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I Want My Middle School Students to Read: Does Using Culturally Relevant Texts Increase Student-Participants' Engagement Levels Toward Reading Particular Texts?

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I WANT MY MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS TO READ: *DOES USING CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS INCREASE STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' ENGAGEMENT LEVELS TOWARD READING PARTICULAR TEXTS?*

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ABSTRACT

This Dissertation in Practice (DiP) employs an action research methodology to examine the use of the Lived Experience Text (LET) model in an English Language Arts (ELA) classroom in order to increase student-participants' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts. The LET model that the teacher-researcher created is twofold, which consists of student-participants taking part in the selection of their text and the teacher-researcher's assessing student-participants to determine if using culturally relevant texts do in fact increase student-participants' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

Key Concepts: Action Research, Critical Thinking, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Culturally Relevant Texts, English Language Arts (ELA), Lived Experienced Text (LET) model, Reading Comprehension Skills, Student Engagement.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELA..English Language Arts

LET .... Lived Experienced Text Model

OWMS .... Oakwood Middle School

ZPD ....Zone of Proximal Development

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.

Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

This project is special for many reasons. A primary reason is because I, the

teacher-researcher, would have once been considered one of the student-participants of

this research study earlier in my life. I was a student who simply wanted to engage in

readings in my English classes that meant more than recalling information from a text

just to pass an assessment. I was a student who wanted to engage in readings that

represented who I was as an individual and took into account my culture and interests.

Just like many of my students, I was born and raised in the city of Oakwood, SC

(pseudonym). Not only did I grow up in an environment analogous to that of my students,

I also attended the same schools that my students now attend where many of the same

teachers are still teaching today. For these reasons, when I look at the faces of my

students, it is not surprising that I am able to see myself in my students' faces.

In light of the myriad challenges that students face at Oakwood Middle School

(OWMS) (pseudonym), I understand how difficult it is for my students to break the chain

of poverty and receive a higher education. I understand how difficult it is to grow up

around peers who do not have an educational outlook on life, which is why I was one of

the few individuals from my graduating class who went off to college and received a post-secondary education. It is for these reasons I wanted to become a teacher.

The difficulties that students are faced with at OWMS are getting worse. At the moment, according to the South Carolina College and Career-Ready-Assessments issued from the State Department, OWMS is rated as unsatisfactory, which means that OWMS fails to meet the criteria to ensure all students meet the profile of the South Carolina Graduate (SC Department of Education). Now more than ever there is a desperate need for innovation in how teachers at OWMS view pedagogy. For these reasons, I elected to investigate whether using culturally relevant texts will in fact increase students' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts, which I presume are the building blocks of becoming lifelong readers and learners, and, in turn, intellectual and productive citizens in a democratic society.

Oakwood Middle School is located in a rural area in upstate South Carolina, with a population of approximately 10,000 people, most of whom are blue collar workers. OWMS houses approximately 600 students, comprised of grades six through eight. The demographics of the students at OWMS are as follows: 62% African American, 33% White, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 1% Native American. All students who attend OWMS receive free lunch (Public School Review, 2019).

OWMS operates on a block schedule with each core teacher teaching four sixty-five minute classes in their respected content area each day. Classes consist of approximately 25 male and female students from various backgrounds, in proportion with the ethnicities stated above.

Traditionally at OWMS, students have been given anthology textbooks that have several short stories, poems, speeches, and articles that have been predetermined by the district as topics that must be covered during the year. From observing students' behavior and overall engagement levels, it is my supposition that students find it difficult to engage with the content that is presented in these anthology texts because the topics presented in these texts are not culturally relevant.

For example, the characters and settings used by notable authors such as William Shakespeare or Mark Twain are foreign to these particular middle level students. From students' responses in class, such as saying they do not like the language used in Shakespeare's stories, I conjectured that many of these students feel it is too difficult to relate to these stories because they cannot relate to the language or the cultural make-up that these narratives display through characters and settings, which causes students to not fully engage with the material that is presented to them.

In addition, when teachers are required to have students read district-mandated texts, students often disconnect from the relevance of the texts' plots and characters, which also make it difficult for students to engage with the texts. Richardson and Miller (2001) note that content area textbooks, such as literature anthologies, often do not provide adequate explanations to enable students to connect to the content or be able to comprehend the sequences of ideas, which causes students to have distorted images of what some textbooks are trying to illustrate. These distorted images are displayed not only in literature anthologies but also in other content area textbooks such as in social studies, science, and math. Gay (2010) asserts:

[Textbooks'] reflect the values, norms, and biases of disciplines and societies . . .

and construct images and impressions that become explanations and

understandings for students. Their largely uncontested authority and

pervasiveness are important reasons why understanding how they treat ethnic and

cultural diversity and the effects on student learning are fundamental to culturally

responsive teaching. (p. 130)

It is my supposition that middle-level students are often unable to develop their

reading comprehension and critical thinking skills adequately because teachers are being

forced to use traditional predetermined texts to cover content throughout the year.

Furthermore, Brozo and Flynt (2008) state that when children are presented with

readings that are engaging and relevant:

[They] spend more time reading than their less motivated peers. Furthermore,

readers who are engaged as children have a greater chance of becoming lifelong

readers, which makes it all the more critical that at an early age we capture

students' imaginations with print that sustains their attention and keeps them

reading into adolescence and beyond. (p. 172)

It is my belief that if students are not presented with readings that are engaging

and relevant to their lived experiences, students will not be engaged with the content that

is presented to them, which ultimately leads to students not being successful

academically.

The present study employed the use of culturally relevant texts with six eighth

grade students from my English classes. Through journal entries, questionnaires/surveys,

and the use of field notes, student-participants used their critical thinking skills to think

intensively about what culturally relevant texts meant to them as individuals as well as used their critical thinking skills to better understand how some texts could have the potential of containing biases, which I presumed student-participants would be better able to recognize at the end of the study.

SUMMARY OF THE STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

As stated, at OWMS students are issued anthology textbooks that have several short stories, poems, speeches, and articles that have been predetermined by the district that must be covered during the year. Along with these anthology texts issued by the district, there are several texts that English teachers at OWMS are issued to supplement the anthology texts that English teachers use as reading material such as Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. These texts are deemed necessary to cover the state standards for students to progress to ninth-grade English.

SUMMARY OF THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to put into practice the Lived Experience Text (LET) model in order to evaluate how the LET model impacted student-participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts. The LET model that I created is twofold: It involves student-participants taking part in the selection of their reading text and the teacher-researcher's assessing student-participants' journal entries, questionnaires/surveys, and analyzing field notes to determine students' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts. At the conclusion of the study, I determined whether using culturally-relevant texts increased student-participants engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

I began by applying Ebe's (2010) eight-step-process of determining whether a text is culturally relevant to nine adolescent texts: *Tears of a Tiger*, *Forged by Fire*, *Copper Sun*, *November Blues*, *Stella by Starlight*, *The Battle of Jericho*, *Out of My Mind*, *Romiette & Julio*, and *Darkness before Dawn*. Students from my English classes were required to vote on the text they were most interested in reading based on the characters, settings, and plot of the story. Prior to voting, each text was written on the board and students had an opportunity to do an internet search of each text to determine which text they would like to read.

Secondly, the LET model consisted of my assessment of student-participants' journal entries and questionnaires/surveys, as well as my field notes in order to determine if using culturally relevant texts increases student-participants' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

After collecting data and determining whether the implementation of the LET model increases student-participants' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts, I developed an action plan to encourage English teachers at Oakwood Middle School to implement the LET model or their own version of the LET model within their own classrooms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Students' reading assessment scores at OWMS have been subpar in regards to the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) and the South Carolina Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (SCPASS), and improvement is needed in areas pertaining to reading comprehension, problem solving, and critical thinking. At the moment, according to SCPASS scores, OWMS is rated as unsatisfactory in overall student achievement in

terms of the profile of the South Carolina Graduate (SC Department of Education). In order to cover the aforementioned areas of improvement needed for students to progress academically, these areas have to be taught while covering a specific text and it is my contention that if the text is not culturally relevant and engaging students will have difficulty in the aforementioned areas of improvement.

Although my study focused on engagement, I also expected to be able to determine whether using culturally relevant texts that are engaging would help student-participants progress in the aforementioned areas of improvement. Therefore, the following research questions guided my study: How do using culturally relevant texts impact student-participants' engagement levels? What are the strengths and limitations of the LET model?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical approach that supported my study was the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. This approach best fits the action-research study because it frames the act of bringing into the curriculum learning tools and topics that incorporate student-participants' lived experiences as they discover their own learning. Ladson-Billings (1994) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as "a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning" (para 1-2). Although culturally relevant pedagogy includes incorporating students' culture into all aspects of learning, it was my intention in this study to begin, not by trying to include students' culture in all aspects of instruction, but to incrementally add different dimensions of instruction into the curriculum beginning with literature in which students can more readily recognize aspects of cultural relevancy in specific texts.

Furthermore, Ebe (2010) notices the importance of using culturally relevant texts to teach English Language Learners (ELLs). Although none of the student-participants in the present study are defined as ELLs, Ebe's experience with ELLs has relevance with the present study because students who cannot find culturally relevant components in the content that is presented to them do poorly on assessments dealing with that content (p. 194). She uses the term schemata to identify what students already bring into the classroom with them:

Schemata are complex structures of information that represent the individual's past encounters with the world. These interconnected clusters of knowledge play an important role in reading. In order to comprehend texts, readers weave new information into preexisting schema. Schema theory, when applied to reading, suggests that readers draw on culturally acquired knowledge to guide their comprehension of texts (p. 195).

Schemata allowed student-participants to pull from their lived experiences in order to relate to the texts used in the study.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING PRACTICES

In addition to taking notice of schema theory, Ebe (2010) developed a rubric to help teachers determine whether the texts they are using are culturally relevant, which I used in selecting the texts for this study. The rubric includes noticing the following eight characteristics of a story: 1.The ethnicity of the characters. 2. The settings. 3. The years the story takes place 4. Age of the characters. 5. Gender of the characters. 6. The language or dialect used in the story. 7. The genre and exposure to this type of text. 8. The reader's background experiences (p. 198). Using a 4-point Likert scale, with 4 being

the most relevant to students' cultures and lived experiences, teachers can rate a text using the aforementioned eight characteristics of a story to determine whether a text is culturally relevant.

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is geared towards answering the following research questions: How do using culturally relevant texts impact student-participants' engagement levels? What are the strengths and limitations of the LET model? To answer these questions, the methodology that best suits this study is an action research methodology. Mertler (2014) states:

> Action research is characterized as research that is done by teachers for themselves. It is truly a systematic inquiry into one's own practice. Action research allows teachers to study their own classrooms—for example, their own instructional methods, their own students, and their own assessments—in order to better understand them and to be able to improve their quality of effectiveness. It focuses specifically on the unique characteristics of the population with whom a practice is employed or with whom some action must be taken (p. 4).

The nine steps of action research that guided my research study are the following: Identifying and limiting the topic, gathering information, reviewing the related literature, developing a research plan, implementing the plan and collecting data, analyzing the data, developing an action plan, sharing and communicating the results, and reflecting on the process (Mertler, 2014). These nine steps are discussed in detail in chapter three.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this action research study was to utilize the LET model with six eighth-grade student-participants from my English classes to determine if using culturally relevant texts increased student-participants' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts as well as to determine if the Lived Experience Text (LET) model identified all culturally relevant factors within particular texts. This was determined by examining student-participants' journal entries, questionnaires/surveys, and field notes. The research approach that guided this study was action research methodology. I believed that this method was the most appropriate because it enabled me to focus on student participants' interests, cultures, and learning styles as well as gave me the opportunity to increase my individual professional development.

KEY CONCEPTS

Action Research: Any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching process, learning process, or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn (Mertler 2014).

Critical Thinking: "Mode of thinking — about any subject, content, or problem — in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing any content that is presented to the thinker. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use" (critical thinking.org).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:

A teaching strategy that emphasizes the critical role that culture plays in the

learning process. . . . It requires teachers to consider individual cultural

differences when imparting knowledge and designing content. Culturally relevant

pedagogy involves concepts such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and social class to

create dynamic learning environments that improve learning and motivation (Best

Choice Schools, 2019, para. 1-2).

Although aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy such as religion, social class,

ethnicity, and gender, are each highly respected by the teacher-researcher and will be

alluded to throughout this study, the teacher-researcher has chosen to focus primarily on

the effect that culturally relevant texts might have on the level of engagement exhibited

by the participants of this project.

Culturally Relevant Texts: Texts that use literary elements that resemble the

reader's personality, community, family structure, environment, cultural norms, and

overall way of life (Ebe 2010).

English Language Arts (ELA): A content area broken down into five categories:

reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. In addition, grammar and semantics

are also focal points (teach.com).

Lived Experienced Text (LET) Model: The LET model created by the teacher-

researcher is twofold. The two steps are as follows: *Step one:* Allow students to take part

in the selection of culturally relevant texts. This includes implementing Ebe's (2010)

rubric to determine if texts that students take part in selecting are culturally relevant to

students. The rubric includes noticing the following: 1. The ethnicity of the characters.

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2. The settings. 3. The years the story takes place 4. Age of the characters. 5. Gender of the characters. 6. The language or dialect used in the story. 7. Students exposure to this genre of literature. 8. The reader's background experiences (198). ***Step Two:*** Examine student-participants' journal entries, questionnaires/surveys, and the teacher-researcher's field notes to determine if using culturally relevant texts do in fact increase student-participants' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

> ***Reading Comprehension Skills:*** The understanding and interpretation of what is read (readingrockets.org).

> ***Student Engagement:*** Weimer (2016) focuses on three aspects of engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement:

- Behaviorally engaged students do what students are supposed to do in class. They adhere to the rules and norms, and they display behaviors associated with persistence, concentration, and attention. They may ask questions and contribute during discussions.

- Emotional engagement reveals students' attitudes toward learning. Those attitudes can range from simply liking what they're doing to deeply valuing the knowledge and skills they are acquiring.

- Cognitive engagement involves effort and strategy use. It's wanting to understand something and being willing to go beyond what's required in order to accomplish learning goals. Those who are cognitively engaged use strategies associated with deep learning. (para. 7)

Weimer notes that although these aspects of engagement can be defined independently they are dynamically interrelated within the individual. During this study,

the teacher-researcher observed student-participants based on the aforementioned aspects of engagement to determine if student-participants' engagement levels increased while engaging with a culturally relevant text.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In an attempt to use education to mold minorities into model citizens, cultures have been forgotten and omitted in various textbooks. Biases, stereotypes, and in some cases falsities have been portrayed in textbooks that have left minorities bewildered and in search of content that represents their cultures and lived experiences. Spring (2014) states:

> The multicultural nature of the U.S. population has sparked struggles over which culture and religious values should be taught by public schools. In the early years, public schools functioned to ensure domination of a Protestant Anglo-American culture in the United States. But as immigration increased from non-Protestant countries and minority cultures struggled for recognition, the schools became a battleground over multicultural education. (p.5)

Questions arose during this time that schools had to answer such as "Should schools support minority languages and cultures? Should schools support only English as the national language and only something called 'American culture'? Should immigrants be Americanized in the schools, or should the schools support immigrant cultures and a pluralistic society?" (Spring, 2014, p. 5).

With this action research study, my aim was to investigate the use of culturally relevant texts to increase student-participants' overall engagement levels toward reading

particular texts as well as to investigate whether the LET model was able to identify all culturally relevant factors within a particular text.

To accurately conduct the research study and to contribute to existing research pertaining to this topic, a review of literature was necessary. In this review of literature, topics pertaining to culturally relevant texts, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally relevant procedures were investigated in depth to acquire data, best practices, and insights for using culturally relevant texts to increase students' overall engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

At the present time, there is a severe need for diversity in the literary canon. Scott (2018) notes only nine percent of children's books published in the United States in 2017 featured African or African American characters according to data obtained from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), which has been calculating data on representation in children's books since 1985 (para. 7). Although this figure is small, Scott (2018) notes this is an improvement because in 2014 only five percent of children's books included African or African American characters.

What is alarming about these statistics is the impact that the exclusion of minority characters from books can have on young readers. Scott (2018) states, "The consequences of a lack of diverse characters can extend well beyond the classroom. The stories that children read at a young age tell them who matters and who doesn't matter, who's human and who isn't human" (para. 19). These occurrences are significant given the fact that in the United States "approximately fifty-percent of public elementary and secondary school children are non-white" (Scott, 2018, para. 27).

Johnson (2016) states:

> Teachers must choose diverse texts with our students in mind. That means not
> only selecting texts that include diverse characters but also texts that are reflective
> of students' rich and complex histories. Our aim should be introducing students to
> characters and themes that resonate with their lived experiences. We must share
> texts that will inspire our students. We must also introduce them to authors who
> can serve as intellectual role models. (para. 2)

Introducing young minority children to literature that is engaging and represents
their lived experiences could have life-changing impacts. Krug (2017) states that
renowned author Jason Reynolds did not read his first book until he was seventeen years
old: "Reynolds's transformation from a nonreader living on the edge in Oxon Hill, Md.,
to a literary celebrity is the kind of relatable stories he wished he'd read when he was a
kid" (para. 5). In grade school, Reynolds was introduced to the classics such as *Lord of
the Flies*, *Moby Dick*, and Shakespeare, but he could not relate to these texts. Reynolds
proclaimed, "I don't know if I can connect to a man chasing a whale when I've never seen
a whale. Nothing that's happening in these books is happening in my neighborhood"
(Krug, 2017, para. 6).

Krug (2017) notes that the kinds of stories that Reynolds writes for children
represent the experiences that he had growing up in the 1980s and 1990s in a
neighborhood that in many parts was permeated with drugs and violence. However,
inside of Reynolds' home was a family that loved and protected him from these troubles.

The stories that Reynolds writes for young minority children, which were inspired
by events that he witnessed growing up, include titles such as *Ghost*, which tells a story

about a boy who joins a track team to escape the violence from his past; *The Boy in the Black Suit*, which tells the story of an inner city kid grieving the death of his mother; and *When I was the Greatest*, which tells the story of a group of friends navigating the violent streets of Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn. Reynolds states, "The literary world has to compete with YouTube, Instagram, PlayStation, Xbox, Hulu and so on. When it comes to books and reading, we have to get creative" (Krug, 2017, para. 8) and I believe a way to get creative and engage students with reading is incorporating culturally relevant texts into the curriculum.

<center>INTRINSIC MOTIVATION/CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS</center>

Ebe (2010) puts forth important notions pertaining to adolescents and their reading habits. One such notion is that "often students find that once they reach middle school, the texts used for instruction are more academic and less engaging. In addition, there is a widely reported trend that middle school students are less intrinsically motivated for reading than elementary students" (p. 180). Culturally relevant texts have the potential to engage students. Ebe (2010) states, "The matter of what students read is a make-or-break dimension of literacy-based learning" (p. 190).

If teachers do not take note of students' interests and lived experiences when planning instruction, teachers take a risk of students' not being fully engaged with the content, which will cause students to not reach their full potential, which is why culturally relevant texts are needed in the classroom. Ebe (2010) states that culturally relevant texts are texts that readers can connect to by drawing from their background knowledge and experiences in order to understand what the text is trying to say.

Another factor that Ebe touches on as it relates to culturally relevant texts is schema theory: "according to schema theory, reading comprehension is an interactive process between the text and reader's prior background knowledge. Students with better developed schemas for a text can comprehend that text more fully" (p. 181). The more students can pull from their lived experiences, the better students can comprehend, analyze, and complete various instructions as these pertain to the text.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

Ladson-Billings (2009) notes that successful teachers of minority students do not express the assumption that their students cannot learn. These teachers look at each student as a student who can perform at the highest level as long as proper instruction is used to tap into that student's passion to learn. Ladson-Billings (2009) states that the successful teacher of minority students "Did not want their students to just receive or consume knowledge. . . . They believed it was important that the students were well grounded in their own culture as a prerequisite to becoming versed in what might be considered mainstream culture" (p. xi), which is why a sound pedagogy is needed in order to engage students into aspects of their culture and then this approach can be used as scaffolding to introducing students to aspects of other cultures. Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts:

> Pedagogy refers to a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and
> identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations. . . .
> As both a political and practical activity, it attempts to influence the occurrence
> and qualities of experiences. (p. 15)

Consequently, using culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach that can "empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural reference to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20). She proclaims that cultural referents are not simply tools to explain or examine the dominant culture but are resources that add to the curriculum in their own right.

Ladson-Billings (2009) demonstrates how a fifth-grade teacher incorporates facets of culturally relevant pedagogy into a U.S. Constitution class, which could also be modified for an English class:

> [The teacher] might begin with a discussion of the bylaws and articles of incorporation that were used to organize a local church of an African American civic association. Thus, the students learn the significance of such documents in forming institutions and shaping ideals while also learn[ing] that their own people are institution-builders. (p. 20)

Taking approaches such as these when giving instruction allows students from various ethnic backgrounds to be inspired and feel as if their culture is important and relevant within the construction of our democratic society, which is why using culturally relevant texts are also important in illustrating to students that their culture matters in literature as well.

Another concept of note in classrooms of minority students is the top-down hierarchical teaching approach, which in many instances takes away from students' engaging in learning that is culturally relevant.

Ladson-Billings (2009) proclaims that in these top-down classrooms:

> The role of the teacher in many classrooms is that of a leader or authority figure. The teacher is regarded as all-knowing and the students as know-nothings. This relationship is exacerbated in classrooms of minority students. The teacher may assume that, because of poverty, language, or culture, the students know little that is of value in a classroom setting. . . . The teacher talks, the student listens. The teacher asks, the student answers. Rarely are the roles reversed. Even when teachers endorse superficially more equitable classroom relations, they sometimes continue to marginalize and poorly serve students of color. (p. 60)

Using culturally relevant texts allow students to contribute to the learning process by allowing students to be able to give their input on topics that speaks to their lived experiences. Giving students a voice in the learning process is especially important with minority students whose cultures are often times omitted in various texts. This study gave student-participants a voice in determining whether they believed that the text that they read was culturally relevant and engaging.

Patrick Camangian (2013), notes that culturally relevant pedagogy is teaching practices that reflect the following: "Acknowledging cultural legacies in relation to the past and present; transitions between community and academic contexts and concepts; facilitating multiple learning styles; fostering intra- and inter-cultural dignities; and incorporating multicultural content in all subject matters" (p. 2).

With these notions, students' current cultural statuses are taken into account as well as students' past histories. These include various accounts throughout history that have helped to mold students' identities as well as how various cultures have evolved and

merged together for the common purpose of sustaining a specific ideal of this nation. Camangian (2013) notes:

> At the center of critical pedagogy is the examination of education's role in reifying existing power relations in order to transform them. Its educational aims are to teach students to become critically conscious so they rethink what they think they already know in order to exercise their agency to disrupt oppressive social, political, and economic relations at the interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels. (p. 3)

Using culturally relevant pedagogy, allows students to begin to ask questions such as why are some individuals living in poverty, why are some schools underachieving, and why do textbooks have biases toward minorities and do not represent all cultures equitably? This was a process that was started in this study by asking student-participants to examine aspects of a specific text in order to recognize culturally relevant factors that the text may or may not have had.

FAILURE TO INCLUDE CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN THE CURRICULUM

Although Wade Boykin (1984) made the following suppositions decades ago, his notions are still relevant today. He asserts that culturally relevant practices are needed in schools because "if one's pattern of reading non-proficiency is not altered by adult-hood, he/she will be poorly equipped to handle adequately the immense informational demands that must be negotiated in a technologically advanced, post-industrial society" (p. 464).

I believe using culturally relevant texts will allow students to find real meaning in reading, which will open the doors to a life of reading and learning. Boykin (1984) states,

"The ensuing remediation strategies and programs have not been effective; the position has failed to consider that Afro-Americans have a coherent cultural repertoire, and the perspective has not put the schooling process into the larger social-structural political context" (p. 464). Boykin proclaims that culturally relevant practices ensure minority cultures are addressed. He states:

> We fail to understand adequately the behavioral character of Afro-American school children if we construe them in terms of varying degrees of inadequate dark White school children. The argument continues that we will not appreciably alter reading or other forms of school achievement for these children unless in our pedagogical formats we take into consideration these children's cultural frame of reference. (p. 465)

Using culturally relevant texts allows teachers to incorporate instruction into their curriculums that is geared towards minority students' specific cultures. This gives teachers strategies to alter reading habits of students who may not be avid readers instead of using instruction that in many cases does not speak to students as individuals, which can discourage students from wanting to read.

PRACTICES TO INCREASE CULTURAL RELEVANCY IN THE CLASSROOM

Wood and Jocius (2013) notice three practices that teachers can use to increase cultural relevancy in the classroom. These practices include students working "together as a collaborative group to build a supportive network that supports the development of critical thinking and reading skills" (p.666). The next practice is for students to "critically examine texts and challenge and inform one another's ideologies" (p.667).The final practice that Wood and Jocius advocate is for teachers to use texts that epitomize

students' cultures and lived experiences by "choos[ing]texts that reflect the culture and lived experiences of your students" (p. 668).

These three components were incorporated into this study by student-participants reading culturally relevant texts and student-participants critically responding to journal prompts based on circumstances that the texts' characters found themselves in. These components were done in the classroom where students worked together as a network to support each other's development of critical thinking and reading skills.

IDENTIFYING CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS

In order to use culturally relevant texts in the classroom, teachers must be able to identify these types of texts as they relate to their students. Many teachers have difficulty identifying culturally relevant texts. Ebe (2010) notes, "There is more to determining cultural relevance than simply considering the ethnicity of the characters in a book. . . . Culturally relevant books connect to students' lives, not just to their cultural heritage" (p. 188). As a result, a text that has characters that are from the same geographical location as the reader still may not be culturally relevant to the reader. Ebe (2010) notices eight questions that a teacher or student can use to rate a text on a scale of one to four (four being the highest) to determine how relevant a text is to a reader. These questions include the following: Are the characters in the text like you and your family? Have you ever lived in or visited places like those in the text? Could this story take place this year? How close do you think the main characters are to you in age? Does the text have main characters who are boys (for boy readers) girls (for girl readers)? Do the characters talk like you and your family? How often do you read texts like this one? Have you ever had

an experience like the one described in the text? Noticing these questions, I was able to

identify texts that could be used in this study that culturally related to my students.

WHAT ADOLESCENT READERS NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL READERS

Calkins (2002) proclaims readers need three conditions to thrive: time to read,

access to books they find fascinating, and expert instruction. Calkins equates time to read

with an individual learning to play a sport or learning to play an instrument. Calkins

(2002) states:

> No one ever asks the coach why his players are practicing on the field, and no one
>
> asks the music teacher why students are playing instruments during practice
>
> times. The only way to get better at doing something is to practice doing it. (p. 1)

Calkins asserts that having students read more is the only way to increase their

reading skills. She states, "Students are expected to read increasingly complex materials,

yet they get little time practicing reading and little instruction in methods for deeply

comprehending texts" (Calkins, 2002, p. 1). When students read more, they subsequently

develop better reading comprehension skills as a result of being engaged in the process of

reading. Calkins (2002) notes:

> Study after study shows that time to read matters. Krashen (2004) points out that
>
> 93% of the tests on reading comprehension that collect data on volume of reading
>
> show that kids who are given more time to read do better. Guthrie and Humenick
>
> (2004) found that reading volume predicted reading comprehension, and that
>
> dramatic increases in reading volume are important for rises in literacy
>
> proficiencies. (qtd. in Calkins, 2002, p. 3)

I believe that the most reliable way to get students to read more is to introduce students to texts that are engaging and culturally relevant.

The second notion that Calkins puts forth is that students need access to texts that they find engaging and interesting in order to increase their reading skills. Calkins (2002) states, "Access to books readers find fascinating, means increasing the range of texts that students access in school . . . students are expected to be independent readers, yet they get limited opportunities to explore their own interests in reading" (p. 1). Often students are required to read predetermined texts based on their school's curriculum. As a result, students do not relate to these readings because the readings are not relevant to their lived experiences. This practice hinders students from becoming high-volume readers because they are not introduced to texts that they find engaging, which discourages students from wanting to read.

The third concept students need in order to become skillful readers is expert instruction. Calkins (2002) states, "To fulfill the third condition readers need to thrive, we also need to increase teachers' expertise in reading instruction aimed specifically to increase teacher depth and breadth of knowledge in the content of reading, and in methods of reading instruction" (p. 1).

The aim of using culturally relevant texts that are engaging is to teach students to become readers and critical thinkers who can use the skills learned from reading culturally relevant texts to become socially and academically competent individuals in a global society. When using culturally relevant and engaging texts, the objective is to use these texts as stepping-stones to introduce students to more complicated texts that are not as engaging and culturally relevant. Subsequently, once students are introduced to texts

that are not as engaging and culturally relevant, they will be able to use the skills that they learned while studying culturally relevant texts and apply those skills to different genres of texts. Calkins (2002) states:

> People believe that reading comprehension boils down to intelligence and that some kids are predisposed to understand complex texts and others simply aren't. Clearly the research suggests differently . . . It has become clear that investing in effective teaching—whether in hiring decisions or professional development planning—is the most 'research-based' strategy available. (p. 2)

In addition, Shirley Brice Heath and Margery Bailey have proclaimed that "the single most important condition for literacy learning is having mentors who are joyfully literate people, who demonstrate what it means to live joyfully literate lives" (qtd. in. Calkins, 2002, p. 2). This is a concept that is especially true with students who are not regular readers. When teachers demonstrate that reading is an enjoyable activity, students, who elect not to read as much, will be prone to read more. For many young students, this is especially important because they may come from households that do not have lots of reading materials or households that may not value the importance of reading, which make teachers the most important resource for students to use in order to gain knowledge in reading. Calkins (2002) states, "Some lucky children grow up in households where families demonstrate the richness of a life of books, but many of our children rely on school to provide them with those literacy resources" (p. 2).

EXEMPLARY CLASSROOM TEACHERS

Allington (2002) notes that exceptional teachers ensure that their students are engaged in reading and writing at the same ratio as other activities:

These teachers routinely had children actually reading and writing for as much as half of the school day around a 50/50 ratio of reading and writing to stuff (stuff is all the other things teachers have children do instead of reading and writing). (p. 742)

This was an important concept throughout this study because a large part of the study's data was obtained from student-participants reading the study's texts then responding to journal prompts pertaining to culturally relevant factors that characters found themselves in throughout the texts. Like many other individuals who have researched methods to increase students' reading skills, Allington agrees that having students read more is the key to students becoming proficient readers. Allington proclaims, "Simply put, students need enormous quantities of successful reading to become independent, proficient readers. By successful reading, I mean reading experiences in which students perform with a high level of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension" (p. 743).

Allington (2002) also notes that exceptional teachers reject the notion that all students learn the same. These exceptional teachers that Allington observed were opposed to the notion of using predetermined texts and worksheets to address the needs of each individual student. Unfortunately, Allington asserts that too often teachers are not supplied with the resources that they need to address the needs of diverse students:

Exemplary teachers too often had to spend both their personal time and their personal funds to locate and purchase the texts needed to effectively teach the children they were assigned. Some were lucky to work in "smart" organizations: organizations that supported them and provided a rich and expansive supply of texts to promote children's learning across the school day; organizations that knew

that 'one-size-fits-all' contradicts virtually everything we have learned about effective teaching. (p. 743)

Using predetermined texts issued by school districts perpetuates the 'one-size-fits-all' notion, which illustrates the importance of using culturally relevant texts when giving instruction.

Furthermore, Allington (2002) asserts that too often students are only given proper instruction and reading materials when they are placed in remedial classes. He states, "In too many schools, lower achieving readers receive appropriate reading materials only when they participate in special-support instruction (e.g., special education resource rooms, Title I in-class support, bilingual education blocks)" (p. 743), which is why using culturally relevant texts that are engaging and represent students' lived experiences is important in helping students achieve their maximum potential.

ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

A teaching concept that teachers can use in order to gauge students' reading comprehension skills is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Learning through imitation was once thought to be an activity that could be done by any student as long as students were given adequate instruction. However, Vygotsky notes that students can only learn when a particular set of learning skills is in students' ZPD. Vygotsky (1978) notes, "Imitation and learning are thought of as purely

mechanical processes. But . . . psychologists have shown that a person can imitate only that which is within their developmental level" (p. 88).

Noticing students' ZPD is important so teachers can accurately identify a student's mental developmental level and provide instruction that is meaningful. Vygotsky (1978) notes, "The state of a child's mental development can be determined only by clarifying its two levels: The actual developmental level and the zone of proximal development" (p. 87).

In order to determine a student's actual developmental level, a teacher must identify the student's ZPD. The reason why a student's ZPD should be identified first is because Vygotsky (1978) concludes: "What is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow—that is, what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (p. 87).

As mentioned in chapter one, students from the teacher-researcher's English classes have proclaimed that they cannot relate to texts written by famous authors such as Shakespeare, Mark Twain, or Nathaniel Hawthorne. At the moment, these texts are just out of the reach of student-participants' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) because they are not culturally relevant to student-participants' lived experiences. However, with scaffolding student-participants will be able to grasp the works of these authors. The teacher-researcher concurs with Vygotsky's (1978) statement that "when left to themselves, [students] will never achieve well-elaborated forms of abstract thought, [so] the school should make every effort to push them in that direction and to develop in them what is intrinsically lacking in their own development" (p. 89).

Noticing a student's ZPD is why the practice of scaffolding is important. In order for a student to obtain their highest level academically, a student's ZPD range will always be just out of the student's reach. If a teacher is teaching at a level that is below the student's ZPD, then that student will become bored and lose focus. If the teacher is teaching at a level that is beyond a student's ZPD, then the student will become frustrated and eventually give up on the task, which is why using engaging culturally relevant texts is of such importance in introducing students to a life of reading. Vygotsky (1978) asserts, "Thus, the zone of proximal development permits us to delineate the child's immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing" (p. 87).

Ultimately, the teacher-researcher's supposition is that once the concept of reading and studying various authors has reached students' ZPD, by first introducing students to texts that are culturally relevant and engaging, students will develop an appreciation and understanding for works written by various authors from different genres and cultures.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

My students have proclaimed that they cannot relate to texts written by notable authors such as William Shakespeare, Nathanial Hawthorne, or Mark Twain. The research conducted during this study suggests that students need three conditions to thrive: time to read, access to books they find fascinating, and expert instruction. Throughout this study, these three conditions were utilized to determine if student-participants' engagement levels would increase while reading a culturally relevant text.

Along with ensuring that these conditions were met, research also suggested the importance of noticing students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) when attempting to teach students new skills. After analyzing literature on student engagement and achievement, I believed that students' understanding and appreciation for texts written by the aforementioned authors were just out of student's ZPD. However, with scaffolding, first by introducing students to texts that are culturally relevant and engaging, I believed that students could attain the ZPD that is necessary for them to understand and appreciate texts written by the aforementioned authors.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

After gathering literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and researching ways to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into my individual curriculum, I chose to use action research methodology as the primary basis for conducting my research study. I choose to use action research because action research allowed me to add to my individual professional development as well as gave me immediate data that I could use to improve instruction for all my students. Action research also allowed me to build upon previous findings and concepts pertaining to using culturally relevant pedagogy as a method to increase students' engagement levels toward reading particular texts. The nine steps of action research that I used to conduct my study will be discussed further in the research design section of this chapter.

RESEARCH CONTEXT/PARTICIPANTS

As mentioned in chapter one, Oakwood Middle School (OWMS) (pseudonym) is located in a rural area in upstate South Carolina, with a population of approximately 10,000 people, most of whom are blue collar workers. According to Public School Review (2019), OWMS houses approximately 600 students, comprised of grades six through eight. The demographics of the students at OWMS are as follows: 62% African American, 33% White, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 1% Native American. All students who attend OWMS receive free lunch. OWMS operates on a block schedule with each core teacher teaching four sixty-five minute classes in their respective content area each

day. Classes consist of approximately 25 male and female students from various

backgrounds, in proportion with the ethnicities stated above.

At the start of the research study, the teacher-researcher identified six students to

participate in the research study. Afterwards the teacher-researcher had a meeting with

the six students after class to ask the students if they would like to participate in a

research study based on their individual thoughts pertaining to reading a culturally

relevant text. The teacher-researcher explained to the students that the data obtained from

the research study would be confidential and used only to enhance and improve

instruction for all students. After the six students agreed to participate in the research

study, the teacher-researcher issued consent forms to the six student-participants as well

as to their parents explaining the research study (see Appendix A and B for consent

forms).

The six students that the teacher-researcher chose for the research study were

students whose writings were the most proficient. The teacher-researcher chose to select

student-participants whose writings were the most proficient because student-participants

would have to respond to several journal prompts as well as answer a

questionnaire/survey during the research study. As a result, student-participants whose

writing abilities were the most proficient allowed the teacher-researcher to collect data

more proficiently and ultimately determine if student-participants' engagement levels

increased while reading the texts.

In addition, although students' whose writings were the most proficient allowed

the teacher-researcher to collect data more proficiently, this decision did not limit the

study's research because all level students and writers from the teacher-researcher's

classes have proclaimed that they cannot relate to texts written by notable authors such as

William Shakespeare or Nathanial Hawthorn because these texts do not relate to their

lived experiences.

Furthermore, as stated in chapter two, with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal

Development (ZPD), a student can only learn a new skill when that skill is within the

student's ZPD, which Vygotsky asserts is determined by a students' problem solving

ability under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. As a result,

using student-participants in the research study whose writing abilities were the most

proficient would not only allow the teacher-researcher to collect data more proficiently,

this procedure would also allow the teacher-researcher to use student-participants'

writing samples as well as student-participants' growth in terms of being able to identify

culturally relevant factors in a text as scaffolding with lower level students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study focused on employing culturally relevant texts to increase middle

school students' engagement levels toward English Language Arts assigned readings,

using an action research design. Mertler (2014) defines action research as:

> Any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or
>
> others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment
>
> for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools
>
> operate, how they teach, and how their students learn. (p. 4)

The research questions that guided this study were: How do using culturally

relevant texts impact student-participants' engagement levels? What are the strengths and

limitations of the LET model? To examine these questions in full, the teacher-researcher

used Mertler's (2014) nine-step action research cycle. The nine steps of Mertler's action research cycle are the following:

1. ***Identifying and limiting the topic:*** During multiple years of teaching eighth-grade English, students have suggested to the teacher-researcher that the district's predetermined texts are boring and that they have difficulty relating to the characters and the overall storylines presented in these texts. It is the teacher-researcher's supposition that students' low performance on assessments that evaluate their reading comprehension skills can be linked to students' low enthusiasm toward the required readings that do not engage or relate to students culturally.

2. ***Gathering information:*** Beginning the research study by communicating with colleagues in the English department in regards to incorporating culturally relevant texts into the curriculum was essential to the research process. From these inquiries, the teacher-researcher was able to get suggestions as to what types of texts could be used during a novel study that could culturally relate to student-participants' lived experiences. The teacher-researcher's colleagues from the English department suggested texts from The Bluford Series and texts written by Sharon Draper, providing over twenty different titles that the teacher-researcher could use during a novel study that could culturally relate to student-participants.

3. ***Reviewing the related literature:*** The teacher-researcher researched information from textbooks, articles, journals, speeches, blogs, and interviews in order to gain insights into using culturally relevant texts to increase student-participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts. This research allowed the teacher-researcher to study various researchers and educators who have interests in developing

students into proficient readers and learners. Using the information gathered from the review of literature, the teacher-researcher was able to develop and create best practices in order to conduct a research study that was geared toward using culturally relevant texts to increase student-participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

        4. *Developing a research plan:* The hypothesis of this study was that the use of culturally relevant texts would increase student-participants' engagement levels toward particular texts. Along with Mertler's nine-step action research cycle, The Lived Experienced Text (LET) model created by the teacher-researcher was also used. The LET model is two-fold, consisting of student-participants' taking part in the selection of the text and the teacher-researcher's developing data resources in the form of journal prompts, questionnaires/surveys, and field notes in order to determine whether culturally relevant texts do in fact increase student-participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

        5. *Implementing the plan and collecting data:* When applying the LET model, the texts that students take part in selecting have to be culturally relevant. To determine whether the texts are culturally relevant, I used Ebe's (2010) rubric by addressing the following components of each text: 1. The ethnicity of the characters. 2. The settings the story takes place. 3. The years the story takes place. 4. Age of the characters. 5. Gender of the characters. 6. The language or dialect used in the story. 7. The genre and exposure that students have to this type of text. 8. The reader's background experiences (p. 198).

        After gathering readings that aligned with these inquiries, I allowed students to vote as a class on the text they would like to read during the duration of the novel study. Prior to voting, each text was written on the board and students had an opportunity to do

an internet search of each text to determine which text they would like to read during the

study. The text that the majority of students felt that they would be most interested in

reading was the text used during the research study, which was Sharon Draper's *Romiette*

& Julio. The teacher-researcher used S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* to notice any

limitations that the LET model had as well as to gather data on how student-participants

felt about the cultural relevancy and engagement levels of *The Outsiders*.

Data from student-participants were gathered using journal entries,

questionnaires/surveys, and the teacher-researcher's field notes. In regards to

questionnaires/surveys, the teacher-researcher issued questionnaires/surveys to student-

participants that they responded to in regards to their reading habits and experiences. This

gave the teacher-researcher a gauge of how student-participants felt about reading.

With the journal entries, the teacher-researcher created journal prompts pertaining

to the experiences that the characters faced throughout the novel studies as these

experiences pertained to cultural relevancy. Student-participants' responses to journal

entries was the research study's primary and most reliable data because these responses

were student-participants' direct testimonies of how they felt about the cultural relevancy

and engagement levels of the texts. Field notes was also an important data collection

method because field notes allowed the teacher-researcher to present data that was

outwardly manifested by student-participants during the research study that

complemented student-participants' self-reported engagement levels through their journal

entries.

6. *Analyzing the data:* The study used only qualitative data. The teacher-

researcher chose to use only qualitative data because qualitative data would be the most

reliable form of data because this data came directly from student-participants'

testimonies and the teacher-researcher's field notes pertaining to the cultural relevancy

and engagement levels of the texts. Although Mertler (2014) uses abbreviations to code

qualitative data, the teacher-researcher modified this procedure by writing out his

interpretations of the study's qualitative data to explain his analysis to readers.

       7. *Developing an action plan:* After the research study was conducted and data

was gathered, the teacher-researcher conducted the LET model with subsequent classes

as scaffolding to introduce students to texts that were not culturally relevant. The teacher-

researcher also requested that the LET model be implemented into more English classes,

which some English teachers did by using different texts and modifying some of the

procedures. Implementing the LET model into English classes across the district is the

ultimate goal of the teacher-researcher.

       8. *Sharing and communicating the results:* After the data was analyzed and the

success level of the LET model was determined, the teacher-researcher shared the results

with his colleagues and with his defense team. The teacher-researcher answered all

questions that his colleagues and defense team had as well as issued them his final

research study document. The teacher-researcher also encouraged his colleagues and

defense team to reach out to him with any questions or suggestions that may come up in

the future.

       9. *Reflecting on the process:* After each lesson of the research study, the teacher-

researcher reflected on the process to examine what went well during instruction as well

as what improvements could have been made to enhance instruction. At the end of the

entire study, the teacher-researcher reflected on the process as a whole to determine what

data resources were most beneficial and what other resources could have been included in order to make the study more successful.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the study, administrators were provided with timelines, methods, and data to keep them informed. After informing administration about the participants, procedures, and methods used during the study, necessary consent forms were given to students as well as to their parents notifying them about the nature of the study and the level of involvement students would have within the study (see Appendix A and Appendix B for consent forms).

During the research study, confidentiality was essential, which required removing all identifiers from collected data and using pseudonyms as well as using a coding system to decipher results of the data that only the teacher-researcher had access to. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) note:

It is the responsibility of every researcher to . . . ensure that participants in a research study are protected from physical or psychological harm, discomfort, or danger that may arise due to research procedures. This is perhaps the most important ethical decision of all. (p. 55)

With these thoughts in mind, the teacher-researcher took all the necessary measures to ensure all student-participants were protected both physically and mentally during the duration of the action research study. The teacher-researcher was available to all student-participants during the entire research study as well as to any individual student-participant who wished to discuss any part of the research study on an individual basis. Student-participants were not forced to participate in any part of the research study.

Furthermore, all data collected from the research study was only used to enhance and improve instruction for all students.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As stated in chapter one, according to the South Carolina College and Career-Ready-Assessments issued from the State Department, Oakwood Middle School (OWMS) is rated as unsatisfactory, which means that OWMS fails to meet the criteria to ensure all students meet the profile of the South Carolina Graduate (SC Department of Education). Now more than ever there is an essential need for innovation in how teachers at OWMS view pedagogy. It is for these reasons that the teacher-researcher elected to investigate whether using culturally relevant texts would increase students' overall engagement levels thereby fostering lifelong readers and learners who, in turn, can become intellectual and productive citizens in a democratic society.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The teacher-researcher chose to conduct the action research study during regular class time to observe student-participants in the most authentic environment possible while collecting data. During the eight-week study, the teacher-researcher analyzed student-participants' questionnaires/surveys, student-participants' journal entries, and the teacher-researcher's field notes to determine whether using culturally relevant texts increased student-participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

As stated in chapter three, although students' whose writings were the most proficient were selected for the study, this decision did not limit the study's research because all level students and writers from the teacher-researcher's classes have proclaimed that they cannot relate to texts written by notable authors such as William Shakespeare or Nathanial Hawthorn because these texts do not relate to their lived experiences, which limits all level students' engagement. As a result, the six student-participants selected for the study was the most proficient way in determining whether students' engagement levels can be increased by reading culturally relevant texts. The six student-participants selected for the research study will be identified throughout the chapter using pseudonyms. The following students read *Romiette & Julio*:

Jane Moore (White female student): Jane is a very intelligent student who always completes her class assignments and activities in a timely manner. During whole class or

group discussions, Jane always contributes to discussions by giving very thoughtful responses to questions that are posed to her or to the class. Jane very rarely takes part in off-task behaviors but at times can get a little talkative when she is seated next to her friends.

John Dyson (Black male student): John is a very intelligent student. John is a leader among his peers because of his tremendous athletic ability that he showcases on the football field as well as on the basketball court. When having class or group discussions, John always contributes with intelligent and insightful answers and is not afraid to ask questions when he is unsure about a certain topic or task. John is not like some school athletes whose primary focus is on sports. John puts his grades first and completes all assignments that are given to him in a timely manner. John very rarely takes part in off-task behaviors but can become talkative, like most students, when he is seated next to his friends, completes an assignment early, or is not interested in a particular assignment that is presented to him. Altogether, John stays on task and is often the student who keeps other students on task because of his outgoing personality.

Jane Porter (Black female student): Jane is a very quiet student. She is very intelligent but also very reserved. She works well by herself and completes all assignments that are given to her in a timely manner. During class discussions, Jane is not the type of student who will participate without being called on, but when she is called on, Jane always has an intelligent response to contribute to whole class or group discussions. Jane hardly ever takes part in off-task behaviors such as talking to her classmates during class time or being a nuance to her peers. When Jane is with her friends during lunch or during class change, she is noticeably more outgoing.

The other three-student-participants selected for the research study read *The Outsiders*: James Washington (White male student): James is a quiet but very intelligent student. When having class discussions or working in groups, James is often very reserved, but when called upon, James always has a very thoughtful and intelligent response to any question. James is a focused student and takes his grades very seriously, which is shown by the maximum amount of effort he puts into all tasks.

Catherine Willis (Black female student): Catherine is also a very smart student who takes her grades very seriously. Catherine often likes to engage in off-task conversations with her peers during class time but always finds a way to ensure she has completed all of her assignments in a timely manner. When having class discussions or doing group work, Catherine participates without being prompted with very insightful responses that enrich and extend discussions.

Brandy Jones (Black female student): Brandy is a very intelligent and outgoing student. Brandy does not have to be prompted to participate in class or during group discussions. Brandy often takes the leadership role during class activities and even leads her entire eighth-grade class in activities such as plays, skits, talent shows, and school assemblies. Brandy takes her grades very seriously and always ensures she has completed all of her assignments and activities in a timely manner.

<div align="center">QUESTIONNAIRES/SURVEYS</div>

At the beginning of the research study, the teacher-researcher gave student-participants a questionnaire/survey pertaining to their reading experiences. These topics included asking student-participants how they felt about reading, how much they read in their free time, and what types of texts they enjoyed. The results are below:

1. <u>Why do people read?</u>

Student-participants reading The Outsiders responded as follows:

James Washington: "To learn and be entertained."

Catherine Willis: "To be entertained, to learn information, and to past the time."

Brandy Jones: "For inspiration, for fun, and to learn something new."

Student-participants reading Romiette & Julio responded as follows:

Jane Moore: "To know more things, to keep up with what is going on, and for fun."

Susan Porter: "To be entertained, to learn, and to be nosey."

John Dyson: "To become smart and get as much knowledge as you can."

Teacher-researcher's analysis of the first question:

   After analyzing student-participants' responses to the first question, the teacher-researcher concluded that student-participants feel that most people read to be entertained and to learn new things. This is in line with one of the three conditions stated in chapter two that Calkins (2002) notes that readers need to thrive, which is access to texts they find fascinating.

2. <u>What does someone have to do in order to become a "good reader"?</u>

Student-participants reading The Outsiders responded as follows:

James Washington: "Practice young and read often."

Catherine Willis: "You have to know how to pronounce the words correctly, have great articulation."

Brandy Jones: "You have to love reading, and practice reading every day."

Student-participants reading Romiette & Julio responded as follows:

Jane Moore: "Know how to say big words. Know how to stay focused, ask questions."

Susan Porter: "Read more."

John Dyson: "Practice reading everyday and every night."

Teacher-researcher's analysis of the second question:

       After analyzing student-participants' responses to the second question, the teacher-researcher concluded that student-participants presume that in order to become a good reader, an individual would have to practice reading. This is in line with one of the three conditions stated in chapter two that Calkins (2002) asserts that readers need to thrive, which is time to read. As previously stated, Calkins equates practicing reading as to an individual learning to play a sport. Calkins proclaims that the only way to get better at doing a certain thing, such as a sport, is to practice doing it, which she equates to becoming a good reader.

3. *Outside of school how often do you read?*

Student-participants reading The Outsiders responded as follows:

James Washington: "Very often."

Catherine Willis: "I read sometimes."

Brandy Jones: "Every day or every other day."

Student-participants reading Romiette & Julio responded as follows:

Jane Moore: "Not much unless it is homework."

Susan Porter: "All the time in my free time."

John Dyson: "A couple of times a day."

Teacher-researcher's analysis of the third question:

       After analyzing student-participants' responses to the third question, the teacher-researcher was able to conclude that four out of the six student-participants said that they

read often. The teacher-researcher believed that researching students who read often and researching students who did not read often would give the teacher-researcher data from both perspectives in determining whether culturally relevant texts increases student-participants engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

4. _If you had to guess, how many books would you say you own, are in your house, and you have read in the past year?_

Student-participants reading The Outsiders responded as follows:

James Washington: "Thirty, one-hundred, and fifteen."

Catherine Willis: "Thirty plus, one-hundred plus, and twenty plus."

Brandy Jones: "Twenty plus, thirty plus, and ten plus."

Student-participants reading Romiette & Julio responded as follows:

Jane Moore: "Five, twenty, and four."

Susan Porter: "More than thirty, more than thirty, and twenty."

John Dyson: "Five, forty-five, and ten."

Teacher-researcher's analysis of the fourth question:

After analyzing student-participants' responses to the fourth question, the teacher-researcher concluded that all student-participants except for Jane Moore stated that they read at least ten books over the past year. Student-participants also stated that they had numerous books in their households to read during their free time. The teacher-researcher believed that student-participants stating that they read several books over the past year and have numerous books in their households would give student-participants greater insights into deciding whether they thought that culturally relevant texts increased their

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engagement levels toward reading particular texts more than texts that are not culturally relevant.

5. *In general, how do you feel about reading?*

Student-participants reading The Outsiders responded as follows:

James Washington: "I enjoy reading and wish I had more time to read."

Catherine Willis: "Amazing."

Brandy Jones: "I love it."

***Student-participants reading Romiette & Julio responded as follows:***

Jane Moore: "I do not like to read."

Susan Porter: "I like it."

John Dyson: "I feel good, it's nothing."

Teacher-researcher's analysis of the fifth question:

After analyzing student-participants' responses to the fifth question, the teacher-researcher concluded that all student-participants except for Jane Moore stated that they enjoy reading. As stated in chapter one, children who enjoy reading and are engaged in reading at a young age have greater chances of becoming lifelong readers (Brozo and Flynt, 2008), which the teacher-researcher believes fashions students into becoming lifelong learners. In addition, as stated in chapter two, "reading volume predicted reading comprehension, and that dramatic increases in reading volume are important for rises in literacy proficiencies" (qtd. in Calkins, 2002, p. 3). This correlates with these student-participants stating that they enjoy reading, which correlates to these student-participants being strong readers and writers.
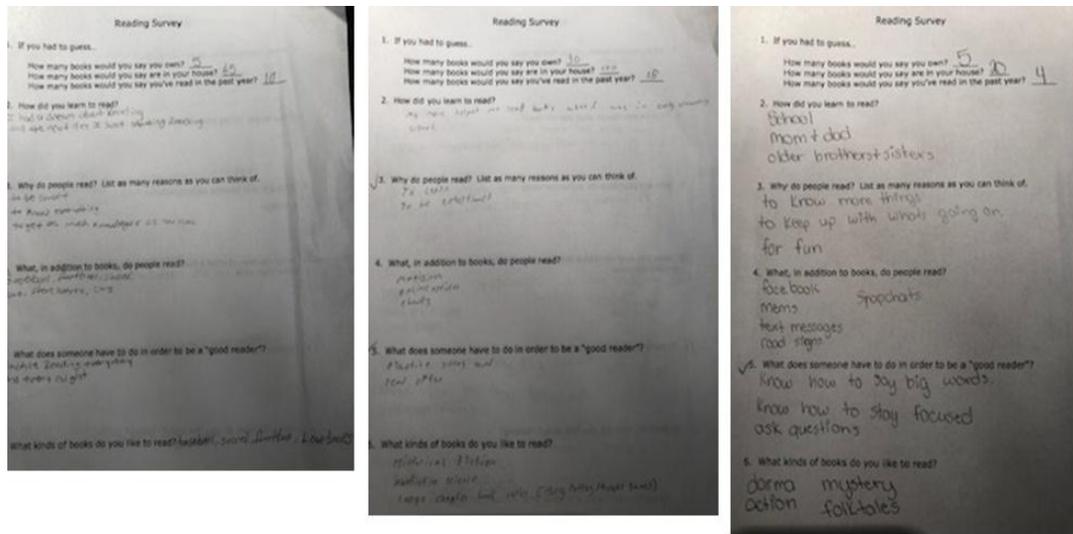
Figure 4.1 Student-participants' questionnaire/survey examples

FIELD NOTES: *THE OUTSIDERS*

Throughout the novel study, the teacher-researcher recorded field notes to gauge student-participants' outward manifested engagement levels toward reading the texts. As stated in chapter one, gauging student-participants' outward manifested engagement levels consisted of observing student-participants' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement levels. Observing these types of engagement levels gave the teacher-researcher a different perspective on student-participants' engagement levels rather than the student supplied data obtained through journal entries and questionnaires/surveys.

The teacher-researcher will address student-participants reading *The Outsiders* first. *The Outsiders* is a moderately short text, which consists of twelve chapters. One of the first things that the teacher-researcher noticed with student-participants is that when a text is relatively short, student-participants are not at all discouraged to begin the text.

To start the novel study, the teacher-researcher presented a Prezi presentation to student-participants that included topics that would be present throughout the novel study. These topics included introducing student-participants to the setting of the story,

the language used in the text, and asking student-participants if they have ever felt like an outsider. Overwhelmingly, student-participants agreed that they had at times felt like an outsider. The teacher-researcher concluded that the text would be able to spark a certain degree of interest based on student-participants' engagement levels toward the introduction of the text and student-participants' being able to relate to the concept of being an outsider.

The teacher researcher went on to introduce student-participants to slang the characters would use throughout the text. The teacher-researcher noticed student-participants were only familiar with a few terms, such as cancer stick, heater, and cooler, which the characters used to refer to cigarettes, guns, and jail, respectively.

The teacher-researcher also observed student-participants were immediately captivated with the text because it begins with Ponyboy, the main character, being jumped by a rival gang. The teacher-researcher observed that student-participants did not expect for the text to begin this way because student-participants were excited and wanted to keep reading.

Later in the text, it is revealed that Ponyboy is from a broken home and is raised by his two older brothers. The teacher-researcher observed that student-participants were intrigued by the main characters' background because student-participants were very attentive while reading this part of the text, so the teacher-researcher presumed some student-participants may have come from an unconventional household or knew someone from an unconventional household.

In subsequent chapters, the main characters' rivals were introduced. The two sets of characters in the text were the Greasers, who were lower class youth from the eastside

of town, and the Socials (Socs), who were upper class youth from the Westside of town. The economic divide between these two sets of characters consequently formed two rival gangs, which the teacher-researcher observed did not lose student-participants' attention during the duration of the text.

Another important part of the text that engaged student-participants was when one of the main characters committed murder to protect one of his friends. When the teacher-researcher posed the question to student-participants of whether it was all right to commit murder under certain circumstances, student-participants agreed that self defense would be a situation in which murder could be justified, but student-participants were against murder as a form of aggression. The teacher-researcher concluded that this type of action and controversy in the text had the potential to maintain student-participants' attention levels during the duration of the text.

Another part of the text that student-participants were engaged with was when Ponyboy finally decided to go back home to his family. Although Ponyboy and his older brother Darry did not get along, when they reunited the teacher-researcher observed that student-participants' engagement levels increased and that they could relate to the concept of gaining something precious back that was taken away.

The rumble was another event in the text that engaged student-participants. The rumble consisted of the two rival gangs' having a brawl with the winner gaining territory that their rivals could not enter. The teacher-researcher observed that this type of action gained student-participants' attention and increased their engagement levels because student-participants did not talk or put their heads down on their desks while covering this part of the text.

The last major event to take place in the text was when Johnny, Ponyboy's best friend, died. The teacher-researcher concluded by student-participants' surprised reactions and some student-participants' coming close to tears that they did not think that Johnny was going to die, which was an event that engaged student-participants.

FIELD NOTES: *ROMIETTE & JULIO*

Romiette & Julio is a parody of the popular play written by William Shakespeare called *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Just like Shakespeare's text, *Romiette & Julio* is a story about two teenagers from different backgrounds that end up falling in love with each other despite relentless opposition from their family, friends, and community. The primary difference between Romiette and Julio that causes uproar is the fact that Romiette is African American and Julio is Mexican American.

Romiette & Julio is a fairly long text but it reads fast because of the uncomplicated language used throughout the text. With the start of the novel study, although student-participants had the opportunity to vote and do an internet search of the nine texts chosen for the study, once students got the actual copy of the text in their hands, the teacher-researcher noticed that some students were not accustomed to reading novels this lengthy (320 pages), and some student-participants were somewhat concerned that the text would be long and boring.

However, after posing questions to student-participants pertaining to the text such as can teenagers fall in love and should family have input in whom their children dated, the teacher-researcher observed that student-participants were open to seeing what the text had to offer because student-participants agreed that teenagers could fall in love and student-participants also agreed that parents should have limited say in who their children

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dated. Altogether, the teacher-researcher observed that students were up for the challenge.

The text starts off with Romiette having a nightmare of drowning and hearing a male's voice, which the author used as foreshadowing to let readers know that the resolution of the text would have something to do with Romiette drowning and someone saving her. The teacher-researcher observed that student-participants were intrigued with how the text started off because students were not talking or getting up out of their seats while the text was being read. The teacher-researcher was optimistic that despite the length of the text, student-participants would be engaged with the text.

As the text moves forward, readers are introduced to Julio, who is from Texas, where the rivers run wild and the weather is hot, and Romiette, who is from Cincinnati where it is mostly cold and the rivers are muddy. Because of Julio's father's job and gang activity at his old school, Julio and his family are forced to move to Cincinnati, where Julio is not happy. At this point in the text, the teacher-researcher felt that student-participants were open to the text's plot because gang activity is something that students at OWMS have to deal with in their communities and in their schools.

In today's culture, teenagers engage in various forms of social media. In the text, a major activity that the characters are engaged with is an instant chat room where the teenage characters communicate with other teenage characters using pennames, which is where Julio and Romiette are first introduced to each other. The teacher-researcher observed that every time the text's plot shifted to the chat room, which is often, student-participants got excited because they started to laugh at the pennames that the characters use while communicating with one another. The chat room component of the text kept

student-participants engaged because this is a social activity that many teenagers take part in during their free time. The teacher-researcher has observed student-participants at lunch, before school, and after school using their cell phones regularly to communicate with their friends on social media.

As the text moves forward, Julio and Romiette decide to meet in person for the first time. They meet at school and have instant chemistry despite the fact that Julio is Mexican American and Romiette is African American. The teacher-researcher was confident that the different cultures presented in the text would make the text engaging to student-participants because of the diversity that exists at OWMS. The teacher-researcher also concluded that student-participants were intrigued with Julio and Romiette's relationship because student-participants during the novel study would often inquire about Mexican heritage such as what languages do Mexican Americans speak and where are Mexican Americans originally from. These were questions that let the teacher-researcher know that student-participants were engaged with the text.

As Julio and Romiette's relationship starts to grow, their friends, family, and classmates start to notice. Most people with whom Romiette and Julio come in contact disapprove of their relationship because they are from different races, which engaged student-participants because of the diversity that exists at OWMS. The teacher-researcher also posed the question to student-participants asking should the race of someone you date matter and student-participants agreed that race should not matter.

A local gang at the school known as the Devil Dogs terrorizes Romiette and Julio regularly, which student-participants could relate to because of gang activity that persists in the student-participants' school and communities. One student-participant said he was

once in a gang, which made the text culturally relevant and engaging to student-participants.

Although Julio and Romiette are met with fierce opposition because of their relationship, they still fall in love and ultimately win the approval of their opponents. While reading the text, the teacher-researcher observed that the student-participants were around the age when teenagers first start to experience a romantic attraction toward other individuals. During the introduction to the text, when the teacher-researcher asked student-participants if they believed teenagers understood what love was, student-participants agreed that teenagers understood what love was. The teacher-researcher was intrigued that student-participants understood the concept of being in love, which the teacher-researcher believed made the text more engaging and inspiring to read.

JOURNAL PROMPTS: *THE OUTSIDERS AND ROMIETTE & JULIO*

To collect additional data, the teacher-researcher created eleven journal prompts that student-participants responded to throughout the duration of the research study pertaining to the two texts' cultural relevancy and engagement levels. The journal prompts were the following:

JOURNAL PROMPT #1

Culturally relevant texts are texts that relate to readers culturally. These include similarities between the characters' and readers' home life, the language that the characters use, and the issues that the characters face (bullying, gangs, peer pressure, relationships, etc.)Respond to this journal prompt in at least two paragraphs (5-7 sentences per paragraph) pertaining to how this text, up to this point, relates to you culturally. Please use details and life experiences to respond to this journal prompt.

*Note: This prompt was used for *Romiette & Julio* as well as *The Outsiders*.

JOURNAL PROMPT #2

How does the language used by the characters in the novel relate to you culturally? Does the language used by the characters make the text more culturally relevant to your own personal experiences? Does the language used in the text make the readings easier to follow and more engaging?

Please respond to this journal prompt in a minimum of two paragraphs (at least 5-7 sentences per paragraph) using details from your own life experiences to respond to the journal prompt.

*Note: This prompt was used for *Romiette & Julio* as well as *The Outsiders*.

JOURNAL PROMPT #3

In *Romiette & Julio*, the characters are White Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans. Does having characters that are the same race as the reader make the text more culturally relevant and engaging to read?

Explain in detail in at least two solid paragraphs why you believe characters of the same race as the reader does or does not make the text more culturally relevant and engaging to readers. Be sure to include your own personal experiences in your response.

*Note: This prompt was modified for students reading *The Outsiders* as well. Modifications are as follows: In *The Outsiders* the main characters are based on White adolescents. Does reading a text with characters the same race as the reader make the text more culturally relevant and engaging to the reader?

JOURNAL PROMPT #4

In Romiette & Julio, Julio represents a character from the lower class while Romiette represents a character from the middle class. Does having characters that represent the reader's economic standings make a text more culturally relevant to the reader as well as make the text more engaging and inspiring to read?

When responding to this prompt, use your own personal experiences and perspectives to respond to the prompt.

*Note: This prompt was modified for students reading *The Outsiders*. Modifications are as follows: In *The Outsiders* the Greasers represent characters from the lower class while the Socials represent characters from the upper class. Does having characters that represent the reader's economic standings make a text more culturally relevant to the reader as well as make the text more engaging and inspiring to read?

JOURNAL PROMPT #5

In *The Outsiders*, the main characters are young adolescents (between the ages of 14-21). Does having characters that are around the same age as the reader make the text more culturally relevant to the reader as well as make the text more engaging and inspiring to read?

Be sure to respond to this prompt in at least two paragraphs (5-7) sentences per paragraph). Be sure to relate your response to *The Outsiders* as well as to your own life experiences.

*Note: This prompt was modified for students reading *Romiette & Julio* as well. Modifications are as follows: In *Romiette & Julio*, the characters are young adolescents (around the age of 16). Does having characters that are around the same age as the reader,

make the text more culturally relevant to the reader as well as make the text more engaging and inspiring to read?

JOURNAL PROMPT #6

In *Romiette & Julio*, the main characters face life circumstances involving bullying, love, relationships, family life, etc. Does reading a text that covers topics such as these make the text more culturally relevant and engaging to the reader?

Respond to this prompt in at least two paragraphs (5-7 sentences per paragraph). Be sure to relate your responses to *Romiette & Julio* as well as to your own life experiences.

*Note: This prompt was modified for students reading *The Outsiders*. Modifications are as follows: In *The Outsiders* the main characters face life circumstances involving bullying, love, relationships, family life, etc. Does reading a text that covers topics such as these make the text more culturally relevant and engaging to you as a reader?

JOURNAL PROMPT #7

In *Romiette & Julio*, Julio and Romiette are faced with racism from a local gang because of their relationship. Do you think having a component of racism experienced by the main characters in a text makes the text more culturally relevant to readers as well as make the text more engaging to read? Be sure to relate your responses to *Romiette & Julio* as well as to your own life experiences.

*Note: This prompt was only used for *Romiette & Julio*.

JOURNAL PROMPT #8

What kind of story would you write that would be culturally relevant and engaging to you? Include any aspects pertaining to social circles, economic standings, family life, aspirations, customs, circumstances, etc.

Respond to this prompt in at least two paragraphs (5-7 sentences per paragraph). Be sure to relate your response to the text as well as to your own life experiences.

*Note: This prompt was used for *Romiette & Julio* as well as *The Outsiders*.

JOURNAL PROMPT #9

We are reaching the resolution of the text. What could the author have done to make the text more culturally relevant and engaging to you? What aspects of the text did or did not make the text culturally relevant or engaging?

Respond to this prompt in at least two paragraphs (5-7 sentences per paragraph). Be sure to relate your response to the text as well as to your own life experiences.

*Note: This prompt was used for *Romiette & Julio* as well as *The Outsiders*.

JOURNAL PROMPT #10

We have finished the text. Overall, do you think the text was culturally relevant and engaging? Do you feel more engaged and inspired to read a text that is culturally relevant?

Respond to this prompt in at least two paragraphs (5-7 sentences per paragraph). Be sure to relate your response to the text as well as to your own life experiences.

*Note: This prompt was used for *Romiette & Julio* as well as *The Outsiders*.

JOURNAL PROMPT #11

Final thoughts: In at least two paragraphs (5-7 sentences per paragraph) explain who you think should read this text and why. Explain whom you think this text would relate to culturally.

Respond to this prompt in at least two paragraphs (5-7 sentences per paragraph). Be sure to relate your response to the text as well as to your own life experiences.

*Note: This prompt was used for *Romiette & Julio* as well as *The Outsiders*.

STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' JOURNAL RESPONSES FOR *THE OUTSIDERS*

Each prompt that the teacher-researcher created dealt with topics that arose while student-participants worked their way through the texts that brought about concerns of whether particular aspects in the novels made the texts more or less culturally relevant and engaging to read.

Using these eleven journal prompts, the teacher-researcher was able to characterize the eleven journal prompts into five themes pertaining to whether these aspects of the texts made the texts culturally relevant and engaging to read. The themes are as follows: the language used by the characters, the race of the characters, the characters' economic standings, the characters' age, and the characters' life circumstances that they faced throughout the text, such as bullying, personal relationships, love, and family life. All responses given by student-participants are unedited. The teacher-researcher chose to use unedited responses because the teacher-researcher values students' own words.

LANGUAGE USED BY THE CHARACTERS

The following is an examination of student-participants who read *The Outsiders*. The first topic that the teacher-researcher addressed was the language used by the characters in the text. The primary characters in *The Outsiders* often used slang and broken English when communicating with other characters.

Examining the language used in *The Outsiders*, Bandy Jones stated, "In the novel *The Outsiders*, the language used by the characters make the text not culturally relevant to me. I say this for many reasons. One reason is because where I'm from we use a different kind of slang. Some of the slang that is used doesn't make sense in my opinion. I feel like this because the characters are from a different place than me and sometimes where you live affects how you talk or the words you use."

James Washington, another participant who read *The Outsiders*, somewhat agrees with Brandy Jones in regards to the language used in the text. He stated, "The language used in *The Outsiders* is not culturally relevant. They use words such as heater, cooler, savvy, lone it, and cancer stick. These words are not used as we use them which could cause confusion. It can also cause you to miss certain parts. The outsiders uses cooler as slang for jail. If you didn't know that it might make you not understand. The outsiders also says heater, which means gun. In conclusion the use of slang in this book makes it non-culturally relevant."

Catherine Willis, another participant, stated, "I have been reading the book *The Outsiders* and it's dated back in the 1960's so the way they talk is not so familiar with the way we speak now. I know we have weird slangs but to me the greasers and the Socs talk way weirder. For instance, we don't use the word fuzz in place of the police, we use

Feds. We don't use heater for gun we use the word gun or banged when somebody is about to get shot or something."

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE LANGUAGE USED IN THE TEXT

Brandy acknowledged that although slang is used within her particular culture, the slang that she is accustomed to using is different. Brandy suggested that although individuals could have similar ways of speaking, location has an impact on being able to identify culturally with the language that is used in a text.

James suggested that the language used in *The Outsiders* in various instances makes the text difficult to follow. James also suggests that some of the language is confusing, which also takes away from readers' being motivated and inspired to read the text.

Catherine took note of the setting of the text. The dates in which events take place in *The Outsiders* are set in the 1960s, which affect the characters' ways of life as well as their language. Even though a text could have components of cultural relevancy in it in regards to the reader's point of view, the date will affect whether the language is more or less culturally relevant to readers, which will affect engagement levels toward the text as stated by Catherine.

RACE OF THE CHARACTERS

The next theme that the teacher-researcher used to address the cultural relevancy and engagement levels of the text dealt with the race of the characters. In *The Outsiders* all of the characters are White. The teacher-researcher asked student-participants if the race of the characters made the text culturally relevant as well as engaging to read.

Brandy Jones stated, "In *The Outsiders* the characters are White. I feel like having characters that are the same race as the readers is and is not culturally relevant. I feel like it is culturally relevant because different races have different cultures. I also feel this way because different races relate to different things. This is why I think race is relevant."

James Washington stated, "I think that the race of the characters can affect cultural relevancy. I think this because it is easier to identify with someone like you. It is also easier to identify with someone that experiences similar events. I think that race influences the cultural relevancy of *The Outsiders*. I think this because similar people will face similar racism. Those similar events let you relate to the characters."

Catherine Willis does not believe that race affects the cultural relevancy of *The Outsiders*. She asserted, "If you never told me the color, I would assume that they are Black. It is because the way they act, which is urban. I'm not saying that all people or African American communities act this way, but most do."

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE RACE OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE TEXT

Jones suggested that in many cases, individuals of the same race have similar cultures and share common norms and cultural tendencies. Similarly, Washington suggested that the characters' race in a text can have a significant impact on how the reader identifies and engages with the text. He suggested readers can relate to characters of the same race better because the reader would have had similar experiences with characters of the same race.

Willis implied that if it were not stated that the characters in *The Outsiders* were White she would have thought that they were Black because of how the characters live from day to day. In many respects, it can be argued that the characters in *The Outsiders* are colorless. This means the characters experience similar situations that many young adolescents experience in regards to having absentee parents, witnessing or participating in gang activity in their communities, and experiencing generational poverty. These are universal issues that involve individuals from all races, which allow these characters to engage readers from different backgrounds.

ECONOMIC STANDINGS OF THE CHARACTERS

The next topic that the teacher-researcher posed to student-participants involved the economic standings of the characters in *The Outsiders*. In *The Outsiders*, the main characters are poor. These characters do not have the luxuries that their counterparts have who live on the other side of town such as cars, money, and food. The teacher-researcher posed this topic to student-participants and examined whether they believed that having characters in similar economic situations relate to readers more as well as make the text more engaging to read.

James Washington stated, "In *The Outsiders* the greasers are poor, lower class people. Characters with a similar economic positions are easier to relate to because they have gone through similar experiences. Ponyboy says that greasers don't have the finniest things and don't have a lot of money. I can relate to that because my family used to be very poor. We had to shop at thrift stores and go to food banks. So I can relate to the greasers. I can also relate to the greasers because I like to work at my churches food

pantry. Doing that allows me to see how other families deal with being in a low income family."

Brandy Jones stated, "In *The Outsiders* the Greasers represented the lower class and the Socs were a part of the upper class. I think having economic standings does and doesn't make the text culturally relevant. I think it does make it culturally relevant because in my opinion people relate to people with the same circumstances or issues as them. I think that it does not make it culturally relevant because money or where you live doesn't define who you are. Just like a lot of entertainers grew up poor and became rich. It's not about where you come from it's about how hard you work to get where you want to be."

Catherine Willis said, "I agree that economic standings may be culturally relevant. What I mean by is that if you have higher economic status, you may be able to relate to the Socs because they are upper class. Also we have the greaser. If you are the lower class you may be able to relate to the greasers. There is this old saying that states Rich can relate to Rich and poor can relate to poor."

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS'
RESPONSES TO THE ECONOMIC STANDING OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE
TEXT

The three student-participants stated that reading about characters with similar economic standings made the text more culturally relevant and engaging to read. James stated how he was really poor and had to shop at thrift stores and go to food banks. Brandy believes being on the same economic standing as the characters in the text can make the text more culturally relevant and engaging, but she thinks money does not make

an individual who they are. Catherine believes rich people relate better to rich people and poor people relate better to individuals in similar financial situations.

AGE OF CHARACTERS

The next topic that the teacher researcher presented to student-participants was whether the characters' age in a text makes the text more relevant and engaging to read. In *The Outsiders* the characters are young adolescents between the ages of fourteen and twenty.

James Washington stated, "*The Outsiders* age affects the cultural relevance of the book. They have a similar mental state (irrational thinking) and they also have the same habits. These similarities help you relate to the characters. I can relate to *The Outsiders* because Ponyboy is going to school and we are in the same grade, which I can relate to. He is also able to smoke which is not relevant."

Brandy Jones stated, "In *The Outsiders* the main characters are between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one. I think that having characters around the same age does and does not make the text culturally relevant. I feel like it does because at a certain age people go through puberty. I think when kids go through puberty they can relate with people who are going through puberty so if they read something like that then they will be more involved. I feel like age doesn't make it culturally relevant because I feel like age isn't nothing but a number. I feel like your age doesn't define who you are as a person. However, I do feel like once you get pass a certain age you need to mature. This is why I think that age does and doesn't make the text culturally relevant."

Catherine Willis stated, "I feel like the answer to that is yes because their ages are relatable. They go through normal teenage people things such as teenagers are looked down upon and teenagers often times get bullied in some type of way."

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE AGE OF THE CHARACTERS

The three student-participants asserted that having characters in a text around the same age as the reader makes the text more culturally relevant and engaging to read. James stated that the mental state of characters plays a role in the cultural relevancy of a text, which is determined by the character's age. He also stated that when characters are around the same age as the reader, the characters will have things in common with the reader such as being in the same grade. Brandy believed that age is only a number but having characters around the same age as the reader makes the text relatable such as going through puberty and maturing. Catherine believes age plays a role in the relevancy of a text in terms of teenagers' experiencing bulling and being looked down upon.

LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CHARACTERS

The last topic that the teacher-researcher chose to present to student-participants was the topic pertaining to the characters' life circumstances. These included things such as the characters' personal life, family life, and social life.

James Washington stated, "This book talks about gangs, violence, guns, drugs, crime and relationships. This book can relate to a large group of people like teens. I think that teens would like this book. I relate to Ponyboy. Ponyboy likes to watch sunsets. Ponyboy is smart and makes good grades. He gets bullied because he is a greaser. Ponyboy also sotta lacks street smarts. I like to photograph sunsets, I get picked on

because I am a nerd and I do not always think things through. I relate to Ponyboy because of how he acts and behaves."

Catherine Willis stated, "I can relate to Ponyboy because he is a smart student. I don't like to brag but I am pretty smart. Another reason is that I am very kind and shy. Another reason is that I stand by people even when they have done wrong. I also relate to Cherry because I see the good in people and because we are both girls."

Brandy Jones stated, "I relate to Ponyboy the most. I relate to Ponyboy the most because of his personality. He has a good heart. He always takes up for his friends whether they are right or wrong and are always there for them. I also relate to Ponyboy because he is always pouring his heart out to everyone but no one does the same for him. Another way I can relate to Ponyboy is because he feels like Darry doesn't like him and shows favoritism towards Sodapop. I feel the same way with my family, so I get Ponyboy one-hundred-percent. Also at school I think popular kids think they are better than everyone just like at Ponyboy's school. Ponyboy is a phenomenal character."

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE TEXT

The three student-participants related to Ponyboy's life circumstances the most. James related to Ponyboy because Ponyboy is smart and makes good grades. Catherine related to Ponyboy the most because Ponyboy is smart, shy, and kind. Brandy related to Ponyboy the most because Ponyboy has a good heart and takes up for his friends.

CULTURAL RELEVANCY OF THE TEXT

After the teacher-researcher gathered insights into how student-participants felt about individual components of the text pertaining to the cultural relevancy and engagement levels of the text, the teacher-researcher posed one final question: Overall, was the text culturally relevant and engaging to read?

James Washington stated, "Overall, I think *The Outsiders* was culturally relevant. The greasers were poor, they did not fit in, they were around the same age, and they lived in similar situations. I could relate to *The Outsiders*. I could see myself in their shoes. That made the story more interesting and more culturally relevant to me. It also made me understand what the characters were feeling and thinking because I knew what they were going through. I would recommend this book to teens and young people. This book talks about gangs, drugs, crime, and relationships. This book can relate to a large group of people."

Catherine Willis stated, "Me and the class have finished the book *The Outsiders* and overall it is a good book. I just feel like it's not culturally relevant to me. I am not saying that it's about color, but it's more so of gender and their way of life. I don't think I can relate. I never killed anybody like Johnny. I have never robbed a store like Dally or got shot by the police. And I know for sure that I will be known as a hometown hero not a hero that saves lives because I will be too busy trying to save my own life."

Brandy Jones stated, "In *The Outsiders* we are approaching the end of the story. Honestly, I think that this is a phenomenal book. I really don't think the author could have done anything different. I feel this way because I can relate to the book culturally. However, if I had to pick what I wanted to change then I would make some of the

characters African American. I would relate more because African Americans have different things we do than other cultures."

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE OVERALL CULTURAL RELEVANCY OF THE TEXT

James felt that the book did relate to him culturally because of the age of the characters, the characters were considered outcasts, and the main characters were poor. Catherine stated that the book is not culturally relevant to her because of the gender of the characters and some of the characters' actions, such as robbing and killing people. Brandy could relate to the book but wished the author had made some of the characters African American. There were aspects of the text that each student-participate could culturally relate to. However, Catherine and Brandy stated that they wished the author would have included more diversity in the text in regards to gender and race. As mentioned in chapter two, this corresponds to what Scott (2018) says about having a lack of diverse characters in a text. She states, "The consequences of a lack of diverse characters can extend well beyond the classroom. The stories that children read at a young age tell them who matters and who doesn't matter, who's human and who isn't human" (Scott, 2018, para. 27). Undoubtedly, Catherine and Brandy felt as if gender and race was not an important aspect in the text, which led these students to saying that the text did not relate to them culturally. The teacher-researcher believes that this is why using culturally relevant texts are not only important to engage students but to illustrate to students that their lived experiences and cultures matter in the literary canon.
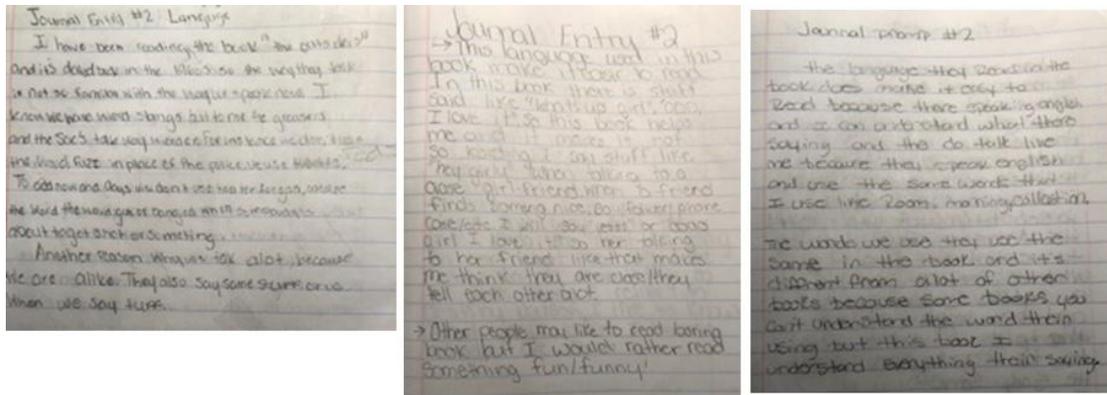
Figure 4.2 Student-participants reading The Outsiders journal examples

STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' JOURNAL RESPONSES FOR *ROMIETTE & JULIO*

Just like with *The Outsiders*, each prompt that the teacher-researcher created dealt with topics that arose while student-participants worked their way through the text that brought about concerns of whether particular aspects in *Romiette & Julio* made the text more or less culturally relevant and engaging to read. The same as with student-participants who read *The Outsiders*, these students have also proclaimed that they cannot relate to texts written by notable authors such as William Shakespeare or Nathaniel Hawthorne, which is why the teacher-researcher wanted to investigate how these students felt about the cultural relevancy and engagement levels of *Romiette & Julio*. The teacher-researcher's premise was that *Romiette & Julio* would be more culturally relevant and engaging than *The Outsiders* because of the characters' ethnicities, genders, and lived experiences. However, both texts proved to be relevant and engaging in their own way, which the teacher-researcher will discuss further in the "Teacher-researcher's analysis of the cultural relevancy and engagement levels of *The Outsiders* and *Romiette & Julio*" section of this chapter.

LANGUAGE USED BY THE CHARACTERS

The following is an examination of student-participants who read *Romiette &*
Julio. The ethnicities of the primary characters in *Romiette & Julio* are Mexican
American, African American, and White American. The characters in *Romiette & Julio*
represent the middle class as well as the poor class.

Jane Moore stated, "This language used in this book makes it easir to read. In this
book there is stuff said like 'What's up girl', and 'ooo, I love it.' So this book helps me
and it makes it not so boring. I say stuff like 'hey girly' when talking to close girl-friend.
So her talking to her friend like that makes me think they are close/they tell each other a
lot. Other people may like to read boring book but I would rather read something
fun/funny!"

Susan Porter said, "The language used by the characters in the novel relate to me
culturally because of the slang that they use like 'what's up' or 'you got me bent.' The
text is more engaging because you can understand better. The Spanish parts sometimes
throw me off because I don't understand what some things mean. In some books its hard
to follow because somethings are to proper like"

John Dyson stated, "the language they read in the book does make it easy to read
because there speaking english and I understand what there saying. The words we use
they use the same in the book and it's different from a lot of other books because some
books you can't understand the word their are using but this book I understand everything
their saying"

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-

PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE LANGUAGE USED IN THE TEXT

The three student-participants stated that the language used in the text made the text culturally relevant and engaging to read. Jane Moore stated that the text was relatable and not difficult to read because of the slang that the characters use such as "hey girly" and "what's up girl," which are phrases that she uses. Jane Porter said the language made the text more culturally relevant because of the slang, which she believed made the text easier to follow. John Dyson said that the language made the text more engaging and easy to follow because the characters in the text use the same kind of words that he uses.

Each student-participant stated that the language made the text relevant and easier to follow. As stated in chapter two, this is in line with what Allington (2002) notes, which is "Simply put, students need enormous quantities of successful reading to become independent, proficient readers. By successful reading, I mean reading experiences in which students perform with a high level of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension" (p. 743). The teacher-researcher believes that the language used in *Romiette & Julio* allowed student-participants to follow the text with high levels of accuracy, which made the text relevant and engaging. The teacher-researcher also believes that culturally relevant texts such as *Romiette & Julio* is a good text to use for scaffolding students into reading texts that are not culturally relevant or engaging because this text does not pose any issues with students not being able to comprehend the language used in the text.

THE RACE OF THE CHARACTERS

The next theme that the teacher-researcher used to address the cultural relevancy and engagement levels of the text dealt with the race of the characters. In *Romiette &*

Julio the characters are Mexican American, African American, and White American. The teacher-researcher asked student-participants if the race of the characters made the text more culturally relevant and engaging to read.

Jane Moore stated, "I think the reason that having the same race in a story makes a difference is because different races have different thoughts and beliefs. I would like to read books about White teenage girls. The only reason I like to read those kinds of books is because she may be going through something or went through something like me. I have a book that is so relevant to me in many ways. The girl is fourteen and her mom and dad are not together. I'm fourteen and my mom and dad have not been together for thirteen years. The girl in the book is going through some things and she is having crazy thoughts. There have been times where I have gone though some crazy things and I have had to rethink things. But this girl in my book makes me think about my life and how I can fix things. I like reading books that talk about things I might have done before"

Susan Porter stated, "I think having different races in the story is culturally relevant to me because I can relate to Romi and her racial problems at school. Having different races in the book helps me understand the characters' background or point of view. Romi is struggling with people telling her she can't date or be friends with anyone outside her race. When I was younger people thought it was wrong that I had friends outside my race. They would constantly talk about me and call me names. In the book, Julio was new but because he was a different race people would pick at him for hanging with another race. I had a friend who was new and we became best friends but everyday they would pick on us. Saying that our friendship was wrong and that we shouldn't be

friends. It got so bad that she had to move schools. After that we rarely spoke and life went on. I still had some people who would bring her up to try and make me upset"

John Dyson said, "It does make the text more relevant to the reader because I'm not the same race as one of the characters in the text which is Julio he's Mexican and Romiette is African American so she is the same race as me. So I wanna learn more about Julio and how it makes it relevant to me. I wanna learn more about Julio's culture of life because he and Romiette like each other so I wanna know what's going to happen in the story"

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE RACE OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE TEXT

The three student-participants had various outlooks on race in the text. Jane Moore states that different races have different thoughts and beliefs and different races may experience different things. Jane Moore even goes on to say that she would like to read texts about White teenage girls because she feels that characters along those lines would have experienced the same things that she has experienced. Susan Porter says that reading about characters from different races help make the text more engaging and relevant because this helps her understand different characters' points of views. She also stated that she was once best friends with someone outside her race, which also made the text more relevant and engaging. John asserts that reading a text with characters that are the same race as the reader makes the text more relevant but he also states that reading about different races makes him want to learn more about other races.

The teacher-researcher also noticed that Jane and Susan were able to pull from their lived experiences when discussing the topic of race, which is in line with Ebe's (2010) schema theory. As stated in chapter two, "according to schema theory, reading comprehension is an interactive process between the text and reader's prior background knowledge. Students with better developed schemas for a text can comprehend that text more fully" (Ebe, 2010 p. 181). Jane and Susan were both able to discuss their past experiences in regards to race, which the teacher-researcher believed made the text culturally relevant and engaging to read.

ECONOMIC STANDINGS OF THE CHARACTERS

The next topic that the teacher-researcher posed to student-participants involved the economic standings of the characters in *Romiette & Julio*. In *Romiette & Julio*, the main characters Julio and Romiette represent the lower class as well as the middle class, respectively. The teacher-researcher posed this topic to student-participants to examine whether they believed that having characters in economic situations similar to the reader relates to the reader more and makes the text more engaging to read.

Jane Moore stated, "Yes it is more culturally relevant reading a book about lower, middle, or higher class characters. I like to read books about the middle class. I don't go without, but I also don't have everything I want when I want it but I don't go without. In the book I relate more to Romiette. The reason I'm more like her is because she is not poor she has a nice house in a nice neighborhood. So I would rather read middle class. I don't like to read about poor people it makes me feel bad. I don't want to read about rich people because I don't like to hear about how much money they have. I would rather read about middle class people"

Susan Porter said, "The economic standings are culturally relevant to me because Julio is considered a lower class. I can relate to the lower class because my home environment isn't like a rich area but it also isn't something really bad looking. I live in a small-medium sized home. It has just enough bedrooms for me and my family. It's nothing big like Romi's house but its home and I'm satisfied with it. When Romi describes her home and how she lives it's not really something I could relate"

John Dyson stated, "I'm middle class because I'm not poor or rich so I relate to Romiette because she's in the middle just like me. She lives in a big house and gets a lot of stuff and I get a lot of stuff like shoes, clothes, and games almost every week. She also has lots of food and I do too. So I wanna read books that have more middle class information in it because it would relate to me and it would be good to read so I could learn a lot more about middle class people. So yes having characters that represent the readers' economic standings makes a text more culturally relevant to the reader"

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE ECONOMIC STANDINGS OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE TEXT

The three student-participants stated that the economic standings of the characters made the text culturally relevant and engaging to read. Jane Moore stated that reading about Romiette made the text more engaging and relevant because Romiette represents the middle class. Jane is neither rich nor poor, which is why she enjoys reading about Romiette. Susan Porter asserted that reading about Julio made the text more engaging to her because Julio is from a poorer background. She also noted it would be harder for her to relate to Romiette because Romiette is considered middle class. John stated that he

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related to Romiette because she is in the middle class. John says he gets nice things such as clothes, shoes, and video games regularly, which is why he believes reading about Romiette makes the text culturally relevant and engaging.

AGE OF THE CHARACTERS

The next topic that the teacher researcher presented to student-participants was whether the characters' ages made the text culturally relevant and engaging to read. In *Romiette & Julio*, the characters are young adolescents around the age of sixteen.

Jane Moore stated, "Yes reading a book with kids my age makes me want to read that book more. I am not a big fan of reading about old or super young people. I like to read books that have teens getting in trouble for doing drugs and being with wrong groups of people. I know that it sounds crazy like why would you want to read about that? Well, see I like to see what happens when kids make bad choices because it shows me what not to do like don't hang out with some people and how to avoid things from happening to me so yes I like reading about young teens"

Susan Porter stated, "I think reading about characters around the same age as me makes me relate to the story more. When I read stories about kids around my age I feel I can relate to their situations or their ways of thinking. I can relate to Romi on how she feels about Julio. When she gets nervous but could always talk to him. I can relate to that because I feel that way about this one person. When I read a story about an adult or how they are feeling I can't relate because I'm young and they are dealing with their own adult issues"

John Dyson stated, "Yes because I wanna read books that relate to my age but the characters are a little older and reading a book that the characters are the same age as you

make the book more inspiring to read. It will make you wanna read more about that book. But when you are reading a book that relates to you more you will wanna read more books that relates to you like someone with the same birthday as you, play the same sport as you, or has the same name as you. Having characters the same age as me makes the book more relevant to read"

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE AGE OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE TEXT

The three student-participants stated that reading texts that have characters the same age as the reader makes the story more culturally relevant and engaging to read. Jane Moore does not like reading books that do not have characters the same age as her. She prefers reading about teens her age to gain insights into circumstances that teens could find themselves in from decisions they make.

Jane Porter cannot relate to older characters because they are dealing with their own adult issues. She feels characters her age will think the way she thinks. Similarly, John stated that reading texts with characters the same age as he is makes the text culturally relevant and engaging to read because characters his age may be involved in some of the same things he is involved in such as playing some of the same sports that he plays.

LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CHARACTERS

The last topic that the teacher-researcher presented to student-participants was the topic pertaining to the characters' life circumstances. These included aspects pertaining to the characters' personal life, family life, and social life.

Jane Moore stated, "Sometimes reading about being bullied helps me know what is going on because I know how it feels to be bullied. I like to read books about relationships that work out because mine never work out. Most of the time me and my family are good but there have been times where things do not work out but blood is thicker than water but they both leak. In *Romiette and Julio* I relate more to Julio when it comes to relationships. I am able to have some here and there but they never work out. I wish that people would think before they do stuff. Julio and Romiette are getting bullied by that gang so they are relatable to me by the bullying thing so I guess I relate to them both"

Susan Porter stated, "I think reading about characters that face the same circumstances as me helps me relate to them because sometimes I don't always get along with my mama like Julio doesn't always get along with his dad. Sometimes me and my mom butt heads but I try not to. I also can relate to Romi and Destiny's relationship because I'm very close with my friends"

John Dyson said, "Something that relates to me is that I got bullied before when I was younger and I was in a gang before when I was thirteen but now I'm not. When I was younger people used to call me out my name. They used to call me bunny teeth and stuff just how Julio got bullied but now a lot has changed. A lot of people look up to me in sports and other stuff. Julio relates to me because he is a strong open minded teenager who has just moved from Corpus and I just moved from Blackstock. He has gang problems and I do too. He has a personality just like me and his dressing style relates to me but in a different way. He's nice and he's a settle relaxed person and he doesn't mention the girls who he talks to. I really like reading books about bullying, love,

relationships, and family. It's more exciting to read and at this school people be bullying, showing love, being in relationships, and a lot of people is family. So they do it all here but most of the stuff that happens in the book it happens at my school. So this book really does relate to me in all kinds of ways"

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE CHARACTERS' LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

Student-participants stated that reading about characters who have similar life circumstances made the text culturally relevant and engaging to read. Jane Moore knows what it feels like to get bullied and have conflicts within her family. Susan Porter could relate to not always getting along with her mother the same way Julio does not always get along with his dad. Porter is also in a close relationship with a friend similar to the way Romiette and Destiny are in a close relationship. John was bullied when he was younger, but now his peers look up to him because of his ability to play sports. He also has had gang problems just like the characters in the text.

OVERALL CULTURAL RELEVANCY OF THE TEXT

After the teacher-researcher gathered information into how student-participants felt about individual components of the text pertaining to the cultural relevancy and engagement levels of the text, the teacher-researcher posed one final question, which was the following: Overall, do you think the text was culturally relevant and engaging to read?

Jane Moore stated, "I think that *Romiette and Julio* would be more relevant to me if Romiette or Julio had a brother or sister like I do so I think they would be more fun to read and easier to connect to. I like reading about people with older brothers and sisters

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and one younger sister. There are many books that I have read in my fourteen years of life but books are something I don't like to read but will read a book that is fun and lovely. Most books are full of games and sports. I don't like reading but when I do read it's got to be something I would do. I have an older brother and sister and a younger sister so I would want to read about characters that have brothers and sisters like me. So I want to say that they need older brothers and sisters"

Susan Porter stated, "The character I can relate to the most is Romiette. I can relate to Romi the most because of her mind set and social life. Romi's mind set is that she's focused on school and cares about her grades. Romi also isn't really worried about boys, drama, or trying to impress anyone. I'm focused on my grades and school. My social life isn't all that. I don't really have as many friends but that's cool with me. I socialize with few people and I'm socially awkward. I also worry about the littlest things but soon forget once I'm comfortable"

John Dyson stated, "The author could change it up some and make it more exciting to read so more people would enjoy the book. The characters' situations relate to me because everything that goes on in the book like gangs, fighting, and bullying happens at my school"

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE CULTURAL RELEVANCY OF THE TEXT

The three student-participants felt that the text's overall storyline was culturally relevant and engaging to read. Jane Moore stated that although the storyline was culturally relevant and engaging, she wanted the main characters to have siblings because she has a brother and a sister, which she feels would have made the text more culturally

relevant and engaging to read. Susan Porter felt the storyline was culturally relevant and

engaging to read because Romiette, similar to her own mindset, is focused on her grades

and not on unimportant things. John related to the text because the text deals with

bullying, fighting, and gangs, which are all things that take place at his school.

The teacher-researcher believes the common thread that allowed the text to be

culturally relevant and engaging to student-participants involved the fact that the

characters in the text were involved in situations that each student-participant had

experienced in their personal lives.
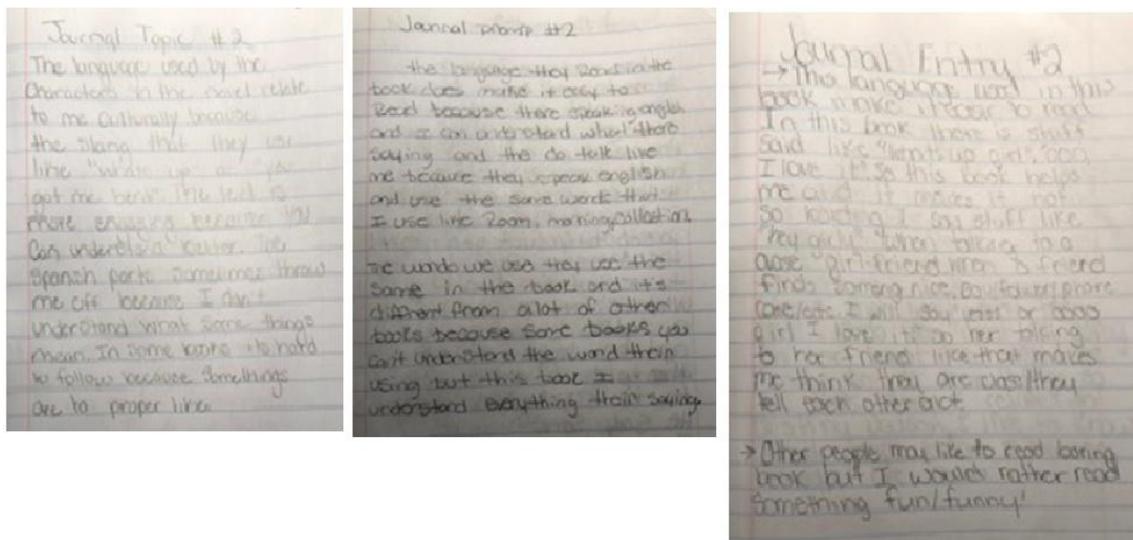
Figure 4.3 Student-participants reading Romiette & Julio journal examples

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S ANALYSIS OF THE CULTURAL RELEVANCY AND

ENGAGEMENT LEVELS OF *THE OUTSIDERS* AND *ROMIETTE & JULIO*.

After analyzing the data from the research study, the teacher-researcher concluded

that *The Outsiders* would not be a culturally relevant text to student-participants because

of aspects in the text pertaining to the setting (the story takes place in the 1960s), the

language (the characters use various dated slang), and in some cases the race of the

characters (all characters in *The Outsiders* are White).

However, data from the study also indicated there were broader sets of culturally relevant factors that engaged student-participants while reading *The Outsiders* that the LET model did not identify. These components included aspects pertaining to teen culture in regards to peer pressure, fitting-in, teen violence as it related to gang activity, drama, sexual tension, rebellion against authority, examples of caring exhibited (or not) between characters, questions of moral and ethical behaviors, and identity.

The teacher-researcher observed that student-participants were engaged and could relate to these aspects that were taking place in the text such as the drama that was taking place between the rival gangs in *The Outsiders*, characters' being there for their friends when their friends needed them, and characters' making right decisions based on morality. Several student-participants stated in their journal entries that they were quiet and reserved like some of the characters in *The Outsiders* and that they could relate to these types of personalities. These are broader sets of culturally relevant factors that captivated student-participants while reading *The Outsiders*, which ultimately increased student-participants' engagement levels while reading this text.

The teacher-researcher also concluded that *Romiette & Julio* is culturally relevant and engaging to student-participants. The text was culturally relevant in many instances, such as how the characters in the text mirrored the student-participants' age, race, gender, language, family life, and generational time period. Student-participants were also able to pull from their lived experiences, which they responded to in their journal entries, in order to relate to various components in the text that dealt with racism (Julio and Romiette were from different races and were victimized because of their relationship), classism (Julio is from a poor background and Romiette is from the middle class), and

ageism (Julio and Romiette were met with opposition from older characters that declared that they did not know what love was because they were teenagers).

The teacher-researcher also observed student-participants' behavior while reading *Romiette & Julio*. Even though *Romiette & Julio* is a fairly long text, there were not any distractions from students while reading this text. Student-participants did not put their heads on their desks while they worked their way through the text or take part in any off-task behaviors while reading the text. When the teacher-researcher gave student-participants journal prompts, student-participants were not unwilling or unenthusiastic about responding. Student-participants also opened up in their journal entries to the teacher-researcher writing about their family life, peer pressure, being involved in gangs, and being victims of racism. These responses from the student-participants gave the teacher-researcher important data and also illustrated the student-participants' trust in the teacher-researcher and respect for the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, ACTION PLAN, AND CONCLUSIONS

This study incorporated culturally relevant pedagogy to increase student-participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts. The teacher-researcher taught student-participants how to use their lived experiences and funds of knowledge to examine various texts to find real meaning in what they read. Escudero (2019) asserts:

I was fortunate to be consistently a part of each of my schools' 'top' classes, learning 'advanced' content and was always a part of the 'highest performing' class according to my test scores. Undoubtedly, these were all good and important skills. However, there were knowledge and skills that were just as important that were also missing. I wasn't encouraged to develop curiosity or learn to critique my social contexts. I didn't learn about my culture or history (or that of my classmates). I wasn't prompted to understand and share my lived experiences. I didn't learn about the cultural wealth and funds of knowledge I already had inside of me. I was seen as an 'empty vessel' that needed to be filled but the reality was that I wasn't an empty vessel and, I wasn't truly being filled. So, I was a proof point. But I was a proof point of successful schooling—not successful education. And, there is a fundamental difference between the two. (para. 1)

Escudero refers to the concept of being schooled rather than being educated. The difference between schooling and education, according to Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2019), is that "Schooling is the process by which you institutionalize people to accept their place

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in a society… Education is the process through which you teach them to transform it"
(qtd. in Escudero, 2019). As a result, a primary goal of culturally relevant pedagogy as
well as this research study was to educate students in ways that did not perpetuate the
vague concepts of schooling but to teach students the importance of education in regards
to thinking as individuals with their own unique perspectives. This was the concept that
drove this study. The teacher-researcher presented student-participants with texts and
instruction that allowed student-participants to think as individuals with their own unique
perspectives, which was revealed in how student-participants responded to journal
prompts as well as how student-participants reacted toward certain scenes in the texts
chosen for the research study.

<div align="center">OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY OF THE STUDY</div>

The LET model, created by the teacher-researcher, was twofold: student-
participants took part in the selection of a culturally relevant text they thought would be
engaging, and then the teacher-researcher used questionnaires/surveys, field notes, and
student-participants' journal entries to determine student-participants' engagement levels
toward reading a particular text.

Acar and Gurol (2015) state, "Culture plays as much a role in a child's learning
process as in his/her learned skills. Studies indicate that cultural context has a profound
effect on the learning outcomes of minority students" (p. 10). With these thoughts in
mind, the teacher-researcher observed student-participants' engagement levels throughout
the research study to determine if student-participants' engagement levels increased while
reading the texts.

READING QUESTIONNAIRES/SURVEYS

At the beginning of the research study, the teacher-researcher distributed reading questionnaires/surveys to student-participants to get information concerning student-participants' reading habits such as how often student-participants engaged in reading and what types of readings student-participants enjoyed reading. All of the questions on the reading questionnaire/survey assisted in helping the teacher-researcher get a better understanding of how student-participants felt about reading.

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S FIELD NOTES

An additional resource used to assess student-participants' engagement levels toward the texts were field notes. The teacher-researcher recorded field notes throughout the novel studies in order to gauge student-participants' engagement levels toward the texts. Field notes included analyzing student-participants' responses and reactions toward certain events throughout the texts as well as aided the teacher-researcher in determining whether using culturally relevant texts did in fact increase student participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

JOURNAL ENTRIES

Another resource the teacher-researcher used for data throughout the novel studies was journal entries. As student participants worked their way through the texts, the teacher-researcher created journal prompts that arose from circumstances that the characters faced throughout the plots of the texts. Focusing on the circumstances that the characters faced during the duration of the texts, the teacher researcher was able to create eleven culturally relevant prompts. The journal prompts allowed student-participants the opportunity to engage with the texts on a deeper level by examining issues that the

characters faced from their own perspectives, which according to student-participants'

journal responses made the texts more relevant and engaging to read.

As stated in chapter two, the creation of culturally relevant journal prompts is in

line with what Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts is an important component of a culturally

relevant classroom. Ladson-Billings asserts that too often teachers practice the top-down

approach to giving instruction. She states:

> The role of the teacher in many classrooms is that of a leader or authority figure.
>
> The teacher is regarded as all-knowing and the students as know-nothings. . . .
>
> The teacher talks, the student listens. The teacher asks, the student answers.
>
> Rarely are the roles reversed. (p. 60)

By creating culturally relevant journal prompts, the teacher-researcher was able to allow

student-participants to contribute to the learning process by sharing their thoughts and

lived experiences as these pertained to circumstances that the characters in the texts

found themselves in. This gave student-participants the ability to grasp the content in the

texts and then make thoughtful and intelligent responses through their writings, which

was an important part of the research study.

IMPACT OF USING ACTION RESEARCH

The process of using action research to implement the LET model allowed the

teacher-researcher to grow substantially. After the research study, the teacher-researcher

understood how important it is to allow students to have a voice in the learning process.

The teacher-researcher learned students will be more invested and engaged in instruction

if students feel they are a significant part of the learning process. The teacher-researcher

was convinced of this observation by noticing the significant effort student-participants

put into their questionnaires/surveys, journal entries, and student-participants' overall good behavior during the research study. From years of teaching, the teacher-researcher knows that when students are not engaged and when students feel as if they are not a significant part of the learning process, the first thing to suffer is students' behavior.

As stated in chapter two, "behaviorally engaged students do what students are supposed to do in class. They adhere to the rules and norms, and they display behaviors associated with persistence, concentration, and attention" (Weimer, 2016, para. 7). This was the case throughout the entire research study. Student-participants stayed on task, valued the knowledge and skills they were learning, and were willing to go beyond what was asked in order to accomplish the learning goals of the study, which represents behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, respectively (Weimer, 2016). These are the areas of engagement student-participants exhibited throughout the research study, which let the teacher-researcher know that student-participants were engaged. This research study confirmed to the teacher-researcher the importance of allowing students to be involved in the overall learning process.

Using action research also allowed the teacher-researcher to better understand the importance of reflection. Reflection was a significant component of the action research process that allowed the teacher-researcher to create journal prompts throughout the research study and illustrate through field notes the experiences of student-participants as well as the teacher-researcher. As a result of successfully using reflections and field notes throughout the action research study, the teacher-researcher will increase his use of reflections and field notes in the future to enhance and improve his teaching.

Finally, the action research process made the teacher-researcher a better researcher and teacher. With the completion of the action research study, the teacher-researcher firmly believes individuals who can conduct extensive research in order to enhance, improve, or implement various teaching instruction are those individuals who will be the most adept in their particular fields. Going through the process of action research confirmed to the teacher-researcher the importance of being able to conduct extensive research on various topics, concepts, and people when attempting to enhance, improve, or implement instruction. The teacher-researcher learned that conducting extensive research before, during, and after instruction gives individuals the best chance to successfully implement, enhance, or improve instruction.

Through extensive research, the teacher-researcher was able to successfully implement the LET model into his classroom instruction to determine if culturally relevant texts do in fact increase student-participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts. With subsequent implementations of the LET model as well as other teaching strategies that the teacher-researcher will include in his instruction, the teacher-researcher is certain his instruction will only get better because of his ability and proclivity to conduct extensive research pertaining to using various teaching strategies to enhance, improve, or implement instruction.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

As part of Mertler's (2014) nine-step process for conducting an action research study, sharing and communicating the results as well as reflecting on the process are essential components. From reflecting on the results of the study, the following questions emerged: would a study that lasted longer than eight-weeks have produced similar results

pertaining to student-participants' engagement levels? Often when a novel study goes on longer than eight weeks, middle school students start to disengage with the novel study.

The teacher-researcher also questioned whether a different genre of text could be used to increase student-participants' engagement levels even if the text is not culturally relevant. When student-participants completed the questionnaires/surveys at the beginning of the research study, several student-participants responded that they enjoyed reading texts that dealt with adventures, sports, mysteries, and horror. The teacher-researcher wondered if using texts from these genres would increase student-participants' engagement levels.

Additionally, the teacher-researcher suggests if another teacher desires to use a similar study with their own students they should consider extending their study to longer than eight weeks, especially if they are working with students who would be considered lower level students. Not only could teachers extend their primary study of using the LET model to longer than eight weeks, teachers could also extend the study to include multiple units based on the LET model by using different texts and strategies that teachers would like to incorporate into their individual curriculums. Using the LET model over multiple units would also allow teachers the opportunity to examine students' engagement levels over time.

The teacher-researcher also recommends subsequent novel studies based on the LET model and culturally relevant pedagogy be done at the beginning of the year in order to use culturally relevant texts as stepping-stones toward texts that are not culturally relevant. Gradually introducing students to texts from different genres will help students

become more knowledgeable of various authors and readings that are available to them, which will increase students' engagement levels toward a variety of texts.

This was illustrated with *Romiette & Julio* as well as with *The Outsiders*, texts that can be used as building blocks to assist student-participants in understanding and appreciating texts that are not culturally relevant or engaging. The teacher-researcher noticed this concept with subsequent novel studies that student-participants took part in studying such as with George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*, and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*.

With these subsequent novel studies, the teacher-researcher noticed that student-participants, as a result of studying *The Outsiders* and *Romiette & Julio*, were more open to the aforementioned texts' plots. Student-participants had developed the ability to examine essential components of these texts, which dealt with issues relating to family structures, social structures, socioeconomic structures, and various ways characters interact within particular cultures all by learning how to identify culturally relevant factors within a text. These are occurrences that the teacher-researcher observed, which gave the teacher-researcher additional evidence as to the importance of using culturally relevant texts that are engaging as building blocks toward introducing students to texts that are not culturally relevant or engaging.

Furthermore, although the teacher-researcher did not use *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* with his regular English students, the teacher-researcher suggests introducing students who study *Romiette & Julio* to Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* by not only reading scenes of the play with students but also showing major scenes of the play using adaptations of the play so students can get a visual of what takes place in the

play. The teacher-researcher's experience with showing adaptations to students has been positive and the teacher-researcher believes that using the adaptation of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* is a good scaffolding approach to introduce students to the works of Shakespeare.

The teacher-researcher also suggests using *The Outsiders* with all level students in order to illustrate to students how a text can have broader sets of culturally relevant factors that can also be engaging. Additionally, although the teacher-researcher did not use *Romiette & Julio* with English I students, the teacher-researcher proposes studying *Romiette & Julio* with higher level students who study *The Tragedy of Romeo & Juliet* in order to illustrate to students how Shakespeare's texts can parallel with the plot of a culturally relevant text.

The teacher-researcher would also like to note that although *The Outsiders* has a slightly higher Lexile level than *Romiette & Julio*, both texts are equally leveled at the upper end of fourth grade with an interest rating of age twelve-plus, which puts both texts at a rather low reading level, which the teacher-researcher was aware would not be a struggle for student-participants chosen for the study, thus removing comprehension challenges as an obstacle for appreciation.

ACTION PLAN

The action plan that the teacher-researcher will perform consists of the teacher-researcher's sharing the information that has been collected from the research study with OWMS teachers and administrators. If teachers or administrators have questions after reviewing the data, the teacher-researcher will address those questions.

The teacher-researcher will elucidate to his colleagues that the LET model if used superficially will not guarantee results. For instance, on the surface, *The Outsiders* is a text that would not be recognized by the LET model as a text that would be culturally relevant to a minority demographic. However, data from the study confirm that *The Outsiders* had broader sets of culturally relevant factors that engaged student-participants, which included aspects pertaining to teen culture in regards to peer pressure, fitting-in, teen violence as it related to gang activity, drama, sexual tension, rebellion against authority, examples of caring exhibited (or not) between characters, questions of moral and ethical behaviors, identity, and purpose. These are aspects that teachers should take into account when applying the LET model to various texts.

The teacher-researcher will continue investigating these broader sets of culturally relevant factors as well as continue introducing more culturally relevant texts and texts from different genres to students to continue finding ways to increase students' engagement levels toward reading particular texts. The teacher-researcher will also continue collecting student data and modifying lessons as needed to continue investigating how culturally relevant teaching practices impact students' achievement and engagement levels toward studying various texts.

Lastly, the teacher-researcher plans to continue building positive teacher and student relationships as well as researching other teaching practices to continue gaining insights inside and outside of the classroom. The teacher-researcher also plans to increase parental involvement in the overall process of using culturally relevant pedagogy so students will be more inclined to use these learning strategies outside of school.

Altogether, the teacher-researcher was able to use various culturally relevant factors located in *The Outsiders* and *Romiette & Julio* to increase student-participants' engagement levels toward reading particular texts. In order for the teacher-researcher's eighth-grade students to continue developing their engagement and achievement levels toward reading particular texts, the teacher-researcher concludes that future teachers of the teacher-researcher's students will have to continue incorporating culturally relevant texts into their individual curriculums as well as continue tracking students' progression levels over time in order to determine if students retain, increase, or decrease their levels of engagement and achievement toward reading particular texts.

As stated in chapter two, this is in line with what Vygotsky (1978) states pertaining to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He states, "when left to themselves, [students] will never achieve well-elaborated forms of abstract thought, [so] the school should make every effort to push them in that direction and to develop in them what is intrinsically lacking in their own development" (p. 89). For that reason, future teachers of the teacher-researcher's students will have to continue scaffolding students by using culturally relevant texts that are engaging as their platform to introduce students to texts from various genres that may not be culturally relevant or engaging to read. As previously stated, "the zone of proximal development permits us to delineate the child's immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87).

CONCLUSION

The teacher-researcher concludes that teachers who are advocates of culturally relevant pedagogy should see teaching and knowledge as ever evolving and the students they teach as unique individuals who can bring unique perspectives into the classroom if given a chance. Ladson-Billings (2009) notes that teachers who are advocates of culturally relevant pedagogy see knowledge and teaching in the following ways:

> Knowledge is continuously recreated, recycled, and shared by teachers and students. It is not static or unchanging. Knowledge is viewed critically. Teachers are passionate about content. Teachers help students develop necessary skills. Teachers see excellence as a complex standard that may involve some postulates but takes student diversity and individual difference into account. (p. 89)

Altogether many districts require teachers to teach certain topics and give particular instruction. However, the teacher-researcher maintains that teachers are the gatekeepers of what our youth will learn and how they will function in an ever-changing global society. Therefore, supporters of culturally relevant pedagogy should continue advocating for culturally relevant pedagogy to be included in classrooms and in communities. In addition, culturally relevant teachers should also continue growing and gaining insights into teaching strategies that will assist our youth in becoming the most productive individuals they can be who will one day pay it forward to succeeding generations to continue the ever-evolving cycle of education and learning.

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APPENDIX A

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Dear: [Guardian]:

My name is Elliott O. Chisholm. I am an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at Oakwood Middle School (OWMS).

I am conducting a research study to examine how student-participant's engagement levels are affected by the Lived Experienced Text (LET) model. Specifically, I am interested in examining how the use of culturally relevant texts that represent students' lived experiences will impact students' engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

You child's participation will involve responding to a brief questionnaire/survey regarding your child's feelings toward particular texts, responding to journal prompts pertaining to the text that your child is reading, and completing final assessments in regards to the text that your child is reading. These components along with the teacher-researcher's field notes will be used to determine if using texts that are culturally relevant to students increase students' engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

This process will be important in the teacher-researcher's efforts to ensure that students are achieving their maximum potential in eighth grade (ELA). This process will also be beneficial to many other teachers in different content areas as they search for strategies and techniques that can be used in their classrooms to help other eighth grade students achieve their maximum potential.

If you or your child chooses not to participate in the research study, there will be no penalty. It will not affect your child's grade, treatment, services rendered, and so forth, to which you or your child may otherwise be entitled to. Your child's participation in the research study is voluntary and he/she is free to withdraw from participation in the research study at any time without suffering any ramifications. The results of the research study may be published, but your child's name will not be used in the research study and data collected from the research study will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions concerning this study or your child's participation in this study, please feel free to contact me at 245-333-9898 or at chisholm@email.sc.edu.

Sincerely,

Elliott O. Chisholm

*By signing below, I give consent for my child to participate in the above referenced study.

Parent's Name: _____   Child's Name: _____

Parent's Signature: _____

**By signing below, I DO NOT give consent for my child to participate in the above referenced study.

Parent's Name: _____ Child's Name: _____

Parent's Signature: _____

(Modified From Mertler, 2014)

APPENDIX B

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Dear: [Student]

My name is Elliott O. Chisholm. I am an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at Oakwood Middle School (OWMS).

I am conducting a research study to examine how student-participant's engagement levels are affected by the Lived Experienced Text (LET) model. Specifically, I am interested in examining how the use of culturally relevant texts that represent students' lived experiences will impact students' engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

 If you agree to participate in the research study, your participation will involve responding to a brief questionnaire/survey regarding your feelings toward various texts, responding to journal prompts concerning topics pertaining to the text that you are reading, and completing final assessments in regards to the text that you are reading. These components along with the teacher-researcher's field notes will be used to determine if texts that appeal to your culture do in fact increase your engagement levels toward reading particular texts.

Knowing how you feel about the types of texts that you read is important in my work to ensure that you are achieving your highest potential in (ELA). This process will also be beneficial to many other teachers in different content areas as they search for ways to help other eighth grade students achieve their highest potential.

If you do not want to participate in the research study, there will be no penalty and your grade will not be affected in any way. Your participation is voluntary, which also means that you can change your mind or stop participating in the research study at any time. Your name will not appear anywhere in the research study and your responses to questionnaires/surveys, journal prompts, and final assessments will not be shared with anyone.

If you have any questions about the study, you can ask me at any time. Also, if you need to contact me with your questions, you may do so at 245-333-9898 or at chisholm@email.sc.edu.

Sincerely,

Elliott O. Chisholm

Please check one of the following:

_____ YES. I want to participate in the research study. I understand that the research study will be done during regular class time. I understand that even if I check "yes" now, I can change my mind later.	_____ NO. I do not want to participate in the research study.

Your Name: _____ Signature: _____

(Modified From Mertler, 2014)

APPENDIX C

READING QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY

1. If you had to guess. . .

     How many books would you say you own? _____

     How many books would you say are in your house? _____

     How many books would you say you've read in the past year? ____

2. How did you learn to read?

3. Why do people read?

4. What, in addition to books, do people read?

5. What does someone have to do in order to be a "good reader"?

6. What kinds of books do you like to read?

7. What, besides books, do you like to read?

8. How do you decide what you will read?

9. Who are your favorite authors/writers?

10. Have you ever re-read a book? List the title(s) of anything you've read more than once.

11. Outside of school, how often do you read?

12. In general, how do you feel about reading?

(Modified From ReadWriteThink, 2008)

APPENDIX D

FIELD NOTES FORMAT

DATE/TIME	OBSERVATION	COMMENTS