the study simply because he likes reading. Bob’s reading surveys showed that he had a strong self-concept and a strong value of reading. While Bob’s self-concept and value scores remained consistently strong on both his surveys, the self-perception survey showed a marked increase in the areas of progress, social feedback and observational comparison. He enjoyed the fact that everyone in the group had a chance to participate, and he especially liked “to see how other people thought about the book”.

**Cara.** Cara, a striving reader, reported that she really does not consider herself a reader. She said, “I have not really been a fan of reading, like much at all.” Despite her feelings about reading, she chose to participate in the study because she expressed feeling an initial connection to me. In addition, she explained that she wanted to get “more reading time out of it and become a better reader.” Her initial survey results showed she had the second lowest raw score of the ten participants in both self-concept and value of reading. Her score for self-concept was in the low range and her value was in the low average range. Her post-survey results revealed improvements. Her self-concept improved to the average range and her value to the high average range. Interestingly, her self-perception increased in the areas of progress, observational comparison, and social feedback. In reflecting on the book club experience, Cara explained that she “really liked the books and the discussions about it and to hear how excited other people were.”

**Jeff.** Jeff, a thriving reader, reported that he loves to read anything except nonfiction books. He explained that the books he likes best, like science fiction books, are action packed and have creative characters. He makes a point to listen to an audio book for at least thirty minutes every night. Jeff chose to participate in the study because his parents encouraged him to join. While he was glad to assent, and remained in the study for the duration, it was their initial idea. Jeff's initial surveys reported an average self-concept towards reading and a strong value of reading. While his pre-survey and post-survey scores were identical on the self-concept and value survey, his results on the self-perception scale revealed a notable decline in observational comparison, but a marked increase in progress. By the end of the study, he reported that he was glad he participated. "I liked being in a small group instead of a class . . . it just felt cozier being in a small group. And in my opinion, is more fun."

**Mackenzie.** Mackenzie, a striving reader, reported that she enjoys reading but finds it challenging at times. In fact, she explained that she chose to join the book club, not for the books, but because she thought it would be "fun to get to know people". Her initial survey scores reflected an average self-concept and value of reading; however, she expressed frustration with not being able to keep up with the pace of some of her fellow readers over the course of the three months. By the end of the study, her post-survey showed improvements to strong self-concept and strong value. Her post-survey scores in self-perception also showed a significant increase across all four aspects. She especially demonstrated improvement in the areas of progress, observational comparison, and social feedback. Mackenzie reported that the book club experience "made me feel more confident that I can actually read a book". This reserved young lady also said that "I got to know people, and I talked more".

**Mustafa.** Mustafa, a thriving reader, reported she loves to read. She stressed enjoying fantasy, magic, and mystery books and especially books with plot twists or stories that are completely unrealistic. Mustafa chose to be in the study because she loves that reading “takes me to a different world where I don’t exist”. Her survey results reflected a strong sense of self-concept and value of reading. Her self-perception results were relatively consistent across all areas as well, with one decline in observational comparison. Mustafa enjoyed participating in the book club because she felt the smaller group size gave her more of a chance to be heard than she typically gets in the regular classroom setting. “I liked being in the group...you get more time to speak individually because there are less people in a group.”

## **Findings**

Engagement in student-led book clubs was a powerful experience. Students benefitted from the opportunity to lead the discussion, choose their own book, and respond in the ways of their own choosing. In addition, by being both a researcher and a participant, I was able to participate in the book club experience as well. The valuable experiences of the ten participants were captured in surveys, interviews, and observations. The students’ insights and perspectives made it possible to examine an abstract construct in a real-world context. This context, these participants, and I all played a role in developing the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers in a student-led book club experience. Analysis of data collected from these book clubs revealed several important findings.

***The relational engagement of these sixth-grade readers increased when they found the reading to be relevant and meaningful to their own individual experiences.***

Data analysis revealed relational engagement with text increased for all ten participants when they perceived the book was interesting or relatable. Specifically, the participants

identified reading experiences as meaningful if they were relevant to their own experiences. Both interest and relevance are important aspects of relational engagement.

**Interesting.** All participants reported feeling more engaged with a text when they found the book to be more interesting. One particular participant highlighted the importance of humor and interest for readers. Ethan, a self-reported reluctant reader, who admitted to often avoiding reading whenever possible said, “If I have spare time on my hands, I am not spending it reading, so when I do read, I need to be really interested or find the book funny.” For him, the historical novel *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) was harder to read because it was not as interesting. Instead, the texts *Cyclone* (Cronin, 2018) and *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) interested him more. Ethan’s interest in these two titles increased his reading engagement and motivated him to read all the selected pages on time. When asked why, he explained how *Cyclone* (Cronin, 2018) captured his interest at the beginning because of the roller coaster, but then he lost interest as the book shifted to more relationship drama. However, as that was the last book of the study, he decided to stick with it for the pizza. When asked why *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) was interesting, Ethan explained it was because he had never read a book where the main character dies at the beginning and is a ghost for the rest of the story. Ethan also pointed out scenes he had found humorous such as startling the girl who can see his ghost and the toy gun in the bathroom scene. For reluctant readers in particular, if books do not hook their interest, they will not relationally engage.

An interesting plotline, or an interesting character, can spark an interest and therefore foster the student-text transactional relationship which increases relational engagement. When asked what made a book interesting, many responded that page-turning, action-packed scenes always sparked their interest. These readers wanted books that would keep them on the edge of

their seats. Bob said that reading “takes me on adventures around the whole world.” For instance, during one book group session, he explained how *24 Hours in Nowhere* (Bowling, 2018) transported him to the cave in the Arizona desert while *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) made him feel like he was trapped in the ghetto trying to escape through underground tunnels.

Books are also interesting when they serve as an escape from reality. Most of the participants identified a book as interesting when it brought the reader to new places and asked the reader to use imagination. Mustafa said magic and fantasy books were her favorites because they were completely unrealistic. She liked the adventure and unlimited possibility of the fantasy world. Similarly, Rose explained:

I think that reading can take you to different places and can like take you around the world. And the best part about it is your imagination. So even if you’re not physically in ancient Egypt, your mind can take you there and something. And while you’re learning about these different things, you’re having fun, like reading about it and imagining your own characters. And if it’s fantasy, then you imagined the worlds of your own imagination.

She went on to clarify why the escape books provide was so meaningful. “If I have a problem, it [a book] takes me to a different world where I don’t exist.” For early adolescent readers, life can often be challenging. For Mustafa, books were a haven, a safe space where she created relationships with characters and shared in their adventures. She found this helpful at times when struggling with real-life friendship challenges. In this sense, the reader-text relationship can be a coping mechanism and another means to spark relational engagement.

Other times interesting texts increased reader understanding of their own world. Eight of the ten participants responded they were more engaged with texts when they felt like the text had

something to teach them. In each of the book club meetings, participants asked clarifying questions or described efferent responses to the literature. For example, group one had many efferent responses to *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018). Their conversations included many clarifying questions and conversations regarding gun laws, urban versus suburban differences, and police shootings. All five group one participants asked questions about Emmett Till. As Ethan admitted, he engaged more with books he could “interact with”. He wanted a book to be “sorta like a puzzle”; one he could “learn something from”. By the end of this book, all five voiced that this text had something to teach them.

For some participants, the introductory information that these texts taught them inspired them to do further research. For instance, group two had many efferent responses to *Resistance* (Nielson, 2018) and wanted to know more about ghetto life in Warsaw, Poland. Bob in particular asked many detail-oriented questions that led fellow group members to doing a little research during the discussion. Mackenzie said she even went home and did some additional research. Since she was reading and discussing the book at home with her mom, whenever they came across a person, event, or place they were curious about, they would look it up together. Similarly, Rose, from group one, explained how the book *Cyclone* (Cronin, 2018) taught her a little about strokes, but it then prompted her to do some research on her own to learn more. This was also true for Amy, who explained, “I kind of like learning about sicknesses and stuff. . . . I’ll read more when it’s a topic which I’m kind of interested in.” For these readers, engagement with the text propelled them to read further.

Other participants reported increased engagement when the text they were reading offered a new insight or an interesting perspective. Brian often would read a magazine or newspaper when there was a story or topic that he wanted to learn more about. Lynn reported



interest in books which gave her a different look at a topic with which she was already familiar. For instance, she thought *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) was engaging because it gave a new perspective on the Holocaust, voicing the viewpoint of the Jews who were in the Resistance movement. Rose agreed on this point too when she reflected on what engaged her so much with the text *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018). Rose's evaluation of the characters was that they were ok, but the storyline appealed to her most. While she felt safe in her own community, she knew there were kids out there in the world who did not feel safe. She felt this book was relevant for the time society was in, and that the new perspective made the book more engaging for her. While texts' intriguing plots were important to the participants, these sixth-grade readers also appreciated seeing points of view different from their own. Humor, adventure, escape, information, and insight all proved to be important aspects of reading interest that supported the relational engagement of these sixth-grade readers.

**Relatable.** These readers also wanted books with strong characters and story lines that they could relate to on a personal level. These reading mirrors certainly were a factor in their engagement. For most, this was often a connection back to their own personal experiences, but at times it was also a connection to another text, a film, or something from their background knowledge. When these students related to texts while reading, the aesthetic responses of their transactional reading increased which also improved their relational engagement.

**Relating One Text to Another.** During the book club conversations, participants often related the book club text to one they read previously. In particular, these sixth-grade readers often made connections between characters. For instance, during the reading of *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018), Cara connected the protagonist, Chaya, to her absolute favorite fictional character, Katniss Everdeen. During a book club meeting, she spoke about how both characters

were strong females who were not afraid to stand up for their beliefs. These were the type of characters that kept her wanting to read more. For Bob, Chaya reminded him of his favorite protagonist Teddy from a zoo mystery series. He described Teddy for the group as determined and passionate about protecting the innocent animals from harm. He admired both Teddy and Chaya for their dedication and courage. These character connections across texts increased engagement because readers recognized personality traits in the new protagonist which they loved about another.

Other participants connected the settings of the texts. For Mustafa the strongest connections were to books set during time periods similar to those of the book club texts. She explained, “It [*Resistance*] reminds me of *A War that Saved My Life* . . . they both have strong girls who grow even stronger due to their war experiences.” Mustafa’s connection included the character, but more importantly it included the character in historical context. Mackenzie expressed a similar connection between the setting of *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) and one of her favorite texts, *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 2011). When she facilitated her discussion group, she described Copenhagen, Denmark’s experience with Nazi occupation and Resistance fighters in comparison to Warsaw, Poland. Jeff and Brian also both related *Resistance*’s (Nielsen, 2018) setting to another text, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Boyne, 2007). When these readers recognized settings that had captured their interest in previous texts in new texts, they found them more relatable and more engaging.

Group one also made strong connections to other texts when reading both *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) and *Cyclone* (Dorin, 2018). For example, they made connections to the characters in a book being read in ELA class. Other times, those connections went deeper. Brian, who had read other books by Rhodes, often made connections between and among the

various titles by the author. As he explained to the group, “This author often writes about misunderstood people. . . Ghost Boys just gives us new misunderstood characters.” Rhodes’ novel inspired Lynn to make connections as well. In particular, she connected this text to *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017). While she enjoyed *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) because of its discussion of real world issues in society, she remarked that she felt like it “sugar coated” the topic. “I feel like that happens in a lot of heavy topic books, they just don’t go into as much detail for kids.” For these readers, having previously established reading relationships with books and characters similar to the new ones sparked relational engagement with these new characters and texts.

***Relating Texts to the Reader’s Life Experience.*** Relational engagement was most apparent when these sixth-grade readers made connections between their own lives and those of the characters in the book-club texts. Interview data revealed the many ways these readers drew connections between their experiences and those of the characters. Brian explained that he enjoyed and was more engaged with a book “if I was able to relate more to them”, as in the books’ characters. Similar to the friendships they had in real life, the participants expected the relationships they made with characters in the text to be strong as well. As Lynn explained, “I just didn’t like one book because it was the one without enough character development, which meant I felt I couldn’t relate to the characters.” This came through in conversation with Cara as well. Cara identified as a strong female personality; therefore, she reported that she connected most with strong female protagonists. She cited Judy Blume as a favorite author and Katniss Everdeen as a favorite character. When asked about the three books read during the group, she reported that *24 Hours in Nowhere* (Bowling, 2018) was her favorite due to the “strong female characters”. Similarly, Mustafa reported, “I prefer a book that speaks to me. . . . like about

confidence and courage.” These meaningful themes and strong characters resonated so powerfully with these early adolescent readers as they too contemplated topics like confidence and courage in their own lives.

Even the readers who preferred being outdoors or doing something physical emphasized the importance of relating to characters in order to relationally engage with reading. Ethan said if a book “just didn’t fit me, it made me feel like I didn’t want to continue with the book”. He went on to share how reading was not his favorite thing to do, and he often got bored easily reading. Therefore, a book really needed a character he saw himself in to draw him into the text. Bob, an avid but striving reader who often abandoned books when they were “too boring”, also explained the need to connect to the characters. He summarized one he recently enjoyed by saying “Like there’s this boy [Teddy] in this book. One day, he just had a regular life, and he’s like the same as me. And then something tragic happened, and that was different. And then he loved the outdoors too, and I do too.” The personal connection to the character drew him in, the tragic plot twist kept him interested, and the relatability kept him relationally engaged.

Another text was relationally engaging for readers because of the dynamics between characters that they found relatable. *Cyclone* (Dorin, 2018) prompted participants to talk about family dynamics and times when they had felt pressured to do something like the character in the text. For example, at the beginning of the text one character is daring the other to ride on a roller coaster. This scene was especially interesting and relatable for members of group one. They had an extensive conversation about the times when family members or friends dared them to do something they did not want to necessarily do. For some, completing the challenge was a growth experience, for others it was not. Lynn described the time her friend talked her into trying a new move in her gymnastics class. In her case, she ended up glad her friend had put the added

pressure on her to perform. Amy talked about a time when her friends convinced her to watch a scary movie with them. She confessed that movie had given her nightmares, and she wished she had stood up for herself and not watched it. She discussed how that experience helped her understand what the characters in *Cyclone* (Dorin, 2018) were going through both before and after the dare. For these readers, personally connecting their own life experiences to the in-text character dynamics increased relational engagement with these texts.

While some related to the characters directly, others related to the social conflict in which the characters were situated. For group one members, *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) sparked powerfully personal connections around social context and conflict. Lynn, Amy, and Ethan often wondered why a young man like the protagonist would feel the need to bring a gun to school, real or fake. Based on their own experiences, they felt school was a safe place and that seemed unnecessary. Brian, while attempting to put himself in the characters' shoes, understood why the gun scene in the text made both the protagonist and readers wary. He remarked, "Of course he felt threatened, he was holding a gun! Guns make me feel threatened too." In response to the police officer's actions in the text, four of the five group members said he should have made a better choice. In their experience, they argued police are there to protect. This one did just the opposite. On the other hand, Ethan said he understood the policeman's actions. He explained how that job is hard enough and risky enough, and so the police should not be expected to take any additional risks. During this same conversation, Rose offered the legal perspective on the issue. She shared with the group some of her own thinking about gun legislation and cases related to guns based on knowledge she had gained from her family. All five participants were saddened by the text's turn of events, but they viewed the policeman's actions from perspectives

that reflected their own life experiences. Bringing personal life experiences to the reading conversation made it more relationally engaging.

***For these ten students, self-efficacy for reading increased before self-concepts changed.***

Reading self-efficacy is a big piece of the relational engagement puzzle. With the reader-self relationship as a cornerstone of the construct, it is important readers believe they are capable of reading. Therefore, reader self-efficacy needs to be in place before reader identity and strong self-concept can grow. The desire to become a better reader, and to improve self-efficacy, is what brought two of the participants into this study. During the semi-structured interview, when asked why she chose to participate, Cara responded, “to become a better reader”. Participating allowed her to get “more reading time out of it and to become a better reader”. Brian from group one had similar hopes. He chose to participate because he “really loves reading, but it would be good to be able to improve”. Believing that one is growing as a reader, and thereby improving reading self-efficacy, influences a student’s perceived reading ability.

**Progress.** A sense of improvement as a reader contributed to developing a stronger sense of self-efficacy, and that in turn lead to a stronger self-perceived reading progress. Therefore, the *Reader’s Self-Perception Scale 2* (Henk et al., 2012) measured self-perception as a construct consisting of four other factors. A reader’s sense of progress was one of these factors (see Tables 9 and 10). For this measure, a score of 74 or more is high, a score in the 66-73 range is above average, a score in the 60-65 range is average, and a score of 58 or less is low.

**Table 9**

*Group One: RSPS2 Reading Progress Results*

Participant	Reading Progress	
	Pre	Post
Amy	71	77

**Table 9** (continued).

Brian	65	68
Ethan	53	57
Lynn	77	76
Rose	73	69
Mean	67.8	69.4

*Note.* Reading Progress max. score = 80

**Table 10**

*Group Two: RSPS2 Reading Progress Results*

Participant	Reading Progress	
	Pre	Post
Bob	65	72
Cara	61	66
Jeff	65	71
Mackenzie	72	79
Mustafa	64	66
Mean	65.4	70.8

*Note.* Reading Progress max. score = 80

Progress, or the reader's sense of improvement and growth, contributed to an increase in self-efficacy and in turn an increase in self-concept for most of these participants. Their self-efficacy and in turn self-concept were often impacted by their reading focus and pace, generating ideas to share, and feeling comfortable enough to share them. Increased self-efficacy and self-concept impact relational engagement.

**Focus and Pace.** Two additional impacts on these readers' self-efficacy were the ability to focus while reading and the ability to maintain a good reading pace. Both Bob and Ethan relayed reasons why focus plays a part in their reading lives. Bob, who often has two or more books going on at one time, explained how there were times when he could lose interest and

focus in a book. Perhaps the book was lacking in action, maybe the characters were too predictable, whatever his reason, when his focus and interest were lost, Bob often felt like he did not understand what he was reading anymore. Ethan had a similar response regarding his ability to focus. He reported, “I can’t stay interested in the book for more than five minutes”. Once his focus was lost, he would put the book down and go outside or start drawing. Even when his situation was just right by his standards for reading, he would still get bored. He explained that he loved to read curled up with a blanket and one of his many animals, but when he got bored with reading, he would just play with the dog or cat. Ethan also felt his lack of focus often impacted his reading ability. He reported he is not a good reader because he cannot stay interested in any book for very long. For Ethan especially, his frustration with his slower reading pace negatively impacted his self-efficacy and his self-concept.

While only two participants mentioned lack of focus as a challenge, several others spoke about reading pace as an impacting factor. While Cara, Mackenzie, and Ethan reported feeling left behind pace wise during the group, Lynn, Brian, Bob, and Jeff reported wishing the pace had been faster. The challenge in a five person book club was the varied reading paces of the group’s members. Lynn said, “four out of five of us were bookworms so that helped”, at least for group one. Brian also felt like the peers in his group were equal in reading pace. He additionally believed they were “on the same reading level and that helped the group keep on track and not leave others behind.” Despite that though, both Lynn and Brian wished the group’s reading pace had been faster. Lynn explained, “I’m really good at reading, and I read really fast”. She wanted the group to pick up the pace in the hopes of exploring more books together during the three month time period. Brian also reported his personal preference for the group to read at a faster



pace. While reading *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018), group one opted to read about ten pages a night or seventy a week. For Brian, this meant “I just got my pages read on the bus on the first day.”

However, Ethan, their fellow group member felt the slower pace was ideal and seventy pages for a week was manageable. When the group selected longer weekly sections of text for their second and third books, the pages per week increased. While Lynn and Brian enjoyed that shift, Ethan did not. Ethan often missed book club sessions because he had fallen behind in the reading of books two and three. He explained how he felt he should not attend book club without his reading done for a few reasons. One, he felt not being up-to-date on his reading would let the group down. While he felt the weekly page expectations for texts two and three were a bit unreasonable for him, Ethan also did not want to be the reason the rest of the group slowed down. Brian, Lynn, Amy, and Rose were classmates and friends, and Ethan had no desire to hold them back from enjoying the story. Instead, since he knew it was his responsibility to read those 100 pages, and if he had not finished all of them, he felt he should not attend the group meeting.

While his responsibility to his peers was one factor, Ethan also did not want the group to spoil the story for him. At the beginning of a November session, while the rest of the group was gathering, Ethan approached me and told me he had not finished reading and was opting out of the discussion. Although I told him he was welcome to discuss what he had read, he explained, “I can’t. If I stay, it’ll just ruin the story for me.” He was at an exciting part, and he wanted to find out what happened on his own. He knew himself well enough to know that if they spoiled the suspense of the scene, he might never finish reading the book. Ethan reported that it usually took him two years to finish a book, so the initial pace for this project was challenging to begin with, let alone the more accelerated pace. He said, “I tried to set a goal for pages every night but then I’d forget and [have to] read like fifty at once.” Fifty pages at once were frustrating for

Ethan because that would take hours. On the other hand, Brian “enjoyed the faster pace of one hundred pages a week because it was more up to speed with his reading habits”.

Members of group two experienced a similar reading pace discrepancy. Mustafa was usually the reader around whose pace the group determined its weekly goals, as she tended to be the voice of the middle reading pace. Cara and Mackenzie reported often feeling left behind by the reading pace of the others, while Bob and Jeff often asked if the group could read the book a lot faster. Bob and Jeff would have been happy with a book a week, Mustafa with a book every two weeks, and Cara and Mackenzie struggled at times to finish the book-a-month pace initially agreed upon by the group. Mackenzie often pushed herself to reach the group’s goals, but at times came to book club discussion meeting a chapter or two behind. Cara also struggled, and there were several sessions where she had not reached the group’s goal. She even spent one session reading off to the side while the other four discussed the read section. Nevertheless, Cara reported, “[I] felt behind at times, but [I] wanted to stick it out”. In contrast, there were meetings in which Cara, Mackenzie, Mustafa, and I had to remind Jeff and Bob what pages were being discussed because they had read ahead. They had to be reminded not to share details from later in the story and ruin it for the rest of the readers.

For these sixth-grade participants, focus and pace contributed to their reading self-efficacy and their reading identities. Ethan was a prime example of focus, as he believed his distractibility made him a bad reader because it took him so long to finish a book. Cara and Mackenzie considered themselves striving readers because they were focused, but their pace was slower than the peers in their group. When a reader felt unfocused or behind, they often perceived that they were not as good of a reader as those who read faster and remained present

for each turn of the page. These participants demonstrated that a reader's focus and pace could influence self-efficacy and in turn self-concept.

**Ideas.** While focus and pace clearly impacted the participants' self-efficacy, when it was stronger, it led to improved self-concept. Improved self-concept led to a stronger belief in the students' own interpretations and ideas. When these readers felt more confident in what they had read, they felt more confident in what they had to say about what they had read. In other words, their increased self-efficacy improved their reading self-concept as well.

The self-efficacy which developed during these group meetings was their ability to believe in the quality of their own ideas. This belief then empowered them to share their reading ideas with their book club group. Bob, who reported that he typically read the selected passages quickly, did not use his reader's journal one and was often unsure about what to say during the group discussion aside from clarifying questions. During the first half of the study, he would mainly ask things like, "What's a ghetto?" or "What's a savant?" His initial contributions sought answers to factual, black-and-white questions. However, the day he was the group's facilitator was different. That day, he had ideas to share. Bob began the conversation by asking his peers to share their thoughts on a scene in *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) that had fascinated him. He wanted to know what they thought and felt about Chaya spending the night in an abandoned Nazi tank. While he did include his tradition what-is-a type questions, he also successfully contributed deeper, more insightful ideas that fostered the conversation with his fellow book club members. During his semi-structured interview in December, he noted feeling like his ability to participate appropriately in a book club was improved. That self-efficacy, and feeling like he had ideas to share, also improved his self-concept as a reader.

For other participants, it was less about sharing their own ideas and more about what they learned from listening to fellow group members that impacted their self-efficacy and self-concept. In group two, Cara reported, “I understood the book more after talking about it” because she could hear others’ ideas. While she often came to the book club session pages behind, she always came with thoughts to share. For instance, during a group discussion of a selection from *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018), Cara entered the group disgruntled about the text. One reason was that she had not finished all the agreed upon pages, but the other was that she was feeling lost in the text. She explained the scene in the ghetto was too slow and too confusing. She wanted the author to move the book along faster. However, after discussing those chapters with Bob, Jeff, Mackenzie, and Mustafa, the group came to a consensus that those chapters had to be slower. Nielsen was focusing on character development, suspense building, and contextual information for the motivations of Chaya and her friends. Cara left that session eager to read on now that her peers’ insights had given her a better understanding of what was happening. In her interview, Cara expressed feeling like her ideas and her understandings were strengthened by her conversations with the group.

Group one also discovered the powerful way group conversation can grow ideas. During the group’s reading of *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018), Amy initially was reading and reacting to the story at the literal, surface level. Then after the first book club conversation about the book, she started to look for the deeper meaning in the text. She explained the surface story included a boy who was killed and now was a ghost trying to help his family find peace and get justice. Yet after conversations with Lynn, Brian, Ethan, and Rose, Amy started to see the deeper meanings and the social commentary behind the story. She explained, “I don’t always see all the things as easily . . . but when I hear what they say I’m like, oh yeah, that could be it.” For Brian, it was

about learning to listen. He confessed, at first “I really wanted to get my ideas out . . . in the end I started listening a little bit more.” Brian found his own ideas grew when he stopped focusing on what it was he wanted to share, and started actively listening to his peers. Growing ideas through group conversation helped these participants feel more confident about their understanding of the texts. Belief in the value of their ideas was a result of an increase in reading self-efficacy. The increase self-efficacy then provided these readers with the confidence to voice their own opinions more. Therefore, for these readers, increasing self-efficacy contributed to the strengthening of reader self-concept.

**Contributions.** When these readers’ understanding and ideas grew, they became more confident in their ability to contribute to the book group, more confident in what they had to say, and developed a stronger self-concept as readers with a valued perspective worth voicing. For Ethan, it was during his group’s sessions about Rhodes’ (2018) *Ghost Boys* where this occurred most. He explained his “comfort in group was dependent on his interest in the book”. For him, this book was his favorite of the three, and the only one he read in its entirety on time. He was even group facilitator once for this book. Ethan identified his increased interest level as the reason he had more to say as well as the confidence to voice his opinion during discussion.

For Amy, the book that helped her to participate more was Nielsen’s (2018) *Resistance*. While Rhodes’ book gave her more to think about, she said there was just something about Nielsen’s book that gave her more to talk about. Perhaps because it was the second book for her group, she reported feeling more comfortable in the group meetings by this point. However, she also explained how listening to others’ ideas during the first book inspired her to have more to contribute to the conversation for this second book. She said using her reader’s journal more for this book also gave her more confidence in what she had to say. Amy expressed enthusiastically

how she had even started to see examples of theme and symbolism in this second book without Brian's prompting or influence. Writing down more thoughts and noticing new aspects of the texts while reading made Amy more enthusiastic to share her thoughts and voice her opinions on this text. Her belief in the validity of her ideas improved her reading self-concept.

For Mustafa, it was not the book, but rather the group dynamic that helped her find her voice in this process. She discussed how in a larger classroom setting, one of twenty or more students, she often felt like she never got called on and never had a chance to share her ideas. Other times, that same large group of students in class could make her feel less confident about the ideas she wanted to share. In contrast, this small reading group felt safer. Mustafa reflected, "I spoke better and more openly, like not in class where I have to share my opinion in front of so many people...it encouraged me to talk about the book and it got me like used to talking about a book. In class I don't really know what to say, but now I kind of have an idea." Increasing the participants' self-efficacy about generating ideas worth voicing in group resulted in the confidence to contribute. As a result of this contribution self-efficacy, their self-concepts as readers and group members grew.

**Confidence and Identity.** The relationship between reading self-efficacy and reading self-concept is logical. When readers feel more confident in their ability, then they will naturally feel a stronger sense of reading self-concept. Self-efficacy plants the seeds that allow reading confidence and reading identity to grow. The participants in this study demonstrated this connection as well. Six out of ten participants increased their *Reader Self-Perception Scale 2* (Henk et al., 2012) scores in the area of reading confidence in comparison to their peers. Seven out of ten participants increased their *Motivation to Read Profile Revised* (Malloy et al., 2013) scores in self-concept between the administration of the September pre-survey and the December

post-survey (see Tables 11 and 12). For the RSPS2, a score of 39 or more is high, a score in the 34-38 range is above average, a score in the 28-33 range is average, and a score of 27 or less is low. For the MRP revised, a score in the 32-40 range is strong, a score in the 25-31 range is average, and a score of 24 or less is low. For these participants, the social, peer interaction fostered a sense of self-efficacy that developed stronger self-concept.

**Table 11**

*Group One: RSPS2 Observational Comparison and MRP Self-Concept Results*

Participant	RSPS2 Obs. Comparison		MRP Self-Concept	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Amy	31	38	30	33
Brian	27	28	29	31
Ethan	13	25	14	29
Lynn	34	33	36	33
Rose	38	38	33	37
Mean	28.6	32.4	28.4	32.6

*Note.* RSPS2 Observational Comparison max. score = 45; MRP Self-concept max. score = 40

**Table 12**

*Group Two: RSPS2 Observational Comparison and MRP Self-Concept Results*

Participant	RSPS2 Obs. Comparison		MRP Self-Concept	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Bob	29	34	34	33
Cara	29	31	24	27
Jeff	26	22	26	26
Mackenzie	27	40	30	33
Mustafa	32	28	33	34
Mean	28.6	31	29.4	30.6

*Note.* RSPS2 Observational Comparison max. score = 45; MRP Self-concept max. score = 40

**Self-concept.** For these ten participants, participating in this choice-based, student-led book group impacted their reading identities. At the beginning of the study, survey data revealed most participants had a strong sense of self-concept from the start. To add to the stories the numbers began to tell, observational and interview data made clear why most of the ten participants enjoyed reading. They were good at it. Yet their experiences in these student-led book clubs fostered it even further. Through their book club interactions, eight out of ten participants expressed an increased feeling of reading progress and confidence. This increased self-efficacy was also reflected in the increased self-perception of eight of the ten participants. Finally, for seven of the ten participants they expressed an increase in self-concept (see Tables 13 and 14). For these readers, self-efficacy improved and then fostered increased self-concept.

**Table 13**

*Group One Comparison: RSPS2 Reading Progress, RSPS2 Full Self-Perception, and MRP Self-Concept Results*

Participant	RSPS2		RSPS2		MRP	
	Reading Progress		Full Self-Perception		Self-Concept	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Amy	71	77	186	211	30	33
Brian	65	68	173	178	29	31
Ethan	53	57	110	139	14	29
Lynn	73	69	200	200	36	33
Rose	77	76	203	209	33	37
Mean	67.8	69.4	174.4	187.4	28.4	32.6

*Note.* RSPS2 Reading Progress max. score = 80; RSPS2 Full Survey max. score = 230; MRP Self-concept max. score = 40.



**Table 14**

*Group Two Comparison: RSPS2 Reading Progress, RSPS2 Full Self-Perception, and MRP Self-Concept Results*

Participant	RSPS2		RSPS2		MRP	
	Progress		Full Self-Perception		Self-Concept	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Bob	65	72	178	197	34	33
Cara	61	66	165	175	24	27
Jeff	65	71	172	177	26	26
Mackenzie	72	79	181	219	30	33
Mustafa	64	66	187	185	33	34
Mean	65.4	70.8	176.6	190.6	29.4	30.6

*Note.* RSPS2 Reading Progress max. score = 80; RSPS2 Full Survey max. score = 230; MRP Self-concept max. score = 40.

These numbers paint a picture, but the participants tell the story. The impact progress, self-efficacy, and self-perception have on self-concept is significant. Even these sixth-grade readers agree. As Cara explained in her interview, this book club experience significantly impacted her as a reader. She became more comfortable, more confident, and she “got to know how interesting books are”. Mackenzie said this book group impacted her as a reader because “it made me feel more confident that I can actually read a book...it felt good like I could read faster and read more books.” It appeared that strengthening the reading self-efficacy of these participants fostered the growth of their reading self-concept as well.

***For these sixth-grade participants, increasing the level of autonomy that they felt in their reading classroom increased their level of participation.***

Relatable text and reader self-concept are both crucial ingredients needed to support relational engagement in the reading classroom. However, increasing student autonomy in the

classroom also fosters relational engagement. Early adolescent students in particular crave independence and choice. When these elements are included, with additional opportunities for student autonomy within their learning environment, middle-school readers' participation improves as well.

**Book Selection.** In this study, these sixth-grade English Language Arts students voiced the need for autonomy and choice beginning with text selection. Choice of texts was revealed as critical to their relational engagement in reading. As Ethan said, when he is given the choice to be in his comfortable environment with a book or with his sketchbook, he admitted he would much rather draw. However, if he was reading, he found it much easier to engage with the book when "I'm able to choose one". Ethan even provided some suggestions for how to improve the student book-choice process both for guided reading groups and choice book groups. From his perspective, students should always start with at least five books to choose from. For an instructional text, or a guided-group text, the students should still start with five choices, but then students should select three which they rank first, second, and third. Since this would be for an instructional text, the teacher could then choose which book of those three, preferably the first or second choice, the student would be reading. In a more independent book-group setting, or literature circle, he also suggested sharing five books with the group to start. The group could then narrow it to three, then two, and then one final round of voting would be conducted to choose the group's selection for the next round of discussion. He felt strongly that one vote, and only one vote, left some people in the minority, and meant there was not actually as much choice for every participant. Ethan was adamant that book choice was crucial to engaging the students who would rather be outside or drawing. Having a say in what he read was critical to his actually

reading it. For Ethan, book selection autonomy was essential to improved class participation and increased reading engagement.

The other nine participants all agreed that they also enjoyed these three book-club texts more than other books they had read in school because they were able to have a voice in the selection process. For both groups, before any texts were selected, book talks were given. The titles used for the book talks were based on interest input participants had offered in the first place. Participants then got the opportunity to vote and rank the five titles in order of most want-to-read to least want-to-read. They knew the books eventually chosen were selected because they had received the most interest from the five group members. When asked, some participants felt disappointed when the book they particularly wanted to read was not chosen, but both groups knew that the books selected always had at least some interest from all five group members. Participants reported feeling enthusiasm for getting each new book because they had had a say in the process. The day the book *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) was distributed, Rose literally jumped up and down and hugged it to her saying, “This is the book I wanted.” The energy spread to the rest of the group and most reported this was a favorite. Autonomy in book selection was especially vital for engaging early adolescent readers.

**Conversation.** No one disputes that adolescence can be a challenge, and most agree that adolescence is a time where students often feel like they do not get to have a say. So many aspects of their lives are controlled and decided for them, yet it is the time when their adolescent development has them craving choice and independence. It is also a time when reading instruction shifts from less self-selected texts to more whole-class reads of traditional, canonical works. Reading as a class for the correct interpretation increases while independent reading for enjoyment often falls by the wayside. As these shifts occur, student reading engagement begins

to decrease. In order to turn the tide and see reading engagement on the rise, the participants in this study called for self-selected texts, peer-to-peer reading interactions, and student-facilitated conversation. These ten sixth-graders noted the marked difference student-facilitated conversations had on their reading engagement.

***Distractibility.*** In addition to book selection, these ten sixth-grade readers expressed how their relational engagement with the text, with their peers, and with their teacher increased due to autonomy in the book group conversation. At times, this meant honoring the value and autonomy of the group even when the conversation drifted off-topic. All ten participants reported getting off-track was a challenge of the group being student-led, and some even reported off-topic conversations was the part of the book group they did not enjoy. Yet others explained how the opportunity to get off-track just made the group feel like it was even more student-led rather than teacher-led.

Even when conversations drafted off-track, the participants connected their off-track topics and digressions to characters' experiences. Their stories of riding rollercoasters at Six Flag and grandparents who had had strokes were connected to *Cyclone* (Cronin, 2018). Their conversations about lightning and summer storms were related to *The Miscalculations of Lightning Girl* (McAnulty, 2018). More importantly, those conversations connected them to each other as readers. That being said, participants reported off-topic conversation threads were part of the learning process for them. While they were learning how to engage with one another in the book group without a teacher's constant direction, they also had to learn how to hold one another accountable. Observational notes from the twelve weeks of discussion groups showed many a time when students would say to one another, "We should get back on track" or "Can we please get back on track?" Ethan explained he appreciated the freedom of the group's conversation.

“You sort of let us speak and speak our minds . . . and so even by letting us drift off topic, we were able to learn how to get back on track after we drifted off.” This freedom to veer from topic to topic, and to digress to other areas of related-interest, resulted in a more engaging and meaningful conversation for these early adolescent readers. More meaningful conversations, even if not always focused, meant more engaged readers and more peer-based relational engagement.

***Authenticity.*** In addition to enjoying the freedom to choose conversation topics, the participants in this study reported they appreciated and valued the student-led nature of the group as they felt it gave them a stronger voice in the conversations. Ethan explained, “We got to choose our conversation – the teacher wasn’t asking the questions – the students got to talk about whatever they felt like.” Jeff also reported the conversation felt just like “a normal conversation we would have at recess or lunch.” Mackenzie agreed, “Most of the time we could just talk . . . most of it felt like just kids.” With the autonomy to drive the conversation, participants agreed it felt more like an authentic conversation than a teacher-led book discussion. This authenticity fostered their engagement as well.

As their engagement increased, the authentic, student-led conversations blossomed. With the participants at the wheel, I was able to take a backseat role in the conversation. When interviewed later, all ten participants agreed the book club was more fun and engaging because they were in charge of it, and I was simply another reader and participant. In addition, although I was a fellow reader and book-club member, I often only contributed to the conversation when lulls appeared as I did not want to take any talk time from the participants. Maintaining student authenticity in these conversations meant contributing little to nothing at times.

With the teacher handing the decision-making to the students in regards to the facilitating of this book club environment, students were able to be autonomous in their choices around participation. This looked different for different participants. For Amy, that allowed her the freedom to doodle her ideas during the discussion which she said she sometimes liked to do to help her understand the characters better. For Rose, it was about asking the why or how type questions that would spark deeper conversation with her group members. For Brian, autonomy meant identifying symbolism in each week's selection. For Lynn, it was more about being a quiet, reflective observer, and then jumping in feet-first when she had something pressing to add to or extend the thinking of her peers.

Still for others it was about keeping the conversation geared to the interests of the participants. By steering their own conversation, they were able to engage with the aspects of the texts they found most interesting and relevant. As Ethan explained,

So I really liked that fact that the teacher wouldn't be like, 'Oh this is, or so what did you think about this particular spot? What do you like about that? And oh, let's stay away from that because that didn't have anything interesting in it. Instead it was sort of like that the students got to talk about whatever they felt like that was related to the book.

Jeff also agreed his group clearly felt student-led. He said, "You let us do our conversation and only put in if we got like really off track . . . but when you did, you didn't tell us we're off track the whole time." Jeff felt the freedom of student-led conversation encouraged him and his group members to contribute ideas, even if they were only distantly connected to the text. Participants felt it was more like a regular conversation because they did not feel the pressure of everything said being academic and directly from the text. Within that authentic environment, they felt safer sharing and more interested in participating.

With their participation increasing, participants reported feeling more peer-to-peer engagement. Lynn expressed an appreciation for how the autonomous-flow of the group's conversations helped her and her fellow group members to engage and connect with one another better. As she explained, "We were free to go off on a tangent if a part of the book conversation reminded someone of something else." As teacher-researcher, my role was more of a participant-observer and not the driving teacher-force of the conversation. Of course that was the intent, yet allowing students the sense of autonomy over the book group meant students engaged with topics that sparked meaning for them. Rose even said, "Maybe twice you contributed a question, but other than that it was just all us, just communicating about what we thought about the book." In order to relationally engage these readers with one another around the text, the conversation had to have an authentic feel for them. With this authenticity and autonomy, participants developed a stronger sense of responsibility to the group, and that in turn increased their relational engagement with both texts and peers.

**Responsibility.** Another benefit of the autonomous, student-led conversation was how students demonstrated increased relational engagement due to the responsibility they felt towards their peers in the group. Having a rotation of student facilitators increased student engagement during this process. As Ethan admitted, "the role of facilitator kept me reading." Others liked being a facilitator because they enjoyed having more control over the group. For instance, Bob said he liked facilitating because he could "control the conversation" and "ask my own questions". Cara enjoyed facilitating because she could "let people have a turn and control the talking". Importantly, student facilitators would re-engage an off-task group member, and they felt the responsibility to engage their more reserved book club members. According to Rose,

rotating the role of group facilitator “gave the people who are a little less outgoing a little more chance for leadership.”

Data revealed that taking on responsibility for the group inspired facilitators to encourage quieter members to respond with their own perspectives. When Ethan was group one’s facilitator, he often asked Amy what she thought because she did not always volunteer her own ideas as enthusiastically. Jeff did the same thing in group two with Mackenzie. Mustafa summarized the responsibility the entire group had for ensuring a good conversation. “We were all able to build up the meeting, like we could take turns doing that, and it was not the teacher telling us to do this and this and this.” An increased sense of autonomy in these groups increased the participants’ sense of responsibility for their groups and their peer-to-peer relational engagement.

***Voice.*** Not only did autonomous conversations impact student-to-peer relational engagement, it also impacted student-to-self relational engagement. Participants reported feeling empowered to speak up and find their voice because of the student-led structure of the book club. However, for both groups this was a process. First, participants had to build rapport with one another in order for this to happen. According to Amy, “It was hard at times for the group to take turns. Sometimes one person was like just vomiting all the words.” Nevertheless, improving self-concepts’ and increasing relational engagement allowed conversations to become more balanced. Ethan noted, “The group had to find a balance. The people that like to share, I think mostly got a chance to share,” and then those not volunteering were often asked for their thoughts after. Mustafa felt like her group created a nice balance, and every group member “got more time to speak individually”. Perhaps Brian captured the impact of the autonomous conversation when he said, “I liked being about to talk about my ideas and not keep them in here [head].” Participating



made him feel “like I had a big enough voice of my own.” The feeling of having a voice increased the relational engagement of these participants due to the autonomous structure of this book club experience.

***Relationships with peers were essential to the relational engagement of these sixth graders.***

It is not possible to discuss the book club experience of ten sixth-graders without reflecting on their relationships with one another. This entire experience would not have been possible without the peer-to-peer connections that occurred. For a few participants, this peer-based experience was enriched through newly developed connections. However, for most of them, it was more about a shift in relational connections that already existed. No matter what, prior history between the participants aside, all ten reflected on the power of learning from one another throughout the process.

**Initial Peer Relationships.** The start of the study provided some insightful observations of the initial peer relationships among the group members. Nine of the ten participants had been in school with one another for at least two years, though not necessarily in the same class. Although they had some familiarity with one another, the book club experience was still a little new and uncomfortable in the beginning. They all reported that the initial meeting of ten participants for survey administration and book selection was awkward, but once they were broken into two groups of five, they felt more comfortable with the smaller group size. As Ethan said, “It was awkward at first, but since I knew the four in my group, I was more comfortable, but I was pretty uncomfortable to start.” Jeff also felt a bit uncomfortable initially, but he was also interested to get to know his group better. “In the beginning I was kind of like, new people! I mean, I knew them, but none of them were in my class last year, so it was like new people. So I was kind of getting to know them” in the beginning.

While nine of the ten participants had some level of social interaction with one another prior to the study, one participant was completely new to the school. Her initial interactions were unique to the others. For Cara, it was her first year at this school, and it was her first time getting to know these classmates outside of the traditional classroom dynamic. She reported enjoying the book club experience mainly because “I got to know people a lot more, especially because I am new this year.” However, she also expressed feeling uncomfortable in the beginning because she did not have history with these peers the way the other nine did. Cara shared being interested in the study initially because of feeling comfortable with me, not her peers. Since it was a teacher-student connection that brought her to the group, and the group was being student-led, Cara’s initial social discomfort with these peer-to-peer interactions impacted her engagement with the group early on. This would not last long though.

Despite the awkwardness of the new group dynamic, several participants remarked on the comfort of having some experience with their group members. While they may not have been great friends, they were not strangers. This beginning-level familiarity benefitted the initial group dynamics. This was particularly true in group one. For instance, Amy explained she and Lynn were already friendly, and since they kind of knew each other, Amy “felt comfortable with her [Lynn] in the group”. Having at least one peer she felt safe talking in front of helped her to participate in the beginning, even if reservedly. Brian reported knowing Ethan and Rose from third grade, but not knowing Lynn and Amy as well. Having prior classroom experiences with Ethan and Rose made Brian feel like he “already knew their ideas and opinions . . . but also at times I had more insight what they were trying to say.” Especially for his friend Ethan, Brian felt he could help Ethan clearly explain to the group what he wanted to share. Ethan agreed, “I was friends with Lynn and Brian for a while, so I was already comfortable with them. So, I was more

open in book club.” Lynn also admitted feeling comfortable with two group members right from the start. Rose also explained, “[We] already knew each other’s personalities, so we interacted well together”. All five members of group one reported feeling comfortable with at least one other member of their group from the start. This peer-to-peer comfort level enabled them to relationally engage with one another almost immediately.

The story was a little different in group two. While these two smaller groups were made based on book selection, it turned out that all five members of group one were from the same sixth-grade homeroom while group two had four members of one homeroom and one from the third. The somewhat familiar dynamic present in group one from the start was absent from group two. As previously noted, Cara was new to the school, Jeff felt like his fellow group members were new people because he had not been in class with them before, Mackenzie felt unfamiliar with her fellow group members as they were not part of her usual friend circle, Mustafa was in a group with no one else from her sixth-grade homeroom, and Bob expressed initial awkward feelings of unfamiliarity as well. While this lack of initial comfort in group two’s peer-to-peer interactions impeded strong relational engagement in September, it seemed to result in more enthusiasm when connections with one another were established through their time together. Nevertheless, all ten participants felt comfortable with their group members by the end of the process. This comfort level allowed participants to increase their relational engagement with one another around the texts they were reading and discussing.

**Shifting Peer Relationships.** The participants’ self-perception via peer social feedback was noted both at the beginning and end of the study via a subsection of a survey tool. One of the aspects of self-perception measured by the *Reader Self-Perception Scale 2* (Henk et al., 2012) is social feedback. Henk and colleagues (2012) broke social feedback down into family, teacher,

and peer feedback. For this measure, a score of 12 or more is high, a score of 10 or 11 is above average, a score of 8 or 9 is average, and a score of 7 or less is low. The maximum score was 15. At the start of the study, participants' self-perception via peer feedback scores included three in the average range, six in the above average range, and one in the high range. By the end of the study, participants' self-perception via peer feedback included two in the average range, six in the above average range, and two in the high range (see Tables 15 and 16).

**Table 15**

*Group One: RSPS2 Peer Social Feedback Results*

Participant	RSPS2 Peer Social Feedback	
	Pre	Post
Amy	11	11
Brian	10	10
Ethan	9	10
Lynn	12	10
Rose	11	13
Mean	10.6	10.8

**Table 16**

*Group Two: RSPS2 Peer Social Feedback Results*

Participant	RSPS2 Peer Social Feedback	
	Pre	Post
Bob	10	11
Cara	9	9
Jeff	9	8
Mackenzie	11	12
Mustafa	11	11
Mean	10	10.2

However, the numbers only begin to tell the story. No matter where the relationships started in September, by December both groups reported shifting dynamics in their relational engagement with their peers. For a few members that shift meant feeling more comfortable taking risks and sharing ideas in their group. For instance, while Cara admitted being new made it more uncomfortable for her to participate in the beginning, she also said, “I was more comfortable at the end because I got know people better”. While Cara contributed very little to the first few book club sessions, sharing two or three things at most during the group’s twenty-five minutes together, by the end of the three months together, she had a prominent voice in the group’s conversation. Amy also said being in the group was awkward at first, but “as I got more comfortable, I found I had more to say”. Mackenzie similarly explained, “I was a little shy at first. Then I got to know people, and I talked more.” Jeff also noted the shift in Mackenzie in his interview. He explained, “In the beginning, Mackenzie, she was kind of just like sitting there. And just listening to the group, but towards the end, she started contributing like, a lot more, at least two or three times more.” Increasing their comfort level in their groups also increased their relational engagement with their peers.

The shift in peer dynamics not only increased the participation levels of some participants, it also improved the quality of the conversation. As Lynn said, “At first I wasn’t sure whether I was going to talk as much, but towards the end, then it was definitely a lot more comfortable, and I just kind of got into the conversation.” While Lynn had admitted to feeling close to Amy before the start of the meetings, by the end she reported she “talked more now with everybody in the group.” Rose had a similar experience as she noted, “By the third meeting, nobody was holding back, and it was great. We could say what we think it was really cool.” The conversation improved because participants felt comfortable and safe relationally engaging with

one another. As Mustafa noted, “I felt safe to have my opinion because other people had different opinions than what the rest of the group had.” She gave examples of when Jeff or Cara shared something that encouraged her to look closer at that part of the text, shift her thinking, and then add on to the conversation. The shift and improvement of participants’ comfort level in the book groups resulted in an increase in relationally engaged readers.

**Learning about Themselves.** These relationally engaged participants ended up learning quite a bit from one another as well. In addition to reading three new books which helped them discover new authors they liked, they also learned about themselves as book group members, themselves as friends, and themselves as readers. These discoveries came from the interactions within the groups with their peers and the relational engagement they experienced during their meetings together.

When participants walked away with from this experience, they demonstrated an increased self-concept, they had read and enjoyed three new books, and they developed more interest and confidence for sharing in groups. However, there were also a few who took away a personal lesson or two. Bob learned how to interact with peers successfully in a social-style situation. As he said, “In the beginning I was not that comfortable, but later I was because I know what I had to do.” On another social level, Bob and Jeff discovered a mutual love for the game of Mao. When asked, both reported their time together in book club led to them playing cards at lunch. As Jeff explained it, “Before he [Bob] was kind of loud and um, then the more I hung out with him, I realized like, he was pretty chill . . . now we kind of just play Mao at recess and stuff.” Jeff learned he needed to get to know people better rather than just judging them.

Others learned more about themselves through the social, peer-to-peer interactions within the group dynamics. Mackenzie, likely the most reserved of all ten participants, confidently

reported she learned to speak up. In the beginning, she felt like she had little to share because she believed she was not a good reader. By the end, she said her peers impacted her self-perception. Mackenzie explained, “They made me feel more confident that I can actually read a book” and have something worth saying about it. For Rose, it was not about being more confident, but rather about interacting with fellow confident readers. She discovered how impatient she could be with her peers, especially when she was yearning for a turn to talk and to share. During her time in her book group, Rose said she felt more confident to interject her ideas, so she could ensure her voice was heard. A fellow member of Rose’s group, Brian admitted the valuable lesson he learned was to be “a little bit more respectful”. He shared how his enthusiasm to talk about his ideas regarding the texts often resulted in him overpowering his groups. In his interview, Brian reflected, “At the end I started to listen a little more. Hopefully.” And it was a good thing he did. This process of reflection and introspection was a result of peer-to-peer relational engagement.

**Learning about Text.** It was by listening to one another and relationally engaging with each other around texts that these participants expressed learning a lot about themselves as readers of texts. For some, talking about the texts with their peers helped them to understand it better and to engage more in general. Cara explained that seeing how “excited other people were” about the book sparked an increase in engagement for her. It also “helped me picture what they were thinking compared to what I was thinking.” Mackenzie also said interacting with her peers around the texts motivated her to keep reading them even when they felt hard. She knew once she got to the group meeting, talking about the texts would be engaging. Mackenzie responded, “We all would take our chances to talk, and the group was funny. We always had good chats about things.” Ethan had a similar response, “talking about my favorite parts made

the book a bit more exciting . . . it was better than talking to your pillow or keeping it to yourself.” When asked what the best part of the book club experience for him was he responded, “The best part was that everybody could talk about the book and it was sort of like, ‘Oh this happened. And I love this. I like this part. I did too.’ It was like one big conversation.” The increased relational engagement of these three participants with their peers improved their relational engagement with the texts as well.

Peer-to-peer relational engagement also increased participants’ understanding of the texts’ content. For some it was literal, and for others it meant taking their understanding to a deeper, more inferential level. For Ethan, it was more about remembering what he read. He noted that interacting with Amy, Brian and Rose helped him remember what he read. Ethan commented, “Amy or Brian mentioned it . . . and then I just, it made me think, ‘Oh! I remember that part!’ and then I was able to elaborate more on that because they sort of refreshed my memory.” For Rose, the peer-to-peer relational engagement helped her learn something new. She said, “I liked it when someone shared background knowledge I didn’t know. I like to branch out and look into new topics.” For other members of group one, in group relational engagement encouraged them to think more analytically about texts. Lynn’s interactions with her peers taught her a lot about symbolism. Observations from group one demonstrated many instances when Brian would proffer a possible example of symbolism and his suggestion would spark a deeper conversation for the group. Amy attested to that too. “Being in the group made me think deeper about the books, especially about symbolism, thanks to Brian”. Relationally engaging with their peers challenged them as readers and thinkers.

Perhaps the most common theme that emerged from data regarding learning about text was perspective. All ten participants reported growing their perspectives of the text by



relationally engaging in these discussions with their peers. Lynn, Brian, Amy and Jeff all felt they had benefitted from hearing other people's opinions on the books. Lynn noted that her interactions with her peers helped her to "see other viewpoints" she had not considered. "I really liked being about to talk with everybody and see different points of view". Brian reported, "Sometimes I'd get a different perspective, someone like Ethan would say something, and I'd shift my thinking." Amy said, "I liked to hear opinions and theories". Then she would get a second opinion. "I already had my own, but I would grow it with ideas from others." Jeff agreed, "I saw [the text] from others' perspectives . . . and that's what impacted me most." Mustafa may have said it best when she explained, "I learned over time that the book could be different for every person". Broadening student perspectives was another benefit of increasing student-peer relational engagement.

***For these ten participants, the teacher-created learning environment impacted relational engagement.***

As critical as relevance, self-efficacy, self-concept, autonomy, and social interaction are to the construct of relational engagement, they cannot occur in a vacuum. Instead, the ideal setting for the commingling of these factors is in a teacher-created learning environment designed to support relational pedagogy and to foster relational engagement. The ten participants in this study reflected on elements of the teacher-created learning environment that most supported their relational engagement.

**Rapport.** All ten participants reported feeling more engaged when I, their teacher, presented book choices of interest to them. Being able to do that required getting to know these students as readers and taking the time to ask them about their interests. Developing a rapport with the students was the foundation for constructing book groups which could foster relational

engagement. The students explained they were more willing to engage and to invest in the reading classroom when they knew the teacher was willing to engage and to invest in them. The participants wanted to know that they had a reading teacher who knew them and cared about them. When Cara was asked what helped her most she explained, “It was having a teacher who supports reading and cares about the reader.” A positive rapport and an encouraging teacher-student relationship had to exist in order for relational engagement to occur in this environment.

**Time.** Another element of the teacher-created learning environment designed to promote relational engagement is time to read. In fact, several participants appreciated that their sixth-grade English Language Arts class time always included designated time for choice reading. These sixth-grade participants explained that having independent reading time built into their English Language Arts class time made a difference in their value and engagement with texts. For instance, Cara mentioned a lack of reading time in her former school during the previous school year. Because reading time was not a sacred practice in her fifth grade class, Cara felt reading was not as important as subjects, and so she read less on her own time as well. In contrast, when interviewed in December of her sixth grade year, she was already on her fourth independent reading book. Brian explained how busy his summer had been, and though he had not read much during the summer, he reported having read at least twelve books at the time of his one-on-one interview. As he said, “having at least ten minutes of each class really helps. Even just those fifty minutes a week will really get me a lot better” and further as a reader.

In addition to time for reading, the participants also asked for more time for book exploration. These ten students voiced their belief in the benefits of browsing books in the classroom library. They all agreed they just needed a little down time to try on books for size. Providing time to browse books, to examine front and back covers, and to preview the first few

pages could spark increased student-text relational engagement. Students reported in-class book tastings and book talks to be helpful, but they were mainly teacher driven. They wanted more books shared during tastings and book talks to be student selected instead. These participants wanted the ideal blend of the teacher's time with their classmates' recommendations. They all agreed I had made great book suggestions at some point since the start of school, but they felt the most important thing I could do, as the teacher, was to set aside time and make choice-book browsing a classroom priority. They also wanted time to make recommendations to their peers after their book browsing and independent reading time. Rose reported often wanting to suggest books to peers, but found it hard to find a time to do it when she would not be disrupting the class. Ethan said he suggested *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) to a friend first thing in the morning the day after he finished it. Brian also suggested this same title to another classmate outside of his book club. Brian said he "usually suggests good books to people who sit next to me class". These participants clearly demonstrated their own value of reading, but they were asking for choice, independent reading to be more of a class priority. In order to relationally engage with the text, with the teacher, and with their peers, these students emphasized the need for more time.

**Access.** During this increased reading time, participants requested increased access to high interest books. Increasing access to relevant, choice texts reflects two core aspects of relational reading, and hence diverse reading options were means to increasing student-text relational engagement. For Lynn, whose mom was a librarian, access was never a challenge. Therefore, she was constantly devouring book after book. No sooner would I suggest a new title to her, she had it on request at the library next door and often finished within the week. However, the others mentioned not always having the same taste in books as their families, and not always being able to find sixth-grade appropriate books in their pre-k-grade 6 building's school library.

Therefore, when asked what a teacher could do to engage readers more, Bob simply said, “Get a good library like yours”. Since my classroom library provided him with numerous options, he felt like he always had access to a book or two which he found engaging. He also mentioned that my own habit of frequently reading middle-grade novels helped. Since my own reading diet included books at his level, he felt I could recommend good books to my students, and I was always adding new interesting books to my classroom-library shelves. Even Amy reported she had visited the library during the summer, but she “read more during the school year because I have access to more books.” Brian agreed. With access to more books in his classroom, he went from only reading a handful of books in the summer to a more voracious-reading speed. As he said, “two or three weeks into the school year, I’d already read like twelve books.” When striving for relational engagement with readers, especially early adolescents, the teacher-created learning environment should include access to high quality, high interest, and meaningful books to spark relational engagement.

**Comfort.** While these participants wanted time and access, they also expressed the desire to read in style. All ten participants enjoyed reading later in the day with soft lighting and a cozy environment. Rose identified her favorite place to read was in her bed because it was soothing, comforting, and it allowed her to let the reading take her places. Lynn agreed reading in bed was best because when she was most comfortable was when she could really feel like she was there with the characters. When her comfort level increased, her text-self relational engagement increased. During their getting-to-know-you questions, all ten participants had some variation of a favorite place to read that was cozy and comfortable. This factor was observed during book group meetings as well. On days when Cara arrived to her book club behind in her reading, she would often take her novel and notebook into the classroom’s cozy corner. There she could read

comfortably while also listening and contributing to the conversation. In addition, the meetings themselves never took place around a table or at a cluster of desks. The groups chose to gather the random assortment of comfy chairs the classroom around the rug area. Some participants even brought over the pillows and bean bag from the cozy corner. Bob often sat on the read-aloud ottoman; Ethan often sat on the rug. Once they were comfortable, their conversation could begin. For these students, their level of text engagement was increased by their ability to feel comfortable in their reading environment. Once settled into a choice spot, with a choice text, they felt they could get completely immersed in the story, experience meaningful reader-character connections, and increase their reader-text relational engagement.

**Support.** Not only did these participants want to be physically comfortable when engaging with text, they also wanted to feel emotionally comfortable as well. Therefore, another element that emerged from the data that was beneficial to the relational engagement of these readers was teacher support. For the striving readers, that support most often came in the form of time to read, access to text, and opportunities to interact with their peers in a student-led conversation. For the three striving readers, while those same supports were indeed helpful, at times they needed just a bit more teacher support and guidance than the others. For Ethan, Cara, and Mackenzie, creating a timeline of nightly reading goals supported their process. As Ethan admitted, “the timeline got me through because usually it would take me like two years to finish a book.” For Cara and Mackenzie this support began during a two-on-one conversation following one particular book group session. Post-it notes were used to mark the page Cara and Mackenzie needed to reach each night in preparation for the following week’s meeting. They both appreciated the assistance in making the reading plan and felt more engaged while reading since they knew they only had to go as far as that next Post-it note. While this strategy was not always

successful at keeping Ethan, or the girls, exactly on pace with the rest of their book groups, they all agreed it helped. Providing these striving students with supports and scaffolds was instrumental in meeting their needs. Differentiating the supports in place for both striving and thriving readers was essential to maintaining the level of relational engagement of all participants during the book club meetings.

**Independence.** Just as much as these participants voiced their appreciation for teacher-provided supports, they also valued the level of independence that they had as a group. All ten students agreed that the group being student-led with teacher support as needed was one of the biggest reasons why they were engaged during book club. As Rose explained, she loved the independence that her group had. “The group started with you telling us what was going to happen and how it was going to work, but it was just us after that.” Lynn said, “The groups were only teacher led to get us started and then jumping in once in a while to get everybody back together.” Amy enjoyed that the group functioned based on student input and that “you would like, put some input in,” but only when the group needed a new question or idea to keep the conversation going. Ethan enjoyed the autonomous intention of student facilitators. His engagement in the conversation increased because I had “given them the lead”. Brian said this book club experience was more engaging because the students were in charge. As he explained to me during his interview, “we treated you like a student as well.” This sense of autonomy and independence in the direction of their conversations invited higher levels of student relational engagement.

**Mergence.** When intentionally combining rapport, time, access, and comfort with the just-right balance of support and independence, the teacher becomes the architect for the relationally-engaging, learning environment. For the participants in this study, their recognition

of these ingredients appeared in their interview responses; however, it was also reflected in their survey responses. The participants' self-perception via teacher social feedback was noted both at the beginning and end of the study via a subsection of a survey tool. One aspect of self-perception measured by the *Reader Self-Perception Scale 2* (Henk et al., 2012) is social feedback via teachers. For this measure, a score of 20 or more is high, a score of 18 or 19 is above average, a score of 16 or 17 is average, and a score of 15 or less is low. At the beginning of the study, participants' self-perception via teacher feedback included two participants in the low range, four participants in the average range, three participants in the above average range, and one in the high range. By the end of the study, participants' self-perception via teacher feedback included one still in the low range, two in the average range, three in the above average range, and four in the high range (see Tables 17 and 18).

**Table 17**

*Group One: Self-Perception by Teacher Social Feedback RSPS2 Results*

Participant	Teacher Social Feedback	
	Pre	Post
Amy	16	21
Brian	16	17
Ethan	17	16
Lynn	19	20
Rose	20	24
Mean	17.6	19.6

*Note.* Teacher Social Feedback max. score = 25

**Table 18***Group Two: Self-Perception by Teacher Social Feedback RSPS2 Results*

Participant	Teacher Social Feedback	
	Pre	Post
Bob	15	19
Cara	16	19
Jeff	15	15
Mackenzie	18	25
Mustafa	18	18
Mean	16.4	19.2

*Note.* Teacher Social Feedback max. score = 25

Merging these crucial factors not only increased the relational engagement of these participants, but it also strengthened several of their self-perceptions as well. The reverse was also true. By strengthening their self-perception and self-concept, their relational engagement increased. Yet this was done without direct instruction. Instead, when designing this relationally engaging learning environment, the intentional role of the teacher was more of a behind-the-scenes, supportive guide. When these sixth-grade students felt independent and autonomous in this teacher-created learning environment, they were more relationally engaged in the process.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented five major findings generated from this mini-ethnographic case study. Data were collected in a three-step process consisting of surveys, observations of book group discussions, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Survey data were analyzed numerically using score ranges. Using open-coding, the observation and interview data were coded in various rounds. The observational notes were color-coded for themes, and then they were re-sorted for a new set of themes. The interview data were also open-coded for themes.



The themes from both sets of data were then reviewed to establish the key ideas from this process. Codes were then grouped into themes that were then organized into the five central findings. Survey data were then used to help extend the participants' stories and to illustrate findings where appropriate.

The findings of this study included the following: the relational engagement of these sixth-grade readers increased when they found the reading to be relevant and meaningful to their own individual experiences; for these ten students, self-efficacy for reading increased before self-concepts changed; for these sixth-grade participants, increasing the level of autonomy that they felt in their reading classroom increased their level of participation; relationships with peers were essential to the relational engagement of these sixth graders; and for these ten participants, the teacher-created learning environment fostered relational engagement. Together they create a framework for understanding what factors impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers participating in a student-facilitated book group with self-selected texts.

This study found that sixth-grade readers' relational engagement depends on a variety of factors including relevance, self-concept, and autonomy. Readers were more engaged with both the text and their peers when they were able to connect what they were reading to their own experience. In addition to using relevant text, when participants felt better about themselves as readers, they began to demonstrate a stronger reading identity and improved self-concept. Most importantly, when these participants felt like they had the authority and independence to run their own book groups, their relational engagement significantly increased. Autonomy was a crucial factor for observing relational engagement. The harmonious blend of these three factors was critical in fostering relational engagement.

This research also found, for these participants, relationships with peers and their teacher also significantly impacted their relational engagement. When these students developed a comfort level with the peers in their discussion group, they were able to engage more during book group meetings. When their teacher demonstrated a sense of trust in their ability to facilitate their own conversations, they rose to the challenge and were more engaged doing so. Most importantly, the sense that they had a voice that mattered to their peers and to the teacher made a difference. This teacher-created learning environment which celebrated student voice, choice and autonomy also facilitated the growth of relational engagement.

These findings support the literature around the benefits of book groups in the classroom, but they also challenge the literature regarding the decline of engagement of middle school readers. Based on these participants' experiences, the middle-school decline can be offset with more relationally engaging practices. The findings from this study demonstrate the complex interplay between self-concept, student autonomy, peer relationships and the role of the teacher in creating an environment where relational engagement can flourish. The following chapter will further discuss the implications of the results of this research.

## **Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an interpretation and discussion of the study's findings, address limitations in this research, and provide recommendations and suggestions for future research on this topic. This mini-ethnographic case study was conducted to examine how implementation of book clubs using student-selected texts impacts the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers. This was done by considering how student-peer, student-text, and student-teacher interactions impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers, as well as how increased opportunities for choice, voice, and autonomy impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers. In this study the term relational engagement is grounded in Suarez-Orozco et al.'s (2008) definition as, "The extent to which students feel connected to teachers, peers, and others in their schools" (p. 49). In the particular context of this study, the focus was on the student's relational engagement around reading as a sociocultural experience (Protacio, 2017). This experience occurred when student-teacher, student-student, and student-text relationships were developed and reflected the social context and cultural background of the group. These connections sparked an increase in student relational engagement, especially as participants noted the relevance of their reading experiences.

Similar to Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008), Davis et al. (2014) defined relational engagement as how students feel about their relationships with their teachers and peers, as well as their perceptions of their teachers' support with their learning. The cyclical nature of the relationships involved in relational engagement stem from continued positive interactions and emotional engagement. In this study, positive interactions in book clubs had positive impacts on the

behavioral and cognitive engagements of students (Davis et al., 2012; Davis et al., 2014). The construct of relational engagement is the heart of relational pedagogy and meaningful teaching.

This qualitative mini-ethnographic case study was conducted in a multi-step process beginning with pre-surveys, book club discussion observations, post-surveys, and participant interviews. The participants in this study were ten sixth-grade elementary school students from one suburban American school district. Data were qualitatively analyzed using the open coding method. Data yielded the following findings: 1. the relational engagement of these sixth-grade readers increased when they found the reading to be relevant and meaningful to their own individual experiences; 2. for these ten students, self-efficacy for reading increased before self-concepts changed; 3. for these sixth-grade participants, increasing the level of autonomy that they felt in their reading classroom increased their level of participation; 4. relationships with peers were essential to the relational engagement of these sixth graders; 5. for these ten participants, the teacher-created learning environment fostered relational engagement. My findings are supported by the tenets of relational engagement as it is described in the literature.

The research question driving this study was, “What factors impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers participating in a student-facilitated book group with self-selected texts?” The related sub questions were, “How do student-peer, student-text and student-teacher interactions impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers?”, and “How do increased opportunities for choice, voice, and autonomy impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers?” These questions were answered through the collection of both pre-survey and post-survey data, three months of book club discussion observations, and a series of one-time, one-on-one interviews. This study was framed by theoretical rather than empirical literature describing the relational engagement due to the lack of extant research examining this construct.

## Discussion of Findings

While each participant's experience was unique and added a different perspective to the understanding of the subject, there were patterns in the sixth graders' responses which developed into the five major findings in this study. The significance of these findings is explored below.

### *Creating a Positive Reading Classroom*

A core finding of this research is the imperative role of the teacher in developing and fostering the growth of relational engagement. One responsibility of that teacher is to create a classroom space which has a positive impact on behavioral and cognitive engagement in order to encourage relational engagement. In this study, nine out of ten participants commented on the need for a classroom space which encourages reading for them to feel engaged. Several mentioned a comfortable and cozy reading environment, but all mentioned access to a diverse selection of reading materials in a rich classroom library. When asked what advice this researcher could provide to other reading teachers, Bob responded, "Get a good library like you have . . . with a bunch of books that children my age like". Crick (2012) also discussed the importance of creating a classroom space which inspired reading and provided accessibility to texts. This classroom space would be an element of the social context impacting relational engagement.

For Davis et al. (2014) it was not about the books on the shelf, but rather the importance of creating a reading classroom that provided reading support and a sense of belonging. All ten participants echoed this in their interview discussions. They felt the environment created within these book clubs allowed them to feel supported both by their teacher and even more importantly by their peers. The ten participants emphasized the value of feeling connected to their peers was

in how these student-peer relationships encouraged them to participate in the discussions more often.

Skinner and Pitzer (2012) reminded readers that the supportive teacher creates a comfortable classroom space, but also a positive classroom space. In this positive reading environment, the teacher should model life-long reading habits, provide relevant materials and interactions, ensure reader choice, and foster the reader-peer, reader-text, as well as reader-teacher connections. Not all participants reported on all of those relational factors; however, they all agreed a teacher who provided choice, made the conversation relevant, and encouraged student-led social interaction around texts encouraged their engagement.

Skinner and Pitzer (2012) also emphasized the role of the teacher to serve as a model in this positive classroom environment. In addition to the opportunities for choice and interaction with meaningful materials, it was also about the critical value of fostering caring connections with students in order to develop relational engagement. These caring connections help create rapport with students; however, connecting with students strongly supports a teacher's meaningful and caring decision-making regarding instruction. When asked what had a significant impact on her as a reader during the duration of the study, Cara noted, it was having a teacher who cared and supported readers. The connection she felt allowed her to grow her reading identity throughout this experience.

The teacher role also ought to encourage the best reading relationship between readers and texts. While the teacher may spend weeks creating a safe, welcoming environment to encourage reading, once the readers are within those four walls, their contributions to the environment are also significant. Bingham (2010) encouraged an emphasis on relating to texts as opposed to reacting to them. All ten participants also emphasized being more interested or

engaged with a text when they felt it was relevant or meaningful to their own experience. Bob explained it as enjoying books more when he could relate to the character. He said, “Books are all pretty good, but a lot of them somewhat relate to me.” His discussion group contributions centered on noting events or pieces of information that resonated with his own background schema. A personal connection with the text increased his relational engagement.

Rosenblatt’s (1978; 1985) seminal works encouraged the transactional approach as the best way to engage readers. The role of the teacher is therefore to create a space where reading transactions can occur. When looking at the observational notes from the meetings of these two book groups, participants offered both efferent and aesthetic responses as Rosenblatt (1978) described. That being said, their aesthetic responses were much more plentiful and led to a more prolonged conversation on a specific portion of the text. Either way, when the classroom environment encouraged transactional responses between readers and texts, relational engagement increased.

The teacher who hopes to foster the relational engagement of readers needs to promote a strong reading identity in this positive classroom space as well. This could begin with modeling one’s own value for reading and reading self-concept, yet the goal needs to be a focus on fostering students’ reading identity (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017). Reschly and Christenson (2012) encouraged promoting reading self-efficacy, emphasizing when readers believe in their abilities as a reader their reading identity improves. Improving reading identity then helps relational engagement to blossom as well. For four of the ten participants in this study, their reading identity in September was more thriving than striving. For those students, participating in this twelve week book club experience, where fostering reading identity was one of the goals, helped their self-efficacy and then their self-concept to improve. Mackenzie said the group

experience helped her to “feel more confident that I can actually read a book.” For the six participants who had strong reading self-efficacy and self-concept to start with, the striving readers, the experience solidified for them the value of their reading identities. From access to texts to fostering reading identities, the classroom teacher is instrumental in creating the positive classroom environment designed to spark relational engagement.

### ***Creating Opportunities for Autonomy and Co-Constructed Learning***

While the role of the teacher is instrumental in creating a physical classroom space where relational engagement occurs, it is also vital for educators to promote the autonomy of their readers. Carey et al. (2013) found this to be true in their study of seventh-grade book clubs. Their readers craved opportunities to construct their own meanings and to have ownership of their own learning. In this study, since all ten participants agreed the book club experience was strongly student-led, they felt they had ownership of their learning in this environment. They also explained how having the freedom to control their own reading, to guide and facilitate their own group conversations, and to decide on their own what was important in the text was instrumental in making the experience more engaging. They also agreed my teacher-participant role was more supportive, and they enjoyed the autonomy of the student-facilitators to direct the group. Brian said he enjoyed the group because of the autonomy he felt. He noted, it was “more student led in a way because we treated you as a student as well. So it was more run by us.” Skinner and Pitzer (2012) would agree that an educator striving for relational engagement should show care and support while developing student autonomy.

Increasing student autonomy improves the students’ connection to school as well as their value of school. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) explained students often feel school-life and real-life are disconnected and their voices are not valued. This is true around the relevance of in-



school reading as well. When educators develop a more relational outlook, increase relevance of their materials and practices, as well as incorporate more student voice, student engagement increases. The ten participants in this study all agreed they had a voice in how the book groups operated. For instance, controlling conversation topics and book selection were important to their engagement. Ethan even provided an entire alternative method for the book-selection process as a means to ensure even more student voice in selecting text. He suggested groups be mixed up if book selection warranted it. Ethan wanted to ensure students' opinions mattered when they "make their vote". When students feel like their voices are heard and valued, they feel more respected and more engaged in their classes (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Valuing student decision-making in the learning process increases relational engagement.

A positive classroom environment which values the co-construction of learning also provides opportunities for this co-construction to occur in a participatory model. Alvermann (2003) explained this as the model in which the teacher is the facilitator or guide, and the students are responsible for constructing their own meaning. The participatory model was incorporated and reflected in the design process of this study. By the third meeting, as the teacher-researcher, I had moved to a supportive role, and the participants were facilitating their own discussions and driving their own thinking around these texts. Rose explained the benefit of these roles. She said, "It gave the people who were a little less outgoing, a chance for leadership . . . and since we switched leaders, everybody got a different chance." By implementing this model, students expressed they had more voice in the classroom, which increased their relational engagement.

Crick (2012) referred to this model as the participatory paradigm. Providing students with the autonomy to drive their own meaning-making process increased student participation in the

classroom. This was evident in the book club observations as well, especially in group two. One of the participants in group two, Mackenzie, was incredibly reserved for the first few sessions together. However, once she facilitated a session, her participation in the remaining sessions increased significantly. Mackenzie explained that facilitating and finding her voice in the group gave her more confidence to know her contributions to the conversation were valuable.

Thayer-Bacon (2010) and Trauth-Nare (2016) also supported the construct of the participatory paradigm. Thayer-Bacon (2010) explained when educators increased the value they had for student voice and perspective, they noticed an increase in student participation. Trauth-Nare (2016) noted when educators incorporated a more relational pedagogy, student involvement in making meaning increased. These concepts were evident in the data collected in this study also. Survey data reflected an increase in student reading value for five of the ten participants. In interviews, all ten participants expressed their participation in the discussions increased from September to December, and they felt more comfortable sharing their insights with the group at the end of the study rather than at the beginning. By the end of the study, Mustafa explained, “[I] was not afraid to speak up about how I felt because I learned that over time, the book could like, be different for every person.” Amy expressed that within a few weeks, her group had felt “like a little community, and I liked it a lot.” This echoed Anderson (2019)’s work which found peer conversation around text helped build a sense of community in the classroom. Since the design of this book club experience was rooted in the participatory model (Alvermann, 2003), noting the effects of the participatory paradigm and the increase in student engagement was confirmed.

Increasing student participation also increases student engagement with both text and peers. Lysaker and Tonge (2013) argued relational interactions occur within a complex web of relationships between reader, text, and peers. Lysaker and Alicea (2017) extended the value of

this complex web when they wrote that learning in a social context where students were dialogically engaged not only increased relational engagement, but it also encouraged students to strengthen their identities and try out new perspectives. Brian echoed this during his interview. When asked if the group interactions impacted him as a reader he said, “I think it kind of brought me up a little, but more being able to talk about it made me get a different perspective on it.” The social nature of the book group increased the participants’ relational engagement while also challenging them to look at the text from new perspectives.

Varying one’s perspective is a critical component to improving relational engagement. All ten participants agreed the richness of their book groups’ conversations and listening to the insights of their peers improved the experience for them. Rose admitted now she looks for symbolism more when she reads thank to Brian’s influence. Cara and Mackenzie discussed improving their understanding of the text from their peers’ takeaways during the group. And while Brian expressed learning the value of listening to the ideas of others, Mustafa credited her group with giving her the confidence to share ideas she knew would be valued. This echoed what both Ivey and Johnston (2013) and Parsons et al. (2011) explained was a benefit of dialogical relationships with texts in the classroom. The texts were simply the means for the students to feel confident about sparking conversations with one another around their own ideas, as well as listening to one another’s ideas. Teacher supported student autonomy allowed participants to make this experience socially interactive and illuminated the social nature of engagement. These connections to both texts and peers were crucial to the construct of relational engagement.

A co-constructed literary space, where learning and developmental needs were supported and power dynamics in the setting were eliminated whenever possible, is a space where relational engagement can thrive. This type of setting allows students both autonomy and the

responsibility for the construction of their learning. This style of relational pedagogy results in student voice and a feeling of being valued at school, which in turn increases the value students have for learning.

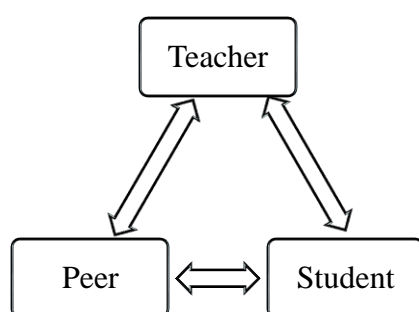
### ***Developing the Triangular Relationship of Relational Engagement***

In the relationally engaging classroom, where knowledge is co-constructed, student autonomy is honored, and the physical space emphasizes a positive relationship between reader and text, there clearly exists a triangular relationship between teacher-researcher, reader, and the peer group (see Figure 3). This triangular relationship is at the heart of the definition of relational engagement. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008) defined this construct as, the “extent to which students feel connected to teachers, peers, and others in their schools” (p. 49). In an attempt to look at the strength of these connections, participants’ self-perception regarding peer and teacher connections were examined in the results of the *Reader Self-Perception Scale 2* survey (Henk et al., 2012). For student self-perception regarding peers, the mean pre-survey raw score was 10.3 and the post-survey raw score mean was 10.5 out of a possible 15 points. All of the participants expressed positive interactions with their peers during the study. In fact, several even noted improved relationships with them. Mustafa expressed having a more respectful relationship with Jeff. Jeff expressed a new, shared interest in playing the game Mao with Bob, and Cara explained she was able to make new friendships at her new school thanks to this group. Group one expressed being more connected to one another from the start, yet Brian said this experience gave him new insight into the perspectives of these classmates he had known for several years. Amy explained how sharing this experience with her four peers gave her more confidence in sharing her thinking about books out loud, rather than just drawing her ideas in a reading notebook. Participants clearly felt connected to their peers during this entire experience, and by

the end of the study, they were more comfortable with talking about texts with both a teacher and their peers.

**Figure 3**

*The Triangular Relationship of Relational Engagement*



Additionally, all ten participants expressed learning from their peers throughout this experience. This supported the idea from Ivey and Johnston (2013) that when peers collaborate around reading, their reading engagement increases. There were clear times when the reading engagement of group members increased because of the social nature of the book club. Students knew their peers were expecting them to have read and thought about the pages before coming to the group. When they had not read, their relational interactions with their peers were not as positive, which often resulted in an improved interaction the following session. Kutnick and Berdondini (2009) agreed when students collaborate with peers in a positive social learning relationship, engagement is increased. Student-peer interactions often come with a significant social influence, so creating a positive social context for these two book clubs had a positive impact on the relational engagement of the participants.

Davis et al. (2014) expanded their similar definition beyond the relationships to also include student “perceptions of their teachers’ support of their continued learning” (p. 266). For student self-perception regarding teacher support, the mean pre-survey raw score was 17 and the post-survey raw score was 19.4 out of 25 possible points (Henk et al., 2012). Notably, an

increased perception of teacher support is logical as the participants developed more comfort with me from September to December. Several participants elaborated on this idea when they also expressed in their interviews how they felt supported by their teacher. For Lynn, Amy, and Bob, support manifested in access to a diverse classroom library. For Ethan, teacher support was felt through increased choice and comfortable spaces to read. Brian felt supported in how he was given the opportunity to voice his opinions, but also the challenge to be quiet at times too. For Cara, she said she knew she had a teacher who cared about her reading and would support her through it. The important part of this equation is realizing teacher support looks different for different students. Therefore, making relational instruction a priority in the classroom gives educators the insight needed to shape experiences for various learners.

One example of teacher support which occurred frequently during the study was regarding reading pace. For instance, as Brian mentioned in his interview, both he and his group members needed to read their texts at a faster pace in order to stay engaged and interested in the story. Therefore, when texts were being selected as various options for future reads, text length was a consideration since four out of five members of group one wanted to read more pages each week. Text length was also considered for group two, but in a different way. In group two, three out of the five group members wanted to read fewer pages each week as they expressed concern regarding their personal reading pace being too slow. Shorter texts were presented as options for this group to ensure three members felt confident regarding their pace while the other two members were engaged with the pace of the plot development.

A second example of perceived teacher support involved reading goals. This again looked different for different participants. Each week both group one and group two would agree on pages to be read for the following meeting. For five out of the ten participants, this

simply required a note in their reading journal or a sticky note to mark their stopping place. There was even an occasional page number reminder on the Google Classroom page. However, for three participants, weekly reading goals were teacher supported with nightly goals. The groups' agreed upon pages were divided by the seven nights to read, fewer if the participants identified a night they felt would be too busy for reading, and then sticky notes were placed in the text to remind the readers where they needed to get to each night. For two others who struggled to stop at the agreed upon page, this included an enormous index card with the word stop printed on it placed on the stopping page to block the upcoming text. Bob even began handing his book in to me when he reached the stopping page, so he would not be tempted to keep reading. As Davis et al. (2014) emphasized, teacher support of learning is a crucial ingredient for fostering the relational engagement of students.

While perceived support is a piece of this triangular relationship, the reader also brings important identity to the three-way dynamic. Crick (2012) noted the reader's identity and personal story has already been shaped by the previous settings and prior relationships. Readers then bring those former experiences into each new social context. The reader's identity and relational understandings then continue to evolve with each new relational interaction. Crick (2012) also emphasized how each student brings a personal learning power to each experience which drives relational experience with teachers, school, and content. This remained true for all ten participants as well. All ten had previous reading experiences with families, teachers and peers, and they had either positive or somewhat negative views of these experiences. During his interview, Ethan expressed the negative impact of teachers and a parent mandating he complete nightly reading when he would have preferred being outdoors and active. For Cara, it was her relationship with a prior teacher who she felt did little to support her reading struggles. The other

eight participants noted positive prior relationships around reading. Amy explained her joy in participating in prior book clubs. Brian expressed his love of connecting with his peers, dad, and brother around books. These prior experiences all contributed to the reading identity each participant brought to the relational triangle of this study.

Therefore, when this study began, each participant brought a pre-existing reading identity to this new context. These identities then influenced the quality of the participants' interactions in this book group context. This enforced what Davis et al. (2012) argued. For true engagement to develop in a new setting, interactions need to be set in a socio-emotional context because relational engagement is, "[the] quality of students' interactions in the classroom and school community" (p. 22). A socio-emotional context honors what students are already bringing with them to this new dynamic while allowing them to participate and grow in this new social learning environment. Hence the design of this study emphasized a social context where student reading identity was honored and supported while providing participants the opportunity for quality interactions.

Quality student-peer, student-self, and student-teacher interactions are at the heart of this three-way dynamic. Dominguez et al. (2014) explained, engagement is "a social construct that is essentially relational" (p. 157). Therefore, relational practices need to provide for relational activities and goals. In order to examine that construct, this study's goal was based on supporting the relational engagement of readers with teacher, text, and peers. This triangular relationship appeared each week during book group discussions. Participants brought read texts marked with sticky notes or notations in reading journals which illustrated student-text interactions. Their conversations mainly focused on the context and concepts presented in these texts, and they were able to facilitate a twenty-five minute discussion regarding it. These



discussions included full participation by all six members of the group including me, the teacher-researcher. When a member was not participating, the student-facilitator would ask them their opinion on a matter. Hence student-peer and student-teacher relational engagement was observed as well.

All ten participants expressed positive feelings about their experience in book club. They thought book club was better than class because it made the reading feel like it mattered more to their real lives and less like it mattered as an assignment for their report card. This supported the idea of researchers (Cha et al., 2010; Parsons et al., 2015) who reported students felt more positive about their work and time learning when they were interacting and learning with their peers. These participants felt so positive about their experience in this study they expressed desire in continuing the project beyond December. Three members of group one, and two members of group two even formed two new separate book clubs with other friends. They ran their own book clubs independently for the duration of the school year. To support their efforts, I merely acted as their classroom teacher, not as a researcher. I allowed them the use of my classroom, I remained in the room while they met to ensure they had supervision, and I acquired the multiple copies of texts needed for their groups. Clearly a positive triangular relationship between reader, peers, and teacher had been developed, thus increasing participants' relational engagement in the book club experience.

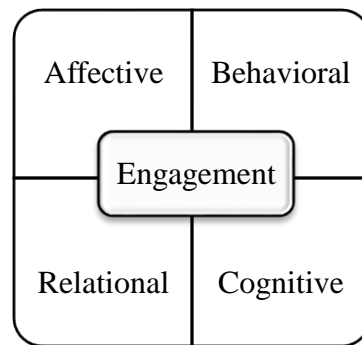
### ***Honoring Relational Engagement as the Fourth Dimension***

Nevertheless, the construct of relational engagement is still quite theoretical. Most researchers agree engagement is defined as behavioral and cognitive. Some agree it is behavioral, cognitive, and emotional or affective. However, recent researchers have suggested expanding the idea of engagement to include relational engagement as the fourth dimension (see

Figure 4). Yazzie-Mintz (2007; 2010) laid the groundwork for this when he stressed that learning should not and cannot be a solo activity, but rather a relationship between the student and the community, the teachers, peers, instruction methods, and curriculum. Even when learning is independent and self-guided, there is a relational connection between the learner and the material, as well as the prior learning experiences being brought into the new context. Learning cannot occur without relational engagement at some level. For the ten participants in this study, the value they found in the experience came from the student-peer, student-text, and student-teacher triangular relationships they developed. They grew as readers, as facilitators, as supporters, and as thinkers. Many credited the conversations they had with group members with shaping their thinking and strengthening their understanding.

#### **Figure 4**

*Relational Engagement as the Fourth Dimension of Engagement*



While relational engagement should be honored as the fourth dimension of engagement, it also impacts the other engagement dimensions. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) argued relational engagement is the driving factor. For instance, negative relational experiences often decrease behavioral and cognitive engagement, while positive relational experiences often increase behavioral and cognitive engagement (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). This certainly was evident during this study. For instance, when Ethan received negative reinforcement from his peers

regarding not having read the agreed upon pages, his whole demeanor changed for the remainder of that session. He slid from his chair to the floor, he started doodling in his reading notebook, and he did not contribute any additional comments to the discussion. However, when he was facilitator of the group two weeks later, and he felt the relational experience was more positive, his cognitive and behavioral engagement also improved.

This was similar for other participants as well. When Cara fell behind with her reading, she came to the session with negative feelings about her progress as a reader. She then was more disengaged with the conversation, and often tried to get her group to talk about other things. She was still looking for that positive peer relational engagement, just not around the text. An additional example was the meeting of group two when the group facilitator felt Mackenzie was too quiet during the conversation. As facilitator, Jeff directly included Mackenzie by asking her several opinion-based questions that did not have “right” answers. They were not yes or no questions either. In her interview, Mackenzie recalled this positive peer relational interaction and how it encouraged her and made her feel more confident about her ideas regarding the books. She then began to share more. Later Jeff even noted how Mackenzie was sharing two to three times more in December than she had been in September. The positive relational engagement increased her cognitive and behavioral engagements.

When reflecting on the engagement of the ten participants throughout this study, it is clear there were various types of engagement occurring. Cognitive engagement was required to read the text, think about it, and discuss it. Behavioral engagement was visible in their ability to self-facilitate a mainly-on-task book conversation with little to no teacher interjections for twenty-five minutes each week. Emotional engagement was visible in their responses to how they felt about the process. There were aspects of joy and pride, as well as frustration and

struggle. Yet they were able to emotionally engage in the experience with peers. However, just as Davis et al. (2010) argued, emotional and relational engagement ought to be two separate constructs. They defined emotional engagement as emotions related to school activities, but they defined relational engagement as how students feel about being supported and accepted at school.

While all ten participants began this study with clear feelings about reading, as is evident in their pre-surveys as well as initial group observations, they also had strong feelings about being supported and accepted by both their peers and their teacher during this process. In their interviews, all ten participants expressed how their fellow book club members impacted them as readers. Amy said her group members challenged her thinking, taught her about symbolism, helped her to think more deeply, and made her feel more comfortable about what she had to say. Ethan said his group members got him more excited about the books because he knew he was going to be able to talk to his friends and share ideas rather than just “talking to your pillow”. Cara, Mustafa, and Mackenzie expressed an increase in reading confidence; Amy, Rose, Ethan, and Lynn expressed an increase in their confidence to facilitate; Bob expressed an appreciation for his peers exposing him to new great books and authors; Jeff expressed an appreciation for the new perspectives his peers shared; and Brian expressed gratitude for his peers’ patience and a newly found appreciation for listening to others. All ten said they felt comfortable in their student-led group. They expressed knowing their ideas would be heard, and that their peers would value what they had to share. They also expressed the positive benefits of student-facilitators leading the group while the teacher was more of a participant. Clearly, these reflections emphasize the evidence of relational engagement at work.

## Implications

### *Reading Classroom Interactions Need a Positive, Student-Focused Approach*

In the day-to-day teacher routine there are so many moving pieces. The job has so many think-on-your-feet demands that at times it is compared to that of working in air-traffic control. Yes, the demands are high, and the job is never the same two days in a row. Nevertheless, when a teacher steps in front of students, the focus needs to be on creating a positive and student-focused classroom climate. When educators value and prioritize the intention of doing right by their students, then the pedagogical choices made will be more beneficial for students.

In the reading classroom in particular, the focus needs to be on positive student-peer, student-text, and student-teacher interactions. Positive student-peer interactions are critical for growing relational engagement around reading in the classroom. Students should be recommending books to one another. They should be discussing books together in book clubs with norms and expectations that focus on the strengths of the participants. Students should be encouraging one another to grow new ideas. Rather than looking for a right answer, they should be looking for what meaning they can make of the text. When students interact with one another positively around text, their level of reading engagement grows.

Second, positive student-text interactions should also be modeled and fostered. This can begin with the teacher modeling what positive student-text interactions look like. An educator might model how to select an engaging book and how to know when to abandon it or to keep reading. Helping students monitor their own engagement level with a text can support the positive nature of their reading experiences. In addition, providing opportunities for choice in text selection always contributes to a more positive reading experience. Beyond text selection, rather than creating prescribed text-based reading questions, educators can create more open-

ended reading experiences for students to engage them in a more meaningful exploration of the text. Encouraging students to track what books they have enjoyed, and what it was about the text they found enjoyable, will also help them find new books to continue their positive relationship around reading. When the age-old questions of how to get a student to read more nonfiction or to read more classics surfaces from families, an educator could redirect the questions to pause and celebrate with families when students are reading more. Finally, be sure the classroom honors and respects diverse texts of all types, so readers can find a book that feels meaningful and relevant to them and their own experience. If the goal is to create life-long readers, then the classroom needs to support more choice and less prescribed reading assignments, so students will relationally engage with their positive reading experience.

Therefore, the key player in fostering positive student reading interactions at school is the classroom teacher. Through modeling a positive reading identity, creating positive reading experiences in class, and providing opportunities for positive student-peer interactions around texts, an educator can impact students' relational engagement. Yet the one-on-one teacher-student interactions need to be caring, supportive, and positive as well. Rather than focusing on extrinsically motivating elements like grades, or points, or levels, focus on what intrinsically motivates students to engage in reading. For instance, teachers can begin by supporting students in their selection of engaging texts. Teachers should take the time to get to know their readers. Perhaps, one could have students take reading motivation and interest surveys to get to know students as readers, and then the teacher could share suggested titles and authors which might match students' interests and experiences. Another idea is having one-on-one reading conferences with students as they are reading. In this conference, be sure to celebrate a minimum of one reading compliment before giving any feedback for growth. These conversations around

text are a great way to get to know readers better, and for the students to feel more connected to their reading teacher. Most importantly, teachers should strive to create classrooms where student voice is valued and reading is relevant. These elements are instrumental to fostering the relational engagement of middle-school readers.

### ***Reading Pedagogy Ought to be More Relational***

While the reading war may never be a thing of the past, and some teachers focus more on phonics, others on comprehension, and still others on the balanced literacy approach, there is room for relational pedagogy in all three of these approaches or philosophies. Researchers and educators alike know that middle-school students crave choice. Yet nowhere in the education world is choice less available than in secondary schools. For decades there have been texts deemed noteworthy enough for the educational canon, so teachers are required to teach these literary masterpieces to the entire class at the same time. When those reading experiences occur, middle-school readers are disengaging. Students, especially early adolescents, crave having a say in their own learning. While the canonical titles in school are certainly worth reading, who is to say that everyone has to read the same one? Perhaps one small change that could help make curriculums more relational is to allow students to choose which traditional text they would like to read. Even structured choice, perhaps say three titles by the same classic author, would allow educators to offer more student choice in their classrooms.

It is also widely known that middle-school students desire more autonomy in their lives. They ask for more independence on a daily basis. Nevertheless, their school day is often so scripted with limited to no student decision-making. In classrooms where teachers choose the materials and teachers dispense the knowledge, students are asked to soak it up like sponges and then regurgitate it in exams, papers, and projects. Perhaps there could be a balance between this

and a more relational approach. Teachers who strive to grow relational engagement should act more like a facilitator or guide than a lecturer or sage. Projects where students can discover their own understanding and create their own means for showing what they have discovered provide students with a stronger sense of autonomy in the classroom.

Thirdly, if relational pedagogy is the goal, teachers need to make learning more social. It is time to let the students talk. This could start with modeling constructive classroom conversation with student facilitators, but letting them guide the conversation makes it more meaningful. That message was received quite clearly from the ten participants in this study. Classrooms which incorporate more book clubs, more pair-share, more think alouds, more small group projects, and a plethora of other activities, encourage students to talk and interact with their peers. Increasing social interaction in the classroom will help increase relational engagement.

Relational pedagogy in a positive learning environment with a supportive and caring teacher is a powerful combination. This recipe calls for materials and experiences to be relevant, for students to feel a sense of responsibility and autonomy over their learning, for student interactions to be positive in order to support the development of self-efficacy, and for the teacher to be the master merging all these elements together. The teacher may be conducting and guiding the relational engagement in the reading orchestra, but the students need to be the ones actually making the music.

### **Limitations**

Findings of this study must be considered in light of the limitations of this research. While the strengths of the mini-ethnographic case study approach provided holistic understanding of a bounded case within a culture, limitations existed also. One main limitation of



this mini-ethnographic case study was that it lacked generalizability (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). The findings of this research were specific to the elementary school of one particular suburban American school district. It was unknown whether the results of this study would apply to sixth graders in other schools, in other school districts across the United States. Although qualitative research may not yield generalizable conclusions, practitioners and other readers may find the outcome of this study helpful in understanding the values and interactions of their middle-grade readers. This study also added to the growing field of knowledge on relational engagement as well as relational pedagogy. Therefore, while the findings of this study were not generalizable, they were transferable (Yin, 2014).

Furthermore, the participants in this study were all from a district with upper level socio-economics. While there are many schools across the country with similar profiles, this sample was not representative of the nation's diverse socio-economic distribution, and therefore it does not offer all perspectives. Additionally, while the participants in this study had no previous relationship with me prior to the study, several of them had existing relationships with one another, in group one in particular. This may have resulted in stronger relational engagement for these participants.

An additional factor when considering the ten participants was that they were included in the study because they volunteered to be involved. Seven of the ten participants were self-reported avid readers who enjoyed reading in their spare time. The prior existence of their reading values certainly was reflected in their pre-survey results as well, but it could also have had an impact on their level of engagement in the book group process. If a random sample of Massachusetts beginning sixth graders were chosen, one might not see 70% of the participants reporting a strong value of reading.

An additional limitation was the limited number of participants. In the case study approach, the study focuses on a smaller sample size rather than a large pool of participants. The sampling was also not as random as a larger quantitative study design would have included. This type of study design does not always include a broad, random sample, but “rather the sample is one that represents the particular participants who have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to answer the research question,” (Fusch et al., 2017, p. 933). In order to counteract that limitation, the study included various data methods and artifacts. Therefore, I was able to produce rich description with fewer participants. Rather than looking at things broadly, I looked at things deeply.

It is important to note this research was conducted in the school district in which I was employed. In fact, all ten participants were also my sixth-grade students during the data collection period. The role of teacher-researcher is a complicated one that makes being objective more challenging. As a sixth-grade English teacher, I certainly brought assumptions regarding relational engagement of middle-school readers to this work; yet as the researcher, I had to consider how these assumptions contributed to my biases. Insider research often creates ethical issues in which the researcher’s personal and emotional investment in the setting can influence the collection and interpretation of data and its overall validity. Although I had only known the participants for the first few weeks of school prior to the start of this study, it is possible their responses were skewed by the fact that I was also their teacher. It is also possible that my interpretation of participants’ responses could have been influenced by my prior knowledge of the school district and my role as the sixth-grade English Language Arts teacher of these ten participants.

Another limitation of mini-ethnographic case studies includes the embedded approach (Fusch & Ness, 2015) and the biases of the researcher. There were both explicit and implicit forms of being embedded in the research, and that was challenging as both teacher and researcher. As the classroom teacher on record, I certainly hold some assumptions regarding relational engagement of sixth-grade readers. The challenge was to acknowledge these biases and still be somewhat subjective when analyzing data. Since this research approach relied heavily on the researcher's interpretations and reflections, that was vital. As only one researcher was collecting data and analyzing it, and the data came from my own classroom and students, the results could easily be influenced by one's own biases and subjectivity. Creswell (2007), Fusch and Ness (2015) and Yin (2014) would explain this as creating an issue of credibility. Therefore, by addressing these limitations and disclosing my role in the study as teacher-researcher, by co-coding data with an unbiased third party, by triangulating my data and methods, and by member checking my findings with my participants, I hopefully addressed this limitation in the research and ensured that participant perspectives were well represented.

Lastly, the narrow data collection window may also be considered a limitation. Due to the nature of the study, it was conducted as early as possible during the school year, so relational connections between teacher and participants would be in the beginning stages of development. Post-surveys and interviews were conducted prior to December break to ensure participants' recall and reflections on the experience were clear. While a lot of rich data were collected in the twelve-week span of the study, it would have been informative to observe these groups for the duration of the school year and to follow them into the next school year. Since engagement research often reflects a decline across the years during middle school, the survey results here

may be skewed based on the fact that the pre-survey and post-survey were only administered three months apart.

### **Future Research**

While the findings of this study have provided insight into my teacher-researcher observations as well as student perceptions of their relational engagement during a student led book club with self-selected texts, further research is necessary. For one, while the educational field often investigates book groups, choice literature, and reading engagement, there is little available in regards to the impact of relational engagement on reading. Most mention of relational engagement appears in the psychological research as a theoretical construct. More research could be done to see how increasing relational engagement in learning environments can impact middle-school readers.

Additional research regarding reading relationships could also be beneficial. Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory was groundbreaking work, but reading research does not often investigate this aspect of reading. No matter one's stance on the great reading debate, improving reading relational engagement impacts learning to read as well. Research which examines reading as a relational experience is needed to investigate the benefits of student-text, student-student, and student-teacher relationships involved with reading in school.

Future studies might consider a more thorough look at the way reading instruction methods are taught as part of teacher education programs. Phonics instruction, balanced literacy, and reading assessments are all embedded in methods courses, as well as pre-service teaching exams. Research supports how crucial these elements are to prepare pre-service teachers for the reading classroom. However, additional research on effective relational pedagogy and practices in the literacy curriculum may be advantageous in adding to a body of work that has

predominantly focused on the how of reading rather than the love of reading. Further studies of pre-service literacy programs might also focus on the relational engagement of pre-service teachers with their students as well as their cooperating practitioners. Many teachers often employ practices in their own classrooms that they considered successful when observing during these pre-service experiences.

As this topic is not overly represented in the research, further study on how relational engagement impacts learning and reading in middle-school classrooms could provide valuable information to the field of educational and psychological research. An exploration of how best to create classrooms which support relational engagement and develop relational pedagogy may also yield helpful information for educational researchers, pre-service teacher programs, and school districts.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of ten sixth-grade readers as they participated in a student-directed book club in order to look at their relational engagement around reading. Specifically, this study asked, “What factors impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers participating in a student-facilitated book group with self-selected texts?” with two related sub questions:

- How do student-peer, student-text, and student-teacher interactions impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers?
- How do increased opportunities for choice, voice, and autonomy impact the relational engagement of sixth-grade readers?

Qualitative research was utilized in order to understand the perspectives and experiences directly from the participants, while also allowing me to investigate the multiple layers that

existed within the research questions and the complex theoretical construct of relational engagement. A mini-ethnographic case study was chosen to conduct a twelve-week exploration of this bounded system in order to provide insight into the abstract idea of relational engagement in the reading classroom. The case was bound by its three-month duration as well as by the singular school in which the participants were students.

The participants in this study were ten sixth-grade students from one American school. All ten participants were students of record of mine and ranged in age from eleven to twelve years. It was essential that these students had no prior relationship or connection to the researcher, hence the study was conducted at the start of the school year. These ten participants were diverse in gender, ethnicity and reported reading interest. Data were collected in a multi-step process which began with surveys, then observations, then post-surveys, and finally one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Additional exit-ticket reflections were collected from participants at the end of each text's discussion meetings. Data were analyzed using open coding.

Based on the data collection and analysis process, the following major findings were generated:

- The relational engagement of these sixth-grade readers increased when they found the reading to be relevant and meaningful to their own individual experiences.
- For these ten students, self-efficacy for reading increased before self-concepts changed.
- For these sixth-grade participants, increasing the level of autonomy that they felt in their reading classroom increased their level of participation.
- Relationships with peers were essential to the relational engagement of these sixth graders.

- For these ten participants, the teacher-created learning environment fostered relational engagement.

The implications of these findings suggest reading classrooms need a more positive student-focused approach and recommend reading pedagogy needs to be more relational. If relational engagement around reading is to increase, the reading classroom is the place to start, and the reading teacher plays a vital role in fostering this growth. Further research on the construct of relational engagement in the classroom, the positive impact of student led learning, and how to include relational pedagogy approaches in methods courses for pre-service teachers would be beneficial to further develop these ideas.

This study was limited by its sample, which was small and did not accurately reflect the socio-economic and reading achievement distribution of middle-school readers. Another potential limitation to the research is that it was conducted in the school district in which I work, in the classroom where I teach, with the students under my instruction. However, I did make sure to exclude any students with whom I had had a prior relational connection, and only included participants that had no prior experiences with me. Nevertheless, critics of insider research often point out that research in one's own setting and classroom environment creates ethical issues.

Despite its limitations, this study provided valuable insight into the perceptions and experiences of sixth-grade students engaging in a self-directed book club and contributes to the growing body of research which supports the inclusion of autonomy, choice, relevance and self-efficacy as factors in the engaging classroom. It also contributes to the more limited field of research regarding relational engagement in the classroom and the development of relational pedagogy. While these ten participants echoed the value and importance of these aspects in their reading experience, many teachers still struggle to implement them due to curriculum mandates

and classroom management challenges. This illuminates an issue of dire importance in the nation's reading classrooms as well-meaning districts and teachers are implementing curricula and practices that are having the opposite effect on students than the relational engagement that is the desired outcome.



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## Appendix A

### Getting-to-Know-You Probes

“Good afternoon, and thank you for being willing to participate in my book group. I wanted to start us off by getting to know one another as readers a bit better. Therefore, I am going to ask the group a few questions about reading.”

- Tell us a little about you as a reader. What’s your reading diet like? What do you like/dislike?
- Did you read over the summer? What did you read? Who made your summer reading choices?
- Where/when is your favorite place/time to read?
- What are some of your favorite things to do for fun?
- What are some of the topics you enjoy reading/learning about?
- When was a time when reading was not enjoyable for you?
- Take a few moments to browse the book piles in front of you. Which of these would you choose to read on your own? Why?\*
- Fish bowl: On an index card, write a question you would like to hear the entire group answer.

\*Books included in the pile will be a sampling of popular, well-reviewed, grade appropriate books across a variety of genres and topics.



## **Appendix B**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Probes**

- Did you like being in this book group? Why or why not?
- What did you think about the texts we read? Did you connect with any of the characters or stories more than others?
- How would you describe your interactions with the other members of the group?
- Was there anything that prevented you from participating as much as you would have liked?
- How was it participating in a group that was student-led?
- How did the group interactions impact you as a reader?
- Would you change anything? If so, what?
- How would you describe your comfort level in the group both at the beginning and at the end?

## Appendix C

### *Motivation to Read Profile Revised (Malloy et al., 2013)*

**Figure 1**  
**Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile reading survey**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Sample 1: I am in \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ Sixth grade
- ☐ Seventh grade
- ☐ Eighth grade
- ☐ Ninth grade
- ☐ Tenth grade
- ☐ Eleventh grade
- ☐ Twelfth grade

Sample 2: I am a \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

Sample 3: My race/ethnicity is \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ African-American
- ☐ Asian/Asian American
- ☐ Caucasian
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic
- ☐ Other: Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

1. My friends think I am \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ a very good reader
- ☐ a good reader
- ☐ an OK reader
- ☐ a poor reader

2. Reading a book is something I like to do.

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Not very often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often

3. I read \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ not as well as my friends
- ☐ about the same as my friends
- ☐ a little better than my friends
- ☐ a lot better than my friends

4. My best friends think reading is \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ really fun
- ☐ fun
- ☐ OK to do
- ☐ no fun at all

5. When I come to a word I don't know, I can \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ almost always figure it out
- ☐ sometimes figure it out
- ☐ almost never figure it out
- ☐ never figure it out

6. I tell my friends about good books I read.

- ☐ I never do this
- ☐ I almost never do this
- ☐ I do this some of the time
- ☐ I do this a lot

7. When I am reading by myself, I understand \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ almost everything I read
- ☐ some of what I read
- ☐ almost none of what I read
- ☐ none of what I read

8. People who read a lot are \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ very interesting
- ☐ interesting
- ☐ not very interesting
- ☐ boring

9. I am \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ a poor reader
- ☐ an OK reader
- ☐ a good reader
- ☐ a very good reader

(continued)

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**Figure 1 (continued)**  
**Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile reading survey**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

10. I think libraries are \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ a great place to spend time  
☐ an interesting place to spend time  
☐ an OK place to spend time  
☐ a boring place to spend time
11. I worry about what other kids think about my reading \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ every day  
☐ almost every day  
☐ once in a while  
☐ never
12. Knowing how to read well is \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ not very important  
☐ sort of important  
☐ important  
☐ very important
13. When my teacher asks me a question about what I have read, I \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ can never think of an answer  
☐ have trouble thinking of an answer  
☐ sometimes think of an answer  
☐ always think of an answer
14. I think reading is \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ a boring way to spend time  
☐ an OK way to spend time  
☐ an interesting way to spend time  
☐ a great way to spend time
15. Reading is \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ very easy for me  
☐ kind of easy for me  
☐ kind of hard for me  
☐ very hard for me
16. As an adult, I will spend \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ none of my time reading  
☐ very little time reading  
☐ some of my time reading  
☐ a lot of my time reading
17. When I am in a group talking about what we are reading, I \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ almost never talk about my ideas  
☐ sometimes talk about my ideas  
☐ almost always talk about my ideas  
☐ always talk about my ideas
18. I would like for my teachers to read out loud in my classes \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ every day  
☐ almost every day  
☐ once in a while  
☐ never
19. When I read out loud I am a \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ poor reader  
☐ OK reader  
☐ good reader  
☐ very good reader
20. When someone gives me a book for a present, I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ very happy  
☐ sort of happy  
☐ sort of unhappy  
☐ unhappy

*Note.* Adapted with permission from the Motivation to Read Profile (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996)



**Figure 6**  
**MRP reading survey scoring sheet**

Student name \_\_\_\_\_

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

Administration date \_\_\_\_\_

Recoding scale

1=4

2=3

3=2

4=1

Self-concept as a reader

Value of reading

\*recode 1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

\*recode 4. \_\_\_\_\_

\*recode 5. \_\_\_\_\_

6. \_\_\_\_\_

\*recode 7. \_\_\_\_\_

\*recode 8. \_\_\_\_\_

9. \_\_\_\_\_

\*recode 10. \_\_\_\_\_

11. \_\_\_\_\_

12. \_\_\_\_\_

13. \_\_\_\_\_

14. \_\_\_\_\_

\*recode 15. \_\_\_\_\_

16. \_\_\_\_\_

17. \_\_\_\_\_

\*recode 18. \_\_\_\_\_

19. \_\_\_\_\_

\*recode 20. \_\_\_\_\_

SC raw score: \_\_\_\_\_/40

V raw score: \_\_\_\_\_/40

Full survey raw score (Self-concept & Value): \_\_\_\_\_/80

Percentage scores

Self-concept \_\_\_\_\_

Value \_\_\_\_\_

Full survey \_\_\_\_\_

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Note.* Reprinted with permission from the Motivation to Read Profile (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996)

## Appendix D

## Reader Self-Perception Scale 2 (Henk et al., 2012)

FIGURE 1 The Reader Self-Perception Scale 2

Listed below are statements about reading. Please read each statement carefully. Then circle the letters that show how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Use the following key:

SA = Strongly Agree  
A = Agree  
U = Undecided  
D = Disagree  
SD = Strongly Disagree

Example: I think pizza with pepperoni is the best kind.

If you are *really positive* that pepperoni pizza is the best, circle SA (Strongly Agree).

If you *think* that it's good, but maybe not best, circle A (Agree).

If you *can't decide* whether or not it's best, circle U (Undecided).

If you *think* that pepperoni pizza is not all that good, circle D (Disagree).

If you are *really positive* that pepperoni pizza is not very good, circle SD (Strongly Disagree).

(PS) 1. Reading is a pleasant activity for me.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 2. I read better now than I could before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 3. I can handle more challenging reading materials than I could before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 4. Other students think I'm a good reader.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 5. I need less help than other students when I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 6. I feel comfortable when I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 7. When I read, I don't have to try as hard to understand as I used to do.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 8. My classmates like to listen to the way that I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 9. I am getting better at reading.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 10. When I read, I can figure out words better than other students.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 11. My teachers think I am a good reader.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 12. I read better than other students in my classes.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 13. My reading comprehension level is higher than other students.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 14. I feel calm when I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 15. I read faster than other students.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 16. My teachers think that I try my best when I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 17. Reading tends to make me feel calm.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 18. I understand what I read better than I could before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 19. I can understand difficult reading materials better than before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 20. When I read, I can handle difficult ideas better than my classmates.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 21. When I read, I recognize more words than before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 22. I enjoy how I feel when I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 23. I feel proud inside when I think about how well I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 24. I have improved on assignments and tests that involve reading.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GN) 25. I think that I'm a good reader.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 26. I feel good inside when I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 27. When I read, my understanding of important vocabulary words is better than other students.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 28. People in my family like to listen to me read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 29. My classmates think that I read pretty well.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 30. Reading makes me feel good.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 31. I can figure out hard words better than I could before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 32. I think reading can be relaxing.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 33. I can concentrate more when I read than I could before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 34. Reading makes me feel happy inside.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 35. When I read, I need less help than I used to.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 36. I can tell that my teachers like to listen to me read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 37. I seem to know the meanings of more words than other students when I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 38. I read faster than I could before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 39. Reading is easier for me than it used to be.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 40. My teachers think that I do a good job of interpreting what I read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 41. My understanding of difficult reading materials has improved.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 42. I feel good about my ability to read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC) 43. I am more confident in my reading than other students.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 44. Deep down, I like to read.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 45. I can analyze what I read better than before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 46. My teachers think that my reading is fine.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PR) 47. Vocabulary words are easier for me to understand when I read now.	SA	A	U	D	SD



NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION; this is the author's final, peer-reviewed manuscript. The published version may be accessed by following the link in the citation at the bottom of the page.

**FIGURE 3 The Reader Self-Perception Scale 2 Scoring Sheet**

Student Name _____			
Teacher _____			
Grade _____		Date _____	
Scoring Key: 5 = Strongly Agree (SA) 4 = Agree (A) 3 = Undecided (U) 2 = Disagree (D) 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD)			
PROGRESS	OBSERVATIONAL COMPARISON	SOCIAL FEEDBACK	PHYSIOLOGICAL STATES
2. _____	5. _____	4. _____	1. _____
3. _____	10. _____	8. _____	6. _____
7. _____	12. _____	11. _____	14. _____
9. _____	13. _____	16. _____	17. _____
18. _____	15. _____	28. _____	22. _____
19. _____	20. _____	29. _____	23. _____
21. _____	27. _____	36. _____	26. _____
24. _____	37. _____	40. _____	30. _____
31. _____	43. _____	46. _____	32. _____
33. _____			34. _____
35. _____			42. _____
38. _____			44. _____
39. _____			
41. _____			
45. _____			
47. _____			
Raw Score _____ of 80	_____ of 45	_____ of 45	_____ of 60
Percentile _____	_____	_____	_____
High 74+	39+	35+	50+
Above Average 66-73	34-38	31-34	44-49
Average 60-65	28-33	28-30	35-43
Low 48-	28-	27-	34

## Appendix E

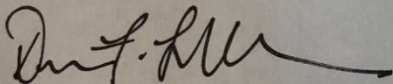
### Principal's Letter Approving Research

July 16, 2018

To whom it may concern;

My name is Dana Labb; I am the principal of the Blanchard Memorial School in Boxborough, MA which is part of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District. Recently, I met with Kathryn Contini who asked to conduct her study titled "Book Groups and the Relational Engagement of Sixth Grade Readers" in my school. After speaking with her and learning the particulars of the project, I am happy to allow Ms. Contini to conduct the study at Blanchard in the fall of 2018. If you have any questions please contact me at [dlabb@abschools.org](mailto:dlabb@abschools.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dana Labb", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dana Labb

Principal

## Appendix F

### *Protecting Human Research Participants Training Certificate*





