Choice and Voice: Student-led Literature Circles for Deeper Understanding of Text

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Context and Problem of Practice

Lighthouse Community Charter School (Lighthouse) is a K-12 charter school in Oakland, California that serves over 700 students. Our mission is to prepare all students for the college or career of their choice, with an emphasis on supporting students *through* college. We began our shift to Common Core standards two years ago, and participated in the pilot run of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium at the end of the 2013-2014 school year. During our preparation for the changing standards it became apparent to me that my students have not yet developed the stamina for the rigor set by the Common Core standards, specifically around reading.

In preparation for Common Core, Lighthouse hosted multiple professional development workshops on the shifting standards; administrators and teachers were sent to off-site professional development; and teachers investigated the implications of the shift on their practice in inquiry groups. The number one takeaway from this work was that students need to spend more time interacting with increasingly complex texts. Additionally, students should grapple with text to extract both surface level details regarding basic comprehension, and deeper meaning including theme and author's purpose. The high demands of Common Core Reading Standards necessitate higher expectations in the classroom regarding how students interact with text.

The increase in rigor clashes with students' current perception of success and learning. Many students perceive academic success as high grades and getting the material on the first try. Common Core stresses the importance of grappling with challenging material, and learning from this struggle, by developing new strategies in order to construct an authentic understanding. The shift in process over product or grappling versus instant understanding has proved to be challenging for some students in my class to accept. Many students give up on challenging texts

if they have not figured out the main idea on the first read, or if there is a large quantity of unfamiliar vocabulary. When encouraged to apply strategies such as close reading or context clues, students will do enough so that it looks like they put in an effort, but often do not aim for understanding. The goal for some students is to complete the required task and then move on to the next one, instead of engaging in deep thinking about complex ideas.

This attitude towards learning is most apparent in how students approach reading. Students' main academic goals are to increase their level on the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Assessment (FPRA), and eventually to exit out of the test altogether. However, there is a disconnect between becoming successful readers and the process necessary to achieve this goal. More often than not, students approach their reading assessments with the goal of pronouncing words and answering questions correctly. Fluency and comprehension *are* weighted importantly for elementary grades, however the expectations grow exponentially for upper middle school. The emphasis is placed on double meaning, theme, author's purpose and craft, and critique. As a result, a common challenge for many students is plateauing around 6th grade level (W and X using FPRA) for multiple years. They cannot get over the hump of deeper meaning and analysis, but show competence in basic comprehension.

This challenge is not unique to an assessment setting. Students struggled to extrapolate information about theme, characterization, conflict, and author's craft for our unit on *The House on Mango Street* and a Gary Soto author study. Their dialectical journals showed misconceptions about what is and what is not author's craft. Similar to their approach to FPRA assessments, many students picked random selections of texts and made an attempt to analyze their selections by writing, "This shows author's craft" with no further explanation. The same was done for characterization, setting, and theme. This showed me that, even in a low pressure environment, students were not interacting with text in a manner that led to deeper understanding.

Adding to my concern was the fact that the 5-8 Humanities Inquiry Group spent the past academic year investigating and implementing close reading strategies specifically for deeper understanding. We developed common language, rubrics, and approaches, and explicitly taught and modeled *how* to close read and discuss their ideas about texts in a Socratic seminar setting. However, students either did not see the value in close reading and discussing ideas with peers, or have difficulty doing so in 7th and 8th grade. These difficulties will likely increase as we continue to move toward aligning with Common Core and students are required to take new high-stakes tests that place an emphasis on reading and synthesizing ideas.

Student work, data from FPRA assessments, and general interactions with students have all led me to the same conclusion: Students are not engaging with texts in a manner that promotes deeper analysis and understanding, leading many to plateau at a 6th grade reading level.

Literature Review

Introduction to Literature

My focus for the literature review was to search for confirmation that my problem of practice is urgent and relevant for students' success, and that an intervention could have a positive impact on achievement. I am familiar with the impact of the problem on my own classroom, but wanted more information on the implications for students once they get to high school and college.
I will first explore the growing disparity between what incoming college freshmen are expected to do, in regards to reading, and what students are able to do upon graduating high school. Next, I will connect this problem to the implementation of Common Core State Standards, and narrow in on the new requirement of reading complex texts. Then, I will investigate different strategies

recommended for students to access and interact with complex texts, including generating student buy-in and motivation. Finally, I will examine the benefit of literature circles for the purpose of getting students to communicate with each other about their own understanding of texts, and analyze deeper meanings.

The Growing Need for Students to Be Prepared for College Rigor

The interest in post-secondary education is growing. In 2004, over 90% of high school seniors declared their interest to attend college, with around 70% actually enrolling in a two or four-year university within two years of graduation (Venezia, et al.). These educational goals are consistent across "race, social class, gender, and student achievement level" (Wimberly, Noeth). Shifts in the U.S. and global economy call for a highly skilled workforce, which makes postsecondary education essential for economic success considering that, "in 1980 college graduates earned 19% more than those with a high school diploma. The earnings gap steadily increased, and by 1999 college graduates earned 58% more than high school graduates" (Wimberly, Noeth). As the demand for college degrees grows, so does the gap between what graduating high school students are able to do and what most colleges expect of their incoming freshmen (ACT, 2006). In fact, "Only 51 percent of ACT-tested, 2005 high school graduates are ready to handle the reading requirements for typical credit-bearing first-year college coursework." (ACT, 2006). With the increase in both college aspirations and the skill gap of high school seniors, many students are forced to enroll in remedial courses during their first two years of college (ACT, 2006). More and more students are starting their post-secondary education lacking college readiness skills. College readiness is defined as, "the level of preparation students need in order to be ready to enroll and succeed without remediation in credit-bearing entry-level coursework at a two- or four-year institution, trade school, or technical school"

(ACT, 2004). Remedial coursework often deters students from persisting with their college education and completing their degree coursework. More specifically, "seventy percent of students who took one or more remedial reading courses do not attain a college degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment (ACT, 2006). Those who do not need to take a remedial course perform decidedly better, with 58% earning their Bachelor's degree (Wyatt, et al.). Low reading ability is one of the major causes of the lack of college readiness in first year college students (ACT, 2006). Reading is required for most college classes, not just English, which contributes to the difficulty many students are facing. The ACT report "Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness and Reading" reports on the growing problem of college readiness in regards to reading:

> Much has been written about the literacy problem in U.S. high schools. Recent trend results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress for the period 1971–2004 show that, while average reading scores for 9-year-old students in 2004 were the highest they have ever been in the assessment's history, scores for 13-year-old students have risen only 3 points since 1975 and scores for 17-year-old students have dropped 5 points since 1992 (Perie, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005).According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2002, 2003), approximately six million of the nation's secondary school students are reading well below grade level. More than 3,000 students drop out of high school every day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003), and one of the most commonly cited reasons for the dropout rate is that students do not have the literacy skills to keep up with the curriculum (Kamil, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003).

A potential underlying cause of this growing problem is the recent focus given to elementary reading instruction, specifically decoding. While this effort was well warranted, it was also narrow; hardly any attention was paid to "the core of reading: comprehension, learning while reading, reading in the content areas, and reading in the service of secondary or higher education, of employability, of citizenship" (Biancarosa, C., & Snow, C. E.).

Acquiring basic reading skills used to be adequate in order to attain reasonable economic success and establish a middle class lifestyle. However, growing complexity in workplace texts

now requires employees not to just decode, but to comprehend, interpret, and analyze (Biancarosa, C., & Snow, C. E., ACT, 2006). Essentially, while workplace and college expectations have evolved, secondary education has remained stagnant.

Another potential cause of the disconnect between what students are asked to do for their K-12 education, and what is expected of them at the university level (Venezia, et al.). Secondary and post-secondary institutions do not collaboratively align their expectations, so students are forced to navigate these changing expectations on their own (Venezia, et al.). High school teachers and college professors have different standards regarding what students should know and be able to do in order to move to the next level. More alignment with postsecondary rigor can help create a smoother pipeline from middle school to college (Vitale, Schmeiser). One of the reasons Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed and implemented by many states is that they aim to close this gap (NEA Education Policy and Practice Department Report, 2010).

Common Core Standards Urge Teachers To Use More Complex Texts

> "The third, and perhaps most important, reason that the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) is designed to close the knowledge gap is that it is language-centered (not image-centered) and reading-based. This is crucial for advanced cognitive development, not only because it requires students to develop habits of thought that force the brain to translate symbols into concepts, but also because it recognizes that facts and information acquired through careful and intensive reading are the foundation for all knowledge."
>
> J. M. Anderson
>
> *Common Core Standards Can Save Us*

In addition to the low reading readiness of graduating high school students, "Reading Between The Lines" also reports that, "performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are likely to be ready for college and those who are not. And this is true for both genders, all racial/ethnic groups, and all family income levels"

(ACT, 2006). However, K-12 textbooks have *decreased* in complexity over the years, even though many people agree that college and workplace reading has steadily *increased* in complexity (Hill). The CCSS acknowledge this truth and push teachers to engage their students in "a broad range of high quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts to be college and career ready" (Fang & Pace). More specifically, Common Core Anchor Standard 10 states that students should be able to "read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently (corestandards.org). This emphasis on text complexity will influence the types of texts students read, the assessments they complete, and how they are evaluated (Hiebert). Additionally, teachers are encouraged to adjust the types of texts students are reading in class by using "a 50/50 balance between informational and literary texts in grades K–5, progressing toward a 70/30 blend in upper grades" (Hinchman & Moore). Complex texts need not be the classroom textbooks, as these do not make National Common Core Curriculum's list of exemplar complex texts, but rather selections of, "rich and varied examples of journal articles, poems, historical primary source documents, nonfiction books, and novels" (Hill).

Unfortunately, what can be considered a complex text does not get much more detailed than the above description. Although tools exist to measure text complexity, it is mostly left up to administrator and teacher judgment to determine grade level appropriate texts (Hiebert). While Standard 10 "defines a grade-by-grade staircase of increasing text complexity that rises from beginning reading to the college and career readiness level", there are disagreements regarding how to best measure complexity (Hiebert). In general, teachers should look for three factors when determining text complexity: qualitative, quantitative, reader & task.

(corestandards.org)

Measuring quantitative aspects of a text includes readability factors such as vocabulary and sentence length (corestandards.org, Hiebert). Lexiles are levels established through a formula that takes "a log of the mean frequency of the words in the text [and] is used in a formula with the mean sentence length" and the CCSS have outlined exact levels appropriate for each grade, using Lexile measures (Hiebert). However, certain texts can score surprisingly high or low using Lexile standards based on the content and structure of the text. For example, "Hemingway's (1926) *The Sun Also Rises* has a Lexile of 610 that falls in the low end of the CCSS Grade 2–3 band". This is due to complicated formulas involving sentence and word length, frequency of high-level words, and the difficulty of measuring syntax. (Hiebert). Using qualitative factors is the suggested remedy to counteract the mathematical flaws in measuring text complexity. Since there is not any formula for qualitative factors, teachers and/or administrators must evaluate texts using their best judgment regarding the levels of meaning, structure, language conventions and clarity, and knowledge demands (Hiebert). The chart on the following page, pulled from the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, gives a clear breakdown of the spectrum of complexity using qualitative measures.

Dimension	Very complex --Slightly Complex			
Meaning	Meaning: Several level/layers and competing elements of meaning that are difficult to identify, separate, and interpret; theme is implicit or subtle, often ambiguous and revealed over the entirety of the text	Meaning: Several levels/layers of meaning that may be difficult to identify or separate; theme is implicit or subtle and may be revealed over the entirety of the text	Meaning: More than one level/layer of meaning with levels clearly distinguished from each other; theme is clear but may be conveyed with some subtlety	Meaning: One level/layer of meaning; theme is obvious and revealed early in the text.
Text Structure	Narration: Complex and/or unconventional; many shifts in point of view and/or perspective Order of Events: Not in chronological order; heavy use of flashback Use of Graphics: If used, minimal	Narration: Some complexities and/or unconventionality; occasional shifts in point of view and/or perspective Order of Events: Several major shifts in time, use of flashback Use of Graphics: If used, a few illustrations that support the text	Narration: Largely simple and/or conventional; few, if any, shifts in point of view and/or perspective Order of Events: Occasional use of flashback, no major shifts in time Use of Graphics: If used, a range of illustrations that support selected parts of the text	Narration: Simple and conventional; no shifts in point of view or perspective Order of Events: Strictly chronological Use of Graphics: If used, extensive illustrations that directly support
Language Features	Conventionality: Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language Vocabulary: Generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading Sentence Structure: Mainly complex sentences often containing multiple concepts	Conventionality: Complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language Vocabulary: Some use of unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language Sentence Structure: Many complex sentences with several subordinate phrases or clauses and transition words	Conventionality: Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning Vocabulary: Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational language; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic language Sentence Structure: Simple and compound sentences, with some more complex constructions	Conventionality: Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand Vocabulary: Contemporary, familiar, conversational language Sentence Structure: Mainly simple sentences
Knowledge Demands	Life Experiences: Explores many complex and sophisticated themes; experiences are distinctly different from the common reader Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge: Many references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements Subject Matter Knowledge: requires extensive, perhaps specialized prior content	Life Experiences: Explores many themes of varying layers of complexity; experiences portrayed are uncommon to most readers Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge: Some references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements Subject Matter Knowledge: requires moderate amount of	Life Experiences: Explores few themes; experiences portrayed are common to many readers Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge: Few references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements Subject Matter Knowledge: requires some prior content knowledge	Life Experiences: Explores a single theme; experiences portrayed are everyday and common to most readers Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge: No references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements Subject Matter Knowledge: requires only everyday content knowledge

	knowledge	prior content knowledge		

While a text may measure low using only Lexile measures, qualitative factors consider elements that cannot be quantified, and thereby up the complexity, which is why using both factors is necessary when selecting texts. Lastly, considering the reader and the task assigned with the reading affect the level of complexity. If students are asked to read and *summarize* a text with a low quantitative complexity, but high qualitative complexity, this is not adequate. The task itself needs to fit in with the level of complexity, which summarizing does not. The complexity level increases if students are asked to read that same text, but asked to *analyze* the events from the perspective of different characters, or uncover hidden meaning. The task need to mirror the complexity of the text. Reading tasks can also vary in complexity depending upon "the degree to which students are asked to be independent in the reading task and the level of open-endedness there is in both the kinds of response that is required from reading and in the time period that students have for the task" (Hiebert). All three factors – quantitative, qualitative, and reader/task - must be considered when selecting texts to read and interact with in class.

Reading Strategies to Engage With Complex Texts

Selecting complex texts is challenging enough, but teachers also have to come up with instructional strategies to get students to access and interact with these texts. This task is even more complicated considering that most middle school students report, "increasingly negative feelings about reading (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995), including less interest in reading and lower competence beliefs regarding their reading ability" (Fulmer & Frijters). Adding complex texts to already negative feelings about reading can make the transition to CCSS difficult for both teachers and students. Close reading, when executed appropriately, can be a

potential strategy to get students to authentically engage with complex texts (Cole). Close reading has many definitions and manifestations (Cole, Doblar, Workman, Hinchman & More), because the introduction to the CCSS is vague and open to interpretation: "Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature" The most concise definition for close reading comes from Elizabeth Dobler's *Authentic Reasons for Close Reading: How to Motivate Students to Take Another Look*: "Close reading entails returning to the text multiple times for multiple reasons". Qualitatively complex texts often have double meaning and unique structures requiring multiple reads in order to, "extract this meaning through careful and thorough analysis and reanalysis, with each subsequent return to the text based on a unique purpose" (Dobler). Other literature (Cole,Workman, Hinchman & More) agrees that close reading involves multiple reads through a complex text, but the focus and purpose can be left to teacher discretion. Dobler supplies an example of multiple reads for different purposes as, "One pass with the text may focus on the details or story structure. The next may seek to define the author's craft or ways the author utilizes dialogue, description, or other literary techniques to convey ideas. A third encounter with the text may entail an analysis of the theme, a character's motivation, or the thread linking ideas together". With each interaction with the text, readers are able to uncover deeper meanings and go beyond basic comprehension. The focus of the reads can be tailored to fit the lesson, unit, or skill set being taught in the classroom.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey ran an afterschool intervention with struggling middle school readers to uncover effective strategies that will help students access complex texts, while also promoting overall reading growth. They documented their findings in the article *Close Reading as an Intervention for Struggling Middle School Readers*. For their intervention, Douglas and

Fisher used five facets of close reading: short, complex passages, repeated readings, annotation, text-dependent questions, and discussion of text. There was a control group that received, "standard supplemental intervention, which included a combination of computerized interventions, teacher-led small-group instruction, and independent reading", while the experimental group focused on close reading of complex texts. The results of the intervention promoted the effectiveness of close reading as an intervention for struggling readers:

> It is important to note that this assessment is criterion based and leveled by grade. Thus the seventh-grade assessment is more difficult than the sixth-grade version, given the higher standards. For the 75 students who completed the study, 48 (64%) made at least one level increase (e.g., from Far Below Basic to Below Basic or from Below Basic to Basic), 26 (35%) achieved the same score on the more difficult test, and 1 (1%) performed worse than the previous year. For the 247 students who participated in the traditional after-school program, 30 (12%) improved by one or more levels, 181 (73%) achieved the same score on the more difficult test, and 36 (15%) performed worse.

Fisher and Frey also noted that unexpected results of the intervention were increased attendance, motivation, and engagement. Students in the experimental group were less likely to leave the afterschool program early, and reported higher self-perception of themselves as readers. These auxiliary findings lead to an important, and sometimes, overlooked detail regarding adolescent readers: students need to be *motivated* before they can be expected to engage in a challenging task (Cole).

The Miriam-Webster Dictionary defines motivation as, "a force or influence that causes someone to do something". When it comes to reading complex texts, teachers can use the goals of getting students ready for the college or career of their choice as motivation, but students might need a more narrow and short-term focus. Students who are motivated to complete a task are more likely to fully participate in classroom activities and tend to be more academically successful overall (Cole). In her article about close reading and motivation, Jill E. Cole points

out a distinct difference between motivation and engagement, while noting that the two are interrelated. Motivation promotes student achievement, produces engagement, and "together, motivation and engagement are essential players in the effort to help students read closely and comprehend complex text better" (Cole). Motivation can come in many forms, and can be extrinsic, intrinsic, or a mix of both. Cole argues that the intrinsic rewards of becoming stronger readers and experiencing moments of accomplishment should take precedence over extrinsic rewards that promote prizes. She believes intrinsic motivation can be incorporated into instruction choosing engaging texts, beginning with essential questions, reading aloud, providing choice, closing a lesson, and celebrating accomplishments. Other literature (Cummins, Workman) add text-dependent questions as a strategy to increase both motivation and engagement in close reading.

Text dependent questions are, "questions that draw the reader back to the text to discover what it says, have concrete and explicit answers rooted in the text, and frame inquiries in ways that do not rely on personal opinion, background information, or imaginative speculation" (Workman).

Not Text-Dependent	**Text-Dependent**
In "Casey at the Bat" Casey strikes out. Describe a time when you failed at something. In "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" Dr. King discusses nonviolent protest. Discuss, in writing, a time when you wanted to fight against something that you felt was unfair. In "The Gettysburg Address" Lincoln says the nation is dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Why is equality an important value to promote?	What makes Casey's experiences at bat humorous? What can you infer from King's letter about the letter that he received? ."The Gettysburg Address" mentions the year *1776.* According to Lincoln's speech, why Is this year significant to the events described in the speech?

(Fisher and Frey)

They require students to interact with the text for details as small as word choice, to larger conceptual ideas shared across multiple texts. Text-dependent questions can be leveled so that students are being slowly released to be independent with complex texts. Students will need to feel success on a more concrete level before they can build confidence around higher-level questions (Workman). Close reading is a key strategy when answering text-dependent questions because the answers are not based on ability to recall information; nor do they ask for readers' personal experiences. Instead, readers are required to annotate the text and read for a purpose with the goal of finding textual evidence that supports their ideas (Fisher and Frey). Non-text dependent questions can often be answered without even reading the text and do not promote interacting with complex texts. Students can use their opinions, personal experience, or sometimes skim the reading to provide sufficient answers to these types of questions (Workman). This does not promote deeper thinking and also does not give students any reason to interact with the text. On the contrary, text-dependent questions require students to use higher order thinking skills, which means they are "truly participating in the type of literacy instruction and learning that the CCSS Initiative envisioned when they developed the standards to begin with (Workman). Fisher and Frey used text-dependent questions in their intervention and also incorporated student discussion of text to promote idea exchange and, ultimately, a deeper understanding of what was read. Pushing students toward peer facilitation can lead to deeper understanding, as well as agency of their own learning.

Using Literature Circles to Promote Deeper Understanding?

Cooperative leaning has long been accepted as an effective way to engage students in learning and increase equity of voice in the classroom (Kagan; Johnson, Johnson, Roseth; Dotson). Having students work together in groups to achieve a common goal increases positive

interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction (Dotson). Dr. Spencer Kagan has published numerous works on the positive impact of cooperative learning, as opposed to a teacher-centered structure: "We now know that there are many styles of learning and multiple intelligences. What works for some, may not work well for everyone. Therefore, we need a variety of strategies to reach and teach our students with different learning styles and intelligences. If we always use lectures and independent exercises, we may inadvertently create barriers to English learning for many students" (Kagan). Dr. Kagan also argues that cooperative learning leads to achievement. The question remains which type of cooperative learning structure would most benefit readers struggling to construct deeper meaning of complex texts. Could literature circles be the answer? Or are they contributing to students opting out of in depth analysis? The answers to these questions vary and seem to rely heavily on the actual planning and execution of the literature circles.

Harvey Daniels' 1994 book, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in The Student-Centered Classroom* started the conversation about student-run book clubs in classroom as a way to increase engagement and comprehension. He suggested that teachers incorporate choice by letting students choose the book they want to read and the role they want to take on within their group. Daniels recommends four distinct roles that are designed to, "support collaborative learning by giving kids clearly defined, interlocking, and open-ended tasks" (Daniels, 2002). The responsibilities for each role are as follows:

> Connector – make text to self/book/world connections
> Literary Luminary– pull out special or interesting selections of text for group to discuss
> Questioner – generate questions about the assigned reading
> Illustrator – create visual representation of the assigned reading
> *Read, Share, Teach Workshops: Literature Circles, 2d ed*. by Harvey Daniels

Giving students autonomy allows them to freely explore their questions about their texts and take ownership of their learning. As students collaborate and discuss their reading, they push each

other's understanding and partake in higher order thinking (Marchiando).

In theory, the literature circle format seems like an efficient way to get students involved in their own learning and to encourage academic conversation. However, my own experience with literature circle - called learning discussion groups at my school – has been either hit or miss. When a hit, groups shared their ideas, built on each other's ideas, and questioned their own understanding; when a miss, students did not keep up with reading, completed their task sheet without giving much critical thought to their ideas, and engaged in off topic conversation when I was not sitting in on their discussion. Through my research, I found that my experiences were not unique and that other teachers have faced similar hardships. Liz Ferguson, a middle school teacher in Rhode Island, shared her experience in the article *Revisioning Literature Circles*: *Incorporating Comprehension Strategy Instruction in Student-led Discussions:*

> …I have the sinking feeling that something is missing. Though some responses show evidence of deeper level reading, many are superficial at best. In what is required in their roles as Discussion Director, Vocabulary Builder, and Literary Luminary, for example, I find I am not seeing the connecting and questioning that are hallmarks of strong readers; worse, I am not even convinced some students have completed the reading.
>
> I began to notice that some group discussions were limited to students providing a rote reading of their responses from their role sheets in what seemed like no time, and unless I was overseeing each group individually, often degenerating into social time. When I read their written responses and discussion notes, I could see why. The role sheets, in spite of the many changes I had made, seemed in some cases, to be stifling the critical thinking and richer discussion I had envisioned. I also realized that the requirements of a few roles. Vocabulary Builder or Literary Luminary, for example, could be easily met without having to actually do the reading. From student feedback, I learned that many students looked forward to literature circle meetings enthusiastically, but for the wrong reasons. For too many, these weekly meetings were a chance to waste valuable class time, especially for those students who had "gotten away" without even reading that week's pages.

A simple Internet search reveals that literature circles are still a widely used strategy in classrooms despite the possibility of students not actually engaging in real discussion. There are over 5,000 resources available for download or purchase on the Teachers Pay Teachers website, so clearly teachers have found a way to make them work for their students (teacherspayteachers.com). Further research led to possible solutions to common literature circle

problems, including incorporating comprehension strategies and planning in time for student reflection (Lloyd, Sanacore, Ferguson & Kern, Wood, Day & Kroon).

Ferguson's reflection on the effectiveness of her literature circles led her to revise the roles and responsibilities for the students. Her method was to put the focus back on the text, by asking questions that require rereading and interacting directly with the book, rather than on personal experience (Ferguson & Kern). Similarly to the ideas behind text dependent questions explored earlier, Ferguson wanted students to rely on the text itself so that, "in order to meet the requirements of each role, it would be almost impossible to skip or superficially do the reading" (Ferguson & Kern). She decided to keep the roles, worksheets, and the basic format of literature circles, but put the focus back on the text by altering the *task*. The results of combining the basic literature circle structure with text-dependent tasks were more engaged students, higher level thinking, and authentic academic conversations.

Susan Litwiller Lloyd tried a similar strategy to enhance literature circles in her classroom. Like many others, she noticed that, "the literature discussions in my classroom were stilted and assignment driven and did not reflect a genuine give-and-take of ideas" (Lloyd). Instead of revising role responsibilities, Lloyd decided to eliminate roles altogether and narrow in on one specific reading comprehension strategy: questioning. Lloyd modeled question-as-you-read through read alouds and guided reading before eventually releasing students into their literature circles. Through the modeling process, students learned to ask questions that could not be answered by pointing to a specific word or phrase the text, but rather questions that went beyond the text itself and into vocabulary, theme, and author's choices. Some questions were asked simply to clear up confusion that arose from a reading selection, which led to student-driven problem solving and collaboration to promote understanding. Lloyd's approach relied heavily on

slowing down the literature circle process, focusing on reading strategies, and letting students drive the conversation instead of pre-determined role sheets provided by the teacher. Lloyd reflected that her, "letting go of the control of the questions meant that students were not only empowered but were also discovering how to comprehend text using a strategy (Lloyd). The skills cultivated through the process of questioning could be transferred to reading *any* type of text, rather than focusing on one chapter of a specific text.

Although Ferguson and Lloyd took different approaches, they aimed for the same results and included one common element: student reflection. Both educators required students to reflect on the literature circle process in a whole class setting, which allowed students to share and troubleshoot challenges, putting the power back in their hands (Lloyd). Ferguson included self-evaluations using a scaled rubric so students could wrap up their weekly discussion by reflecting on their own contributions to the group. This was a new addition to her literature circle format with the hope that, "clearly identified expectations for preparing, participating and follow-up, would make students more accountable and reinforce all of the criteria that make a successful literature circle (Ferguson & Kern). Reflecting on the text itself, the overall process of the literature circle, and their own contribution to the discussion helps students' literacy development (Sanacore).

Metacognition and Reading Strategies

Metacognition is a necessary skill to become an effective reader (Wilson & Smetana). Thinking about your own thinking is a complex task that requires the reader to, "think about the cognitive processes required to achieve comprehension, which involves monitoring, understanding and self-regulating mental processes. Before any of this is possible, readers must

first recognize when their understanding begins to slip and more information is required. (Wilson & Smetana). However, most reading instruction focuses on what students are doing *after* they read a text, rather than what students are doing *during* their reading of a text (Beck, Sanacore, Wilson & Smetana). This oversight puts the emphasis on what students can recall from the text versus how students are actively engaged with the text as they read (Beck). Instructional models that focus on recall results in students, " fail[ing] to develop the strategies to solve comprehension problems and monitor their own learning with text (Wilson & Smetana). Instead, instruction should promote metacognition, with an emphasis on effective strategies when students get stuck (Beck, Wilson & Smetana). Think alouds and active questioning are both strategies that promote metacognition. They both put the emphasis on the process by "demonstrating the thinking in which learners engage when learning; demonstrating and reinforcing the fact that being knowledgeable is a process of learning and using information, which involves metacognition" (Wilson & Smetana). Isabel Beck's Questioning the Author: An Approach for Enhancing Student Engagement with Text lays out a comprehensive plan for teaching students how to strategically ask themselves questions as they read:

> In a QtA lesson, students are prompted to interact with the text and converse about it through Queries. These general probes are phrased in such a way that they encourage young readers to take notice of a text—to consider meaning and develop ideas, not just passively receive and then retrieve information. Queries tend to be open-ended, and they place the responsibility for building meaning on students. Some examples of Queries are "So, what is the author trying to tell us?" or "Why is the author telling us that now?"

Beck promotes taking on a text one piece at a time to ensure deep understanding, clear up misconceptions, and connect ideas. This approach devalues the after-the-fact approach many teachers use through assigning a section of reading and providing comprehension questions. Emphasizing deeper understanding over basic comprehension may take more time but the effort pays off. As Beck puts it, " Or put another way, the local understanding gets settled sufficiently so that global understandings are founded on solid ground" (Beck).

Conclusion

Based on the literature, I have concluded that the ability and willingness to persist through complex texts is imperative for student achievement. This impacts students from pre to post secondary education and even into the workplace. While the Common Core State Standards are attempting to address the importance of becoming lifelong readers, more work needs to be done in classrooms to prepare students for the shift to complex texts. Part of the work to be done involves student motivation, engagement, and concrete strategies to use with complex texts. Literature circles, when strategically planned and executed with clear goals in mind, *can* be a possible solution to get students to critically analyze and engage with complex texts. With the emphasis on what is done *while* they are reading, and explicitly teaching metacognition, students can move closer to independently engaging with complex texts.

Theory of Action

Problem of Practice	Literature Review	Literature Review	Intervention	Literature Review	Expected Outcome	Research Methods/ Data Collection	Type of Data
What is the context? What is the problem in that context?	What do you know about the problem?	What has been tried in the past to address the problem? What was successful and why?	What are you going to try? Why do you think it will impact the problem? What is your rationale?	What do we know about quality interventions of this kind?	What do you think will change/ improve?	How will you know if it changed/ improved? What data will you collect?	Process or Impact
Middle School Humanities students are not interacting with complex texts to gain a deeper understanding	Reading proficiency of HS school graduates is far below the expectations placed on college freshmen	Close reading – to help students see multiple layers in text in order to move past basic comprehension	Re-teaching close reading and targeted strategies	Close reading helps reveal deeper meaning and helps students pinpoint the areas they need help	Students will self monitor as they read and use strategies when they get stuck – asking questions, re-reading, etc.	1. Pre and post intervention 'how I read' survey	1. Process and impact because the pre surveys will guide my next steps and post surveys will reveal outcomes
	Common Core is requiring more complex texts (both in quantity and complexity)	Text-dependent questions – pushing students to rely on the text instead of personal experience. Promotes re-reading and sets a purpose before reading	Read alouds and model thinking while reading – how and when to stop and clarify, investigate, or predict Literature circles with focus on reading strategies instead of roles	Focusing on what students do *while* they are reading instead of *after* they read promotes metacognition and deeper thinking	Students will go back to the text to find evidence to support their answers (unprompted) Increased participation; more student voice (discussion, questions, partner talks)	2. Lit circle transcripts to analyze how students are collaboratively constructing meaning and to see what they are discussing. Compare to pre-intervention student discussions	2. Process and impact because I will start to see the results of my intervention as well as areas of challenge my students are still facing
	Cooperative learning, specifically literature circles, can either detract or add to students' engagement – depending how they are structured	Aligning literature circle tasks with reading strategies that require using the text itself – promotes reading with a purpose beyond completing a task	Slow release to independence to promote transferability of skills • Whole group using The Giver • Heterogeneous grouping using short stories • Homogeneous groups for leveled choice books	Establishing structures with clear expectations and purposes promotes self guided work	Students will push each other's understanding and analysis of the text by asking questions on building on thoughts/ideas	3. Students independent reading journals. Specific attention to the types of questions they are asking themselves about the text	3. Process because I can monitor their use of strategies and buy-in to the intervention in an independent setting
	Too much emphasis has been put on 'read and recall' models of instruction and moving through texts quickly	Developing questioning strategies as a way for students to start interacting with text		Slow release from whole to small group allows teacher to troubleshoot areas of confusion and reteach strategies when necessary	Students will begin to think about and discuss beneath the surface meaning (theme/message, author's purpose)	4.Student interviews re: -their choice book - lit circles purpose -view on reading	4. Process and impact: Student response will allow me to make necessary adjustments and see the impact of the intervention
	Engagement and motivation are precursors to academic success	Incorporating student voice and choice for book selection and group work	Designing an interactive procedure for evaluation and selecting texts based on reading level and interest	Motivation and engagement can be precursors to investment and academic success		5. FPRA data – observation notes of strategies students use 6. "Are you a reader" survey vs. "Did you enjoy your book survey"	5. Impact because the ultimate success is transferability across situations, including reading assessment 6. Impact – how more choice affected their attitude towards reading

Intervention and Data Collection Plan

My intervention and data collection plan consisted of a pre and post surveys, targeted instruction around questioning while reading, incorporating more student choice with text selection, whole class and small group reading discussions, and student interviews.

The initial 'How I Read' survey was created with Google Forms and completed in class. Students were informed that their names would not appear on their responses and that the data would be used to gain a better understanding of the cohort as a whole in order to plan future reading instruction. I wanted to see if my own observations regarding my students' approach to reading was in line with their self-perceptions. Additionally, knowing that my research was steering me towards questioning as an emphasized reading strategy, I wanted to see where it ranked with my students.

The survey data confirmed that questioning was the least used strategy amongst my students, so I developed targeted instruction around questioning for our work with The Giver. I took a depth over breadth approach by slowing down the pace for reading the text and taking time to question and infer. We listened to the audio of The Giver in class and stopped at predetermined inquiry points. Student discussed with their tablemates any questions that came to mind based on the text selection and then shared whole group. They then recorded questions and predictions in their reading journals for more in depth discussion in future literature circles.

As we began to get to the meaty parts of text around theme and author's message, I narrowed my instruction to different types of questions for different purposes. I introduced the idea of thick versus thin questions and when it is appropriate to ask both types. Thin questions are mostly for comprehension and recall, while thick questions are text based, may require making an inference,

and push the reader beyond the text. As students were released to finish The Giver on their own, they were instructed to continue recording questions as they read, and bring their ideas to literature circles and Socratic Seminar.

While the targeted intervention prepared students to read their text in a new way, the heart of my intervention took place in the student-run literature circles. We ran practice circles for The Giver with emphases on understanding the goals and purpose of literature circles and understanding what is needed to accomplish these goals. I sat in with each group, recording both their discussion and their behaviors, including if students were using evidence from the text; rereading; adding on to each other's thinking; and helping each other understand and analyze the text. These circles were considered practice because the whole class was reading the same text and we would end each circle session with a whole group reflection on the both the process of circles and ideas about the text itself. Each group also got to run a fishbowl style circle and receive feedback from peers regarding areas of strength and challenge. This slow rollout of circles was meant to prepare them for their upcoming choice book groups, which would mean less whole group instruction and less teacher monitoring of their understanding.

For the choice book literature circles, I had students set their own reading pace and topics to discuss in their circles. Each student was given a reading journal with prompts and space to record their ideas – almost like a running record. There were pages for basic chapter notes, text questions, beyond the text questions, dystopian elements (theme), and characterization. Students were given loose requirements for journal entries so I would be able to ascertain how they engaged with their books independently. The original plan was for each group to engage in three literature circles before every group came together in Socratic seminar. However, homework completion challenges, combined with standardized testing breaking up the flow of class time,

students were not far enough along in their books to have new topics to discuss. Each group completed two official circles with me transcribing their ideas, and met two times to discuss and prepare for Socratic seminar.

When I first planned my intervention, my main data points were my own observations, student work, and student survey responses. As data started to roll in, I realized I was missing an incredibly important data point: student voice. Yes, I had their survey responses, but their names were not attached to their answers and the numbers seemed impersonal. I needed to find out how this intervention was impacting them as individuals. I sat down with a randomly selected group of students for an informal discussion about their choice books, literature circles, and journals. Additionally, I added two short surveys about whether or not students consider themselves readers and whether or not they enjoyed their choice book. This decision for extra surveying was made in the midst of my intervention rollout after a conversation with a focus student, which is described in greater detail in my findings and analysis. These interactions immediately made my research come alive and helped me see my intervention from their perspective.

The final discussion-based data point was whole-class Socratic seminars, where students were able to discuss, compare, contrast, and question the texts read in their block. I transcribed the seminars and compared them to a pre-intervention discussion from earlier in the school year. For the purposes of my action research project, I paid special attention to the types of questions students asked each other, how they used and interacted with their texts, and the connections made between texts, themes, concepts, and essential questions.

Once my intervention came to an end, I gave students the post-intervention 'How I Read' survey to see if their strategies or approaches with texts have changed over the last three months.

Throughout the entire intervention, I kept a researcher journal capturing my own wonderings, observations of student behavior, areas of concern, and potential reteaching topics. After a whole group discussion, or a literature circle observation, I wrote down general findings in order to discover whole-class trends and outliers. These reflections often influenced my next lesson and allowed me to cater feedback to specific groups and students.

Research Methods

While I implemented the intervention on all three of my classes, I decided to collect specific data on Block Y, because the students in this class varied in ability, reading level, and investment in school. Within this block, there were four students with Individualized Learning Programs (IEPs); two who had been retained in 7th grade the previous year; and three students new to the school. Another reason for choosing this block was they collectively showed stronger habits of work than my two other blocks. I knew that I needed data for my intervention plan, and the data was often dependent upon my students' completing work. Work completion, both for reading and non-reading tasks, had proven to be a major challenge for this particular cohort so I had to consider habits when selecting my focus group.

Impact Data

I collected data from four sources: student surveys, observations and transcripts of student discussions, student work, and student interviews. The initial survey aimed to give me an idea of what strategies students choose when reading independently. I administered the same survey once my intervention was complete to analyze any shift in responses. There were a selection of students absent on this day who did not get a change to make up the survey. As a result, they

were not given the post-intervention survey in order to ensure accurate data points. The second survey given to students asked them for their opinion on reading in general, and then specifically on their books. I gave the survey on whether or not they considered themselves readers a few days after they started their dystopian books and the survey on their overall enjoyment once their books were completed.

For each student discussion, I sat in for 10 to 15 minutes and transcribed their interactions. I typed what they shared word-for-word, unless they were reading a quote from the text. In these cases, I simply noted that a direct quote was being read. I included my own contributions to discussion in the transcripts, as well any behaviors I observed, such as rereading or annotating text.

Throughout the intervention, I sat down with students to discuss a variety of topics: how these literature circles differed from previous learning discussion groups; the literature circles effectiveness on their understanding; and their overall enjoyment of their choice books. I transcribed these interviews in the same way that I did the student discussions.

At the conclusion of the intervention, I collected all student work for closer review. Throughout the duration of reading their choice books, they were keeping journals where they recorded notes, questions, and general observations about their books. While there were some prompts and directions provided, students were given liberty to record any information that would help them better understand and analyze their books.

Process Data

One of the most valuable tools throughout my entire intervention was my researcher's

journal. It was here that I recorded my thoughts and reflections in the moment; what worked, what needed adjusting, and what seemed to be ineffective. Entering and reading though my thoughts helped me plan lessons, pinpoint my feedback, and notice trends across all three blocks. This process also helped me focus my attention on the intervention, because I was often caught up with day-to-day challenges in my classroom that were sometimes unrelated to my projected outcomes.

Additionally, I used parts of my impact data to influence the process as well. General observations of student work and discussion showed me areas of improvement and success, as well as next steps. The interviews gave me a fascinating perspective regarding how students were feeling about the literature circles process, where they felt successful, and where they required more guidance. This information dictated the kinds of lessons and supports I planned for future classes.

Impact and Findings

Ms. Davi, I Can't Find Three Books That I Like

"There is no such thing as a child who hates to read; there are only children who have not found the right book."
Frank Serafini

Cole's work on motivation, engagement, and close reading influenced the structure of my intervention plan. In theory, if I could create a learning environment where students are motivated and engaged, then they would buy-in to the idea of close reading and interacting with texts on a deeper level. To me, this meant starting with text selection and giving students more choice. I knew that if I assigned books based solely on reading level, I would lose their interest.

During our text selection process, students were intrigued with the self-guided tour of book options and curious as to what books lay beneath the covers. Students were asked to at first chose 2 to 3 books that stood out to them based on the small excerpts written on the book covers. Depending on reading level, students had 2 to 12 book options. During my last block, a student, Cecilia, approached me with a genuine concern. She said, "Ms. Davi, I can't find three books that I like". I started to explain that she could probably find at least two that seemed somewhat interesting to her, but she cut me off. "No, you don't understand. I've found four, but there is only room for three on this worksheet". This particular student is slightly above average with academic achievement, but strongly resists checking out books when we have our regular library visits. She reads to complete work, but is not overly enthusiastic about reading. Her interest in four of the book options was an indication that my goal of increased motivation through engagement was attainable. I followed up with the same student after two weeks of reading her choice book:

> Q: Would you consider yourself a reader?
>
> Cecilia: (shakes her head no, smiling) No, because I need to find really, really interesting books. I will read the back or read a few pages but, if I don't think it is interesting, I will just return it [to the library].
>
> Q: How do you feel about the book you picked for class?
>
> Cecilia: It's all over the place. It gives you so many different kinds of settings and things that you wouldn't expect to happen. It's a book that I would read over and over again. I hope they make a movie out of it.

Not long after this conversation, I polled all of my students on whether or not they consider themselves a 'reader' and gave them the option to explain why or why not. The average "Am I a Reader" score for the 65 students surveyed was a 2.68 out of 5. When asked to explain, many students made comments such as, "I don't like reading but sort of enjoy books when they are interesting" or "I enjoy reading but only the books I get really in to". Upon completing their

choice dystopian books, student ranked their interest levels at 4.03 out of 5[1]. Many students explained that "It had a lot of action", "It was a good adventure book", or "It made me have curiosity and ask a lot of questions, which also enjoyed reading and talking to others about the book".

I also selected a group of students from Block Y, with a wide range of reading ability and academic achievement to sit down and have an open-ended discussion about their choice books:

> Q: How has it been going with the book you're reading for class? How does it compare to other books you've read for past learning discussion groups (LDGs)?
>
> Cecilia: The books we were given [in past LDGs] were based on our reading levels but there wasn't really any choice. I enjoyed this book a lot. We were given options to pick from.
>
> Jackson: With these books we were given more choice and I really understood the book. I was able to pick the book I wanted and enjoyed this book more than the others.
>
> Alicia: This one was more interesting than all the other ones I read. I don't know how to describe, it was just interesting. I was given books before by my reading level, but this time I chose my own book.
>
> Emma: The reading is amazing. It's really intense and really dramatic and it makes me want to keep reading more and more.
>
> Lily: I think my book is good because I'm getting interested and into the book. Some parts have a lot of details that I can imagine.
>
> Lina: The difference was that there are more dystopian and the other ones were just random books. We had to read an answer question, but for these we had to come up with our own questions. Other classes would like give us books we don't know about and we don't know what kind of book it is, and in this one we got a choice of what it is.

I spoke to students in my other two blocks as well, of the 23 people, not one person had a negative comment about their book. The closest to a negative comment came from a student who was worried that she was not reading fast enough, "It's been going okay, but my group, since they like read at faster pace than me, they want to read 50 pages a day. Yeah, it's pretty good. I enjoy it because it's like teens and talking about kids and it's interesting and you never know what kids do and they are like mysterious or something". Based on the wording of my question, I

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[1] See Appendix C for full results

expected more answers like this, or comments on the amount of work they are being asked to do, but all students interpreted the question as, "Do you like this book?" and all of them answered in the affirmative. Students who are reading the first book in a series stated that they would voluntarily read the next book just to find out what happens to these characters. The interest in these books spread to the point that students actively sought out the titles they were not reading for class during our subsequent trips to the library and had me make extra printed copies of some of the books so they could read them on their own time. My students both recognized and appreciated the increase of choice in their learning through book selection. Increased choice led to more engagement with the tasks. The question still remained whether this increase in engagement would lead to stronger buy-in to the taught strategies, and whether these strategies would be practiced in literature circles to promote a deeper understanding and analysis of texts.

From "What Happened?" to "Why Does This Matter"

In October students participated in a Socratic Seminar as culmination of a Gary Soto author study. Students read a handful of short stories together in class and were assigned a Gary Soto novel in their literature discussion groups. Books and groupings were based mostly on reading level, and students prepared for discussion and Socratic by completing dialectical journal entries focused on setting, characterization, author's craft, and theme. For Socratic, guiding questions were provided and the objective was to analyze similarities and differences in Soto's texts, specifically around setting, characterization, author's craft, and theme. It was during this Socratic that I started to notice the surface level conversations regarding what happened in each text, rather than an in depth discussion with analysis and text evidence. Here are a few excerpts from the conversation:

> Sophia: In my book he changes by in the beginning when he turned into a 'chimp' he was surprised and freaked out but by the end he got used to it by showing more responsibility
>
> Joshua: In my book she didn't want to move but she did and she found her cat
>
> Guiliana: When Gary was smaller he was the one who was mature – his brothers and sisters were always messing around and then he grew up and was more mature
>
> Marcus: Gary didn't really like girls but in the end he gets more mature and him and his friends start to like girls

Students *did* talk about one of the guiding questions (How did the characters change from the beginning to the end of your book?), but they stopped short of both providing textual evidence to support their ideas and discussing any similarities between the types of changes Soto has his characters experience. There was a lot of room left for in depth analysis of the types of characters Soto creates and why he creates them. A different group of students overlooked another opportunity to delve into Soto's craft and target audience:

> Arianna: Soto adds Spanish words to books
>
> Cameron: I agree…*reads a quote from the text*…that shows Soto uses Spanish words in his writing.
>
> Teacher: Why do you think he uses Spanish words?
>
> Abigail: I think he does that because he wants to put character, yeah. Sometimes they use Spanish words for a reason…*reads a quote from the text*….that shows that his neighborhood are partly Mexican because he's saying everyone is going inside to watch their TV shows.
>
> Jaden: Connecting to [that] idea that mostly people are Mexican…*reads a quote from the text*…he uses Spanish words to involve his religion.
>
> Peyton: Don't you guys notice or think that it kinda tells you about the environment that he lives in? Soto tells us that he grew up in a mainly Hispanic neighborhood. Don't you think that's evidence of where he grew up?
>
> … Break in conversation (silence)…
>
> Riley: Has Soto learned to be more responsible?

In this excerpt, students provided text evidence to support their ideas, but once again, missed the opportunity to go deeper with their thinking and analysis. A student brought up an observation that Soto uses Spanish words in his writing and provided a quote that proved this to be true.

Conversation on this topic was about to die off when I provided a prompt to discuss *why* Soto does this. It is easily provable that he uses Spanish words, but a deeper understanding of Soto's craft and purpose is required to analyze *why* he does this. Students started down the road of in depth analysis (he lives in a mostly Mexican or Hispanic neighborhood) but did not complete the trip. Once conversation started to drop, a student quickly steered the topic in another direction.

These two excerpts provide an accurate glimpse into the type of discussions my students were having pre-intervention. They showed potential to have deep discussions, but were lacking the tools. Using The Giver, I modeled how to interact with a text and read for understanding rather than completion. Students practiced this skill whole class, in small groups, and independently as I continued to integrate more texts with similar dystopian themes. Students were asked to prepare for a practice literature circle where they would discuss their ideas and understanding of the texts.

Excerpt from Practice Literature Circle

Riley: What's the conflict in the society?

Veronica: Everybody had to be equal because the emperor took off his mask and I think somebody came in and shot them.

Riley: The Handicapper General. How did the conflict come to an end? I say the conflict was Harrison escaped from jail and he dissented against the rules of everybody being equal. The solution was the handicapper general came and killed them

Veronica: Why did they shoot them? I think it was answered in the summary.

Ellie: Why would they take competing out of the world? Nobody has differences.

Veronica: I think they just didn't want people to get in to arguments.

Riley: They don't want anybody to be angry. They want everybody to be calm. Nobody gets angry or jealous. They are just relaxed.

Isabelle: Nobody would get in to arguments.

Ellie: I put that they don't want people to get hurt. Like in The Giver they took away bad memories.

In this conversation, the students made the decision to figure out the conflict in a short story and and then shifted to unpacking why everybody was forced to be equal in this particular society. They asked and answered their own questions, built on each other's thinking, and even connected the short story back to The Giver. I already started to see small changes in students collaboratively *constructing* understanding and verbalizing their takeaways. In another excerpt, a different group of students delved into deep analysis about emotions in response to another student-proposed question.

> Alicia: Why didn't they want people to have feelings? For The Giver.
>
> Vincent: I think they didn't want feelings because with feelings you get love, and if you fall in love with the wrong person, you make wrong decisions.
>
> Cecilia: From feelings come love, from love comes actions, and the actions might lead to really bad behavior. Only the Elders can make decisions.
>
> Shawn: They didn't have emotions. They didn't feel anything.
>
> Vincent: With feelings you get hate and if someone does something bad to you, you remember it and get them back. People make bad decisions and it would be really bad and even more dystopian.
>
> Jackson: How did they put parents together if there aren't feelings?
>
> Shawn: I think they chose them out. They found things that they acted the same – they put people together who understand each other.
>
> Cecilia: Just like how they watch you so you can have your assignment.

This group started off with an inferential question about the book and took the conversation to a deeper level. Additionally, they built on each other's ideas in a way that was not repetitive and led to a concrete understanding of characters' motivations. Similar to the first excerpt, what stood out to me the most was that the conversation was sparked by a question a student brought to the group. Students made this conversation happen.

I was curious about whether my intervention should be credited for this jump in the quality of

discussion and analysis or if this was just an indicator of students improving from Fall to Spring semester. I sat down with a group of students and asked them to compare past learning discussion groups (LDGs) to their most recent experience in literature circles.

> Teacher: Compare these latest literature circles to learning discussion groups you've had in the past. What has been similar and what has been different?
>
> Cecilia: This one has been better than past groups. It's been more productive. Like in other groups people wouldn't really do the work and we weren't really watched. We would have time to discuss but people would just look at each other's papers and say 'Okay, what are the answers?'
>
> Austin: This one was better since there were better choices of books. The other ones were boring. This work was simpler, we didn't have a teacher on our case so much. We could choose our pace in the books and how we worked in our journals and stuff.
>
> Shawn: Before they never used to ask for your thinking. They just asked plain questions that don't really get in to what you are thinking. What we did this time was more complex and required deeper thinking than before. Before, we weren't given a choice [of what book to read], it was just based on our level, but this time we got to choose which was better.
>
> Wyatt: You have to think more about it. Take notes and read it. Past ones were easier with questions that you could answer. For these books, you could choose the topic you want , not just getting random book you don't like or don't know anything about

I had two distinct takeaways from this conversation:

1. Students know and appreciate when they are given choice in their education
2. Students noticed the increase in quality conversation with the increase in self-guided literature circles.

Having already analyzed the relationship between choice and engagement, I will focus on my second takeaway – the impact of student-run, self-guided literature circles. Providing less structure allowed students to arrive with their own ideas, take their conversation in any direction they pleased, and construct understanding together. The focus became the students' thinking, rather than task completion, and this led to deeper conversations about the text. The loose structure also provided an opportunity for students to interact with their texts in the moment. In previous discussions, many students did not even bother to take out their books, but instead relied on their prep sheets to share their ideas. During the student-run literature circles, all

students had their text out and they frequently went back to reread and/or find new evidence to support or refute ideas. This was a major shift from earlier in the year.

Teach, Reteach, Repeat

As exciting as these shifts were, this positive data did not roll in overnight. In fact, students needed frequent reminders about the purpose and objective of their literature circles. Prior to beginning student-run circles, students were asked to explain their ideas about the purpose and goals of discussion text. Across all three blocks students responded with comments such as, "Share what you think", "Having good ideas and comparing ideas", "To discuss with detail." A few students in my third block said a goal is to "Gain more understanding of the topic." Overall, most students believed that the goal was merely to talk. Even though I clarified that the ultimate goal is a deeper understanding of text through discussion, and reinforced this idea when we did whole group discussion with The Giver, their first literature circles still felt like 'talking' was their main objective. Excerpts from my researcher log confirm this belief:

> Tuesday, May 5, 2015
>
> General Observations: Groups seemed to have a strong sense of what happened in their texts, but were not actively pushing each other to go deeper with analysis. They chose to focus on basic comprehension and started to go deeper when I pushed them, but only when I pushed. I gave them this feedback and they brainstormed next steps for their second circle.

An emphasis on talking also showed up in their plus/delta self-evaluations of the first circle. Over half of the comments in the plus section were about participation: "Shared ideas", "Everyone participated", "Everyone talked and shared an idea", "We all talked", and "Everyone had something to say." The other plus that showed up a lot was running a good circle: "We did a good circle", "We had a good discussion", and " We had good things to talk about". These over generalized comments made me think that students did not yet have a clear image of what a good

literature circle looked and sounded like, and showed me that there was still a heavy emphasis on participation and discussing what happened in the text. I read every plus and delta that students wrote down to each block and asked them for the observations and comments about their own evaluations. Many students noticed the trend of participation being mentioned more than any other aspect of circles. We spent some more time renorming the idea that the ultimate goal is a deeper understanding of the text, not *just* participation. I created an anchor chart to help them visualize this goal, while also showing them that comprehension and surface level discussion is a stepping-stone the actual goal, but not the ultimate goal of literature circles.

Using this chart, students set concrete goals for their next circle in order to try to move towards deeper understanding. Based on their goals, it was clear they were starting to see how to prepare for and facilitate their own discussions: "Each person will come with 3 questions to ask the group", "We will make connections to other dystopian texts", "We will bring our ideas about the theme/author's message." Frequent reteaching pushed students to arrive prepared to have deeper conversations about their text.

In addition to teach, reteach, repeat, I also had to repeatedly emphasize the importance of reading enough text in order to have interesting ideas. One of the main reasons students were having difficulty moving from comprehension to real world connection discussion was because they were not far enough along in their books to uncover the theme and bigger ideas. This was challenging for them to fully understand because they did not know when exactly they would hit the points in their text where the theme would start to break through.

> Thursday, May 7, 2015
>
> Today, I gave students a more concrete example of how far they need to be in order to have authentic discussions. Using The Giver, I filled out a plot mountain that showed the exposition takes up chapters 1-10, the rising action is chapters12-18, and the climatic moment doesn't occur until chapters 19/20. The falling action happens in chapters 21-24. The point was that we could discuss the exposition of the book (the community, rules,

> rituals, etc.) but the real conversation starts when we get to the rising action (choice, color, power, loss, etc.). I truly believe that students are enjoying these books and want to discuss what is happening, however, I am trying to emphasize the importance of moving beyond just 'what happened' and getting into 'what does this mean' and 'why does this matter'. Students have an entire week of testing and then they meet again. I'm confident that they will have many ideas to discuss at this point.

This example gave students greater context regarding at what point theme and author's message become clear. Their deltas on their self-evaluations all included comments on the amount of text they had read so far. Almost all groups opted to not have literature circles and chose to read during class instead. Students realized that a good literature circle required reading the text, preparing ideas, and challenging each other to go beyond basic comprehension.

Your Questions Are Better Than My Questions

A major part of my intervention was focusing on what students are doing *as* they read instead of after they read. My plan was to utilize questioning as the main strategy to get student to read more actively. This shift from prioritizing their questions over teacher-generated questions gave students more ownership and freedom with their reading. Instead of reading a text to find concrete answers for an assignment, the goal was to get student to read for their best understanding by stopping, questioning, and predicting.

When I looked back at the Socratic Seminar transcripts, I found that students asked only 14 questions during the Gary Soto discussion. They relied more on the questions I provided, and only asked each other basic comprehension questions about their texts, which did not take the discussion to a deeper, analytical level. This was not a surprising find, seeing as on my initial reading survey, 25% of students answered that they never ask themselves questions as they read.

As we moved through The Giver and engaged in both whole and small group discussion, a heavy emphasis was placed on student generated questions. At first, any and all questions were

encouraged so students could get an idea about what other noticed while reading. On the first day of the practice literature circles, the amount of questions jumped from 14 to 33 and were all based on students' wonderings as they read. There was an even divide amongst the type of questions being asked: 14 were basic comprehension questions (what happened); 15 were prediction/anticipation questions; and 16 were inference based (required text evidence to provide a logical answer). These questions allowed to students to engage in discussion for 15-20 minutes and use evidence to back up their ideas. By the time students ran their last practice circles, the amount of student generated questions reached 88.

Students seemed to embrace the idea of questioning as they read, so I upped the ante and challenged them to construct questions that would require going beyond the text to provide answers; questions regarding theme and real world connections. Since the ultimate goal is a deeper understanding of the text, the questions needed to increase in complexity. Students worked together in their circles to move beyond basic comprehension questions and pose larger questions to the class. The results were impressive. Groups evolved from asking questions like, "Why couldn't Jonas receive medicine for the pain he feels?" to "What is the difference between emotional and physical pain?". Text evidence from The Giver can be used to answer both questions, but the latter allows for analysis on a deeper level and debatable conversation. Another example of shifting the questions is going from, "What does the Giver mean by the 'wrong choices'" to "Why do people let other with more authority choose what is best for them?". Other examples of beyond the text questions are as follows:

Why do people conform to totalitarian governments?
Why can't people have the opportunity to pick what's best for them?
Why do others pick what they think is best for others?
Why do people dissent from totalitarian governments?
Are emotions friends or foes?
What corrupts anything from the inside and outside?
What is REAL pain?
Can there be wisdom without experience?
Is conforming a sign of surrendering?
If there is safety, does individuality and choice really matter?
Is pain worth having?
Why aren't we all the same?
What does a community need in order to exist?
Will giving individuality mean you are giving away power, honor and authority?

All of these questions connected to the topics and themes explored in The Giver and could also be applied to other dystopian texts and current events. Students were able to provide their own answers to these questions based on their own opinion, and then back up their ideas with evidence from a text. These types of questions allowed for authentic discussion that went well beyond 15-20 minutes like their first practice circle. Brainstorming beyond the text questions became a slight competition amongst my students and they started arriving at class with more questions to share, even on days when we did not have circle. It is important to note that comprehension questions were not discouraged at this point. In fact, all types of questions were still encouraged because they all serve a specific purpose, but there was a heavy emphasis placed on bigger picture questions as we neared the end of the text.

Using questioning as a main strategy allowed students be more aware of their own thinking and ideas as they read. They were able to ask clarifying, inferential, and beyond the text questions to each other and structure their discussion around the topic of their choice. This led to authentic discussion instead of teacher prescribed talking points. The strategy also seemed to

stick with students and they moved into their choice books and became more independent. Survey results showed a large jump in the amount of students who choose questioning as a reading strategy.

February Survey	May Survey
I ask myself questions as I read	
1: I never or almost never do this = 25%	1: I never or almost never do this = 12%
2: I do this only occasionally = 49%	2: I do this only occasionally = 51%
3: I usually do this = 25%	3: I usually do this = 35%
4 I always do this = .01%	4: I always do this = .01%

The biggest change is in the amount of students who chose "I never or almost never do this" as a reading strategy. Half of the students who did not consider questioning as a strategy changed their approach after my intervention. The highest response remained at "I do this only occasionally" but there was also a slight increase in the amount of people who chose " I usually do this". For the February survey, questioning had the third highest percentage of students who said that they never chose it as a strategy, behind only using reference materials and annotating. The May survey showed questioning still lagging behind other strategies like previewing and stopping to think when the reading gets challenging, but there was still a significant shift in students trying it out as a new strategy. Not surprisingly, annotating, summarizing and paraphrasing also made significant jumps from February to May seeing as students were more likely to interact with their text after the intervention.

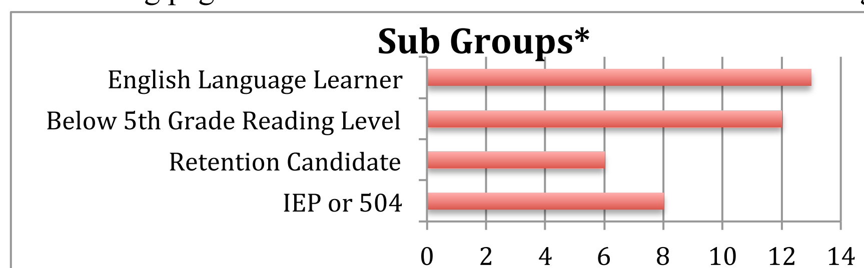
February Survey	May Survey
I ask myself questions as I read	
1: I never or almost never do this = 25%	1: I never or almost never do this = 12%
I summarize after I read a section	
1: I never or almost never do this = 23%	1: I never or almost never do this = 12%
I annotate the text as I read	
1: I never or almost never do this = 29%	1: I never or almost never do this = 14%
I paraphrase to clarify my understanding of the text	
1: I never or almost never do this = 21%	1: I never or almost never do this = 12%

Although I placed a significant emphasis on *one* strategy, students embraced complimentary strategies that helped them prepare for meaningful discussion. Their use of these strategies was evident in the quality of their discussions.

Yeah, But Can These Skills Transfer?

Looking back at the context for my problem of practice, I said one of the most convincing pieces of concrete data that proved my problem of practice was the issue of students plateauing on their reading assessment in 7th grade. I witnessed an inspiring shift in student discussion and engagement with text, but I did not know if students would be able to transfer this newly embraced approach outside the comfort zone of their literature circles. The Spring reading assessment provided some mixed results:

Of the students reading below grade level, 22% did not make any growth or regressed; 28% made .5-.75 years' growth; and 50% made one or more years' growth. More specifically, nine students started the year at Level W – the level at which students tend to plateau; two students remained at W; one student moved to X; one student moved to Y; and five students made two years' worth of growth to end at Level Z. There are many variables that contribute to the rise and fall of reading levels. Of the twenty students who did not make any progress on their reading assessment, many of them fell into one or more sub groups who tend to struggle with reading. The chart on the following page breaks down the number of students in each sub group.



*Students can belong to multiple sub groups. For example, many students who are classified as English Language Learners also read below 5th grade level.

My intervention was effective for students who had mastered basic fluency, but had challenges getting to deeper analysis. However, my intervention did not have a significant impact on students who faced more severe reading difficulties. Fluency and basic comprehension need to precede interpretation and analysis, but my intervention plan focused on the latter. Even though students were provided with books close to their independent reading level, my intervention was missing appropriate differentiation to address the particular needs of students reading far below grade level. Looking back, the loose structure and emphasis on independence was not the proper choice for students who require extra support and scaffolding. I could have utilized literature time better to pull groups and work on specific skills as needed. This intervention was appropriate for students who needed to extra push to go beyond surface level meaning, but adjustments need to be made to address the needs of all readers.

The Great Debates

After reflecting on the strengths and challenges of this intervention in my own classroom, I began to recognize the potential implications of my findings on best practices in general. My researcher's journal is filled with apprehension and second-guessing about my decision making during the intervention. After reviewing notes, two questions arose for which I have yet to find answers:

1. Should depth or breadth be the primary approach to instruction?
2. How much work should middle school students be required to complete independently?

Making the decision to slow my instructional pace meant eliminating content usually taught in 7th grade. Instead of learning about the Renaissance and Reformation, students were honing their critical reading and thinking skills with dystopian texts. Even as I started to see positive results, I

continued to question this approach. Was it more important for my students to gain more content knowledge or develop a strong skill set that could be transferred across content areas? I still do not know the correct answer or if one exists. I do know that my students became readers through this intervention.

The depth over breadth debate extends far beyond my classroom, requiring further discussion. Common Core Standards allow more room to take a depth approach, but content should not be overlooked completely. As discussed in my literature review, there is a disconnect between what K-12 schools teach and what college students are expected to know and be able to do (Venezia, et al). Students need knowledge of the former content standards *and* the skills emphasized with the Common Core Standards. How to accomplish this heavy task should be the topic of another's action research project. From my experience, teachers need support and direction from administrators as well as collaboration amongst content partners in order to make sure students are instructed in a way that promotes both content knowledge and skill development.

A final wondering about the depth over breadth debate is specific to Humanities classrooms. While I believe this instructional tension exists across other content areas, I feel that teachers required to teach two subjects in one class must face this tension more often. I do not believe I would have faced the same kind of pressure if I implemented this intervention in an English class. Teaching Humanities requires that I incorporate History and English Language Arts and each subject comes with required content to cover. For my intervention I sacrificed History content knowledge for reading skills. Both are relevant to Humanities, but students were only able to practice these skills using English Language Arts content. I wonder if my intervention would fit better with an English class, and if it makes more sense to move away from having Humanities as a subject - more questions with debatable answers.

The second great debate topic involves how much independent work middle students should be asked to complete. Before implementing the intervention, I brainstormed potential problems or challenges that I might have to troubleshoot. "Students not completing work" was at the top of my list. In order to sidestep this issue I picked a focus group that seemed most likely to complete their work. Despite this decision, I still ended up using the majority of class time for students to read; and was not able to complete the original plan for three literature circles with choice books because students had not read enough. My researcher's journal is filled with comments about students not doing enough work on their own and arriving unprepared for circles. However, when given time in class, students stayed focused, read, and made journal entries to prepare for Circle. They produced high quality work independently while in a classroom setting, but did not replicate this effort after school. At first, I explained this occurrence by claiming the "habits of work problem" I described early in this project. Yes, many students in my cohort *do* struggle with work completion, and have for quite some time, but could that really explain why *every* literature circle had not done enough reading at home? Probably not. This realization led me to rethink the assumption many educators make regarding when and where students should be required to complete work.

When students moved on to their choice books, I assigned reading as homework because that seemed like a reasonable assignment to complete independently. Class time was reserved for mini lessons and discussions. It took two weeks of frustration before I realized this system was not working. I looked back on the success my class experienced while reading The Giver and my decision to use class time to listen to the audiobook. Originally, I structured class this way in order to slowly roll out the questioning strategy and to promote deeper thinking. As it turns out, a major factor in my students' success was not just that they were given time to practice the *strategy*; it was the fact that they were given ample class time to *read*. Due to reasons and

variables out of my control, many of my students did not have opportunities to fulfill homework expectations. Yet, I was still asking them to read challenging texts independently and was frustrated when they arrived to class without having completed the work.

Just as slowing the pace and choosing a depth approach, deciding to eliminate homework and dedicate class time to reading made me feel uneasy and unsure if this was the right move. My feelings came from a preconceived notion that students need to do homework because they are supposed to do homework. It took a huge mindset shift on my part to accept that reading homework was not right for my students. They needed a quiet space to get their work done, where there would be no interruptions, and peer or teacher help was readily available. They needed to read in class. Once I decided to use class time for reading, students deeply engaged with their texts and had ample ideas to bring to literature circles.

Looking back, it seems like a decision I should have made earlier in the year. I had endless evidence that showed the majority of my students were not in a position to complete homework. So why did I continue to assign it? My best answer to this question is that I believed students *should* be doing homework. They need to practice what was learned in class and show ability to master skills independently. However, this project showed me that it is possible for students to get independent work time during class, in a more structured setting where there is a higher chance of success. Students need to experience success in this type of environment before they can be expected to transition to complete independence outside of school. This worked for *my* students. I do not think I am ready to make a generalization that middle school students should not be required to do homework. However, there needs to be more discussion about the purpose and value of homework, as well as how to leverage work time in class. Similar to the depth over breadth debate, I believe the solution to homework versus classwork lies somewhere in the

middle. There needs to be a balance of both so that students can build confidence and feel supported, while also preparing themselves for rigors of high school and college.

Conclusion

Research shows that reading proficiency is a determining factor in students' academic success from elementary school through college. Middle school is a pivotal time for students to view themselves as readers, and develop strategies to interpret and analyze complex texts. It is also a time when students demand more choice and ownership over their own learning and begin to develop apathy towards challenging academics. With my intervention, I took on the challenge of sparking students' interests in reading, and showing them new ways to interact with text for a deeper understanding. There is more work to be done, but incorporating more student voice and choice appears to be a promising starting point.

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Appendix A

Pre and Post Survey Questions

The following questions are about what you like and do not like to read. Your teacher will not see your answers to the questions.

1. Please rank how much you enjoy reading a book/text of your choice (ex: library or bookstore)

- 1 - Not at all
- 2 - I enjoy reading a little bit
- 3 - I usually enjoy reading

Please explain your answer

2. Please rank how much you enjoy reading books/text given to you in class (ex: The House on Mango Street, Gary Soto books, etc.)

- 1 - Not at all
- 2- I enjoy the readings a little bit
- 3 - I usually enjoy the readings

Please explain your answer

3. When your class visits the library, are you more likely to check out fiction (made up stories) or non-fiction (true stories)?

- Fiction
- Non-fiction
- Why?

Reading Strategies

The following questions are about how you read. Please choose the option that best relates to you as a reader. There are no right or wrong answers. Your teacher will not see your name on your answers.
• 1 means "I never or almost never do this."
• 2 means "I do this only occasionally." (less than 50% of the time)
• 3 means "I usually do this." (more than 50% of the time)
• 4 means "I always or almost always do this."

4. I have a purpose in mind when I read.
5. I preview the text to see what it's about before reading it.
6. I summarize what I read to reflect on important information in the text
7. I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it
8. I use reference materials such as dictionaries to help me understand what I read
9. I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding
10. I stop from time to time and think about what I'm reading
11. When text becomes difficult, I re-read to increase my understanding.
12. I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text.
13. I paraphrase (restate ideas in my own words) to better understand what I read

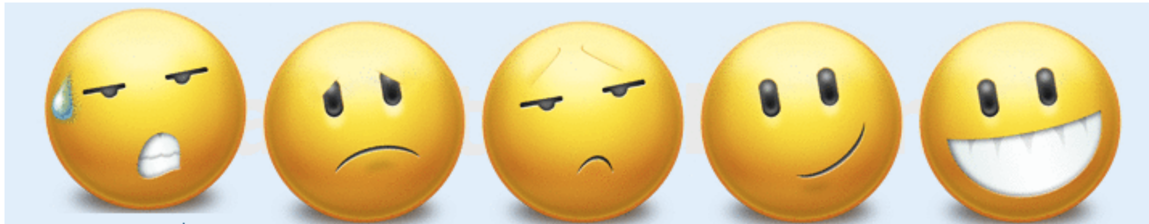
14. When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I'm reading

Your friend tells you that he or she had trouble reading a text. What advice would you give him or her?

Appendix B

Reading and Dystopian Book Surveys

Name:
Do you consider yourself a 'reader'? A person who truly enjoys reading and reads for fun often…



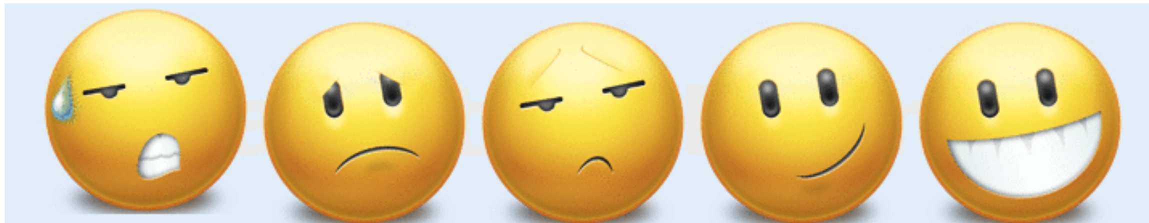
1. NOPE. 2. Eh. 3. Sure 4. Pretty much 5. Totally

Want to explain?

____

____

Name:
Did you enjoy the dystopian book you read for class?



1. NOPE. 2. Eh. 3. Sure 4. Pretty much 5. Totally

Why or why not?

____

____

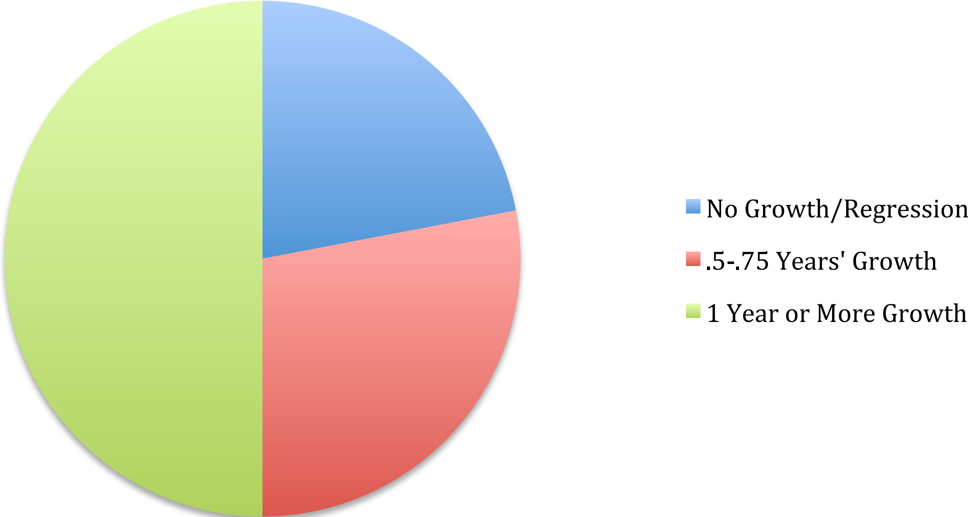
Appendix C

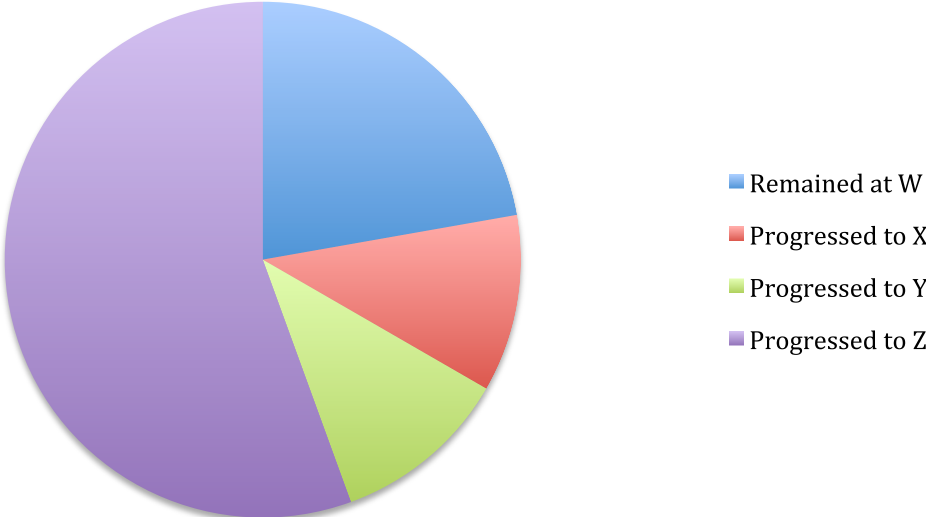
Results of Reader and Dystopian Book Surveys

Student	Reader Survey	Book Survey
1	3	3
2	3	5
3	3	4
4	3	4
5	2	4
6	2	4
7	2	4
8	3	4
9	2	5
10	3	2
11	3	4
12	2	3
13	3	5
14	2	4
15	2	4
16	4	5
17	3	4
18	2	3
19	3	4
20	1	2
21	3	5
22	3	3
23	3	4
24	3	5
25	3	4
26	3	4
27	3	5
28	3	4
29	3	4
30	5	5
31	3	4
32	4	4
33	2	5
34	3	5
35	1	3
36	3	4
37	3	4
38	2	4

39	2	4
40	3	5
41	2	4
42	3	2
43	3	4
44	5	5
45	3	5
46	2	5
47	2	3
48	2	3
49	2	4
50	3	3
51	3	4
52	1	4
53	3	4
54	3	4
55	1	4
56	2	4
57	2	4
58	2	4
59	3	4
60	5	5
61	3	4
62	3	4
63	5	5
64	3	4
65	2	4
	177	262
	Average = 2.68	Average = 4.03

Appendix D





Appendix E

Choice book selection process