The Fight for "Quality" Discussions:
How Student-Directed Book Discussions Can Contribute to Academic Gains

By

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THESIS

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Abstract

Name: Keli Gebhardt
Title: The Fight for "Quality" Discussions: How Student-Directed Book Discussions Can Contribute to Academics Gains

Research Question:
In what ways can a student directed book club incorporating shared reading discussions lead to academic growth in the areas of reading comprehension and response to literature.

Research Activities: This after school intervention explores the effectiveness of student-directed book clubs in facilitating knowledge acquisition, greater reading comprehension, more active student interaction with the text, and a higher "quality" of overall student dialogue. Context: The inquiry consisted of four male fifth grade students, three of whom are English language learners. All four students, prior to the intervention, were scoring at or below the class average in both their standardized test scores and classroom quarter grades. The students demonstrated an interest in reading, yet their lowest classroom grades were in the two language arts subcategories that corresponded with reading: reading comprehension and response to literature. Methods and Data: The intervention took place over a four-week period and consisted of two one-hour after school meetings each week and one to two thirty minute lunch time meetings each week. Students were given attitude/interest surveys both before and after the intervention and CELDT scores, STAR scores, and classroom grades were all compiled for each of the four students. During each of our weekly meetings and individual teacher-student interviews, an audio recording device was used to collect observational data on their cooperative learning processes. Results: Results showed that throughout the course of the intervention there was a notable decline in teacher talk, which resulted in greater overall student involvement and an emphasis on genuine student led discussion. Not only did overall talk time for students increase drastically, the "quality" of discussion shifted from more superficial interactions with the text to deeper, more personal

connections regarding the content of the text, the social issues presented in the book, and the students' growing interest in more dramatic and serious chapter books. Students were able to incorporate the reading strategies presented to them in the first week into their discussions and, after being assigned specific roles within the book club, students demonstrated greater independence and maturity as learners and readers. Unfortunately, although the audio recorded data, individual interviews, and attitude surveys all pointed to dramatic changes in student involvement and performance, more standardized measures such as classroom tests and language arts grades, were not able to capture student growth. This finding suggests the need for multiple indicators for learning and growth.

Grade: 5

Research Methods: Writing samples; Audiotape; Survey-Attitude; Observation-Field notes; Observation-Student engagement/behavior tallies; Observation-Transcripts; Interviews

Curriculum Areas: English Language Arts; Reading

Instructional Approaches: Reading-Reading logs; Reading-Comprehension; Note-taking; Teacher-student conferences; Cooperative learning; Oral response to literature; Student engagement

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Introduction

The bell rings as students rush through the door of the classroom and take their seats. It is "target time", a period of the school day when 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students are split into language arts classes based on their achievement scores and current academic progress. Each target time class uses curriculum that addresses the specific and varied language development needs of the students within it. Today I am observing the "GATE" class, comprised of students who are either formally classified as GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) or those students that are receiving language arts grades and achievement scores that are far above average. "Students," the teacher begins, "today we are beginning our literature circle discussions. Remember what we talked about yesterday, this is a privilege and I need your full cooperation and maturity in order to make this work. You need to show me you are ready for this, because I can assure you no other target time class is doing this. Now quietly and quickly get into your groups and discussion leaders may begin asking group questions." The students break into groups and begin their work.

For the next forty-five minutes I walk around the room, watching young faces light up with excitement, heads nod in agreement, and arms cross in dissent. I listen in on heated debates, reflective dialogue, and candid discussions regarding topics such as loss, love, death, friendship, betrayal, and prejudice. I am awed by the eloquence and thoughtfulness of these conversations and find myself at times forgetting that I am not, in fact, watching a college level literature course, but rather a group of eleven and twelve year olds. And then I wonder, should engaging exercises such as these be considered a "privilege"? Who is to say that low performing students could not equally benefit from such experiences? Are some students simply unable to contribute to peer-led discussions, or have we just never given them the opportunity or the tools to do so? This

line of questioning would eventually lead me to my current research question: **In what ways can a student-directed book club lead to academic growth in the areas of reading comprehension and responding to literature?**

Research indicates that interactive, student-directed curriculum, such as literature circles and book clubs, can be extremely valuable for all students. As noted in a research article by Kong and Fitch (2002):

> "Studies of different student populations have shown that all children, when given the opportunity and appropriate guidance and support, are capable of participating in meaningful conversations about texts where they construct the meaning of what they are reading, make connections between the text and their own experiences, and evaluate the text and their understanding of it." (p. 353)

When learning is meaningful and when students are able to make choices about their learning they are often more engaged and more eager to actively participate in instructional activities (Davenport, Arnold, & Lassmann, 2004). With so much research supporting the beneficial nature of student-led book clubs, I was eager to investigate the use of this teaching strategy with students outside of the GATE classification. My hope was to demonstrate the effectiveness of book clubs and thus highlight the importance of incorporating more dynamic, interactive, and high interest activities into every classroom, not just those serving a specific subgroup of the student population.

<u>Context: District and School</u>

I conducted my Masters research in the same school and classroom in which I was a student teacher the previous year. I was in a unique situation in that I was volunteering in a class rather than teaching my own; however, I found many advantages to this arrangement, namely the freedom it afforded me to act as a true observer removed, in many ways, from the pressures felt by my collaborating teacher. I was able to construct my inquiry topic and intervention independent of state and district

regulations and could chose to use any number of teaching strategies. Because of this fact I was eager to experiment with teaching methods that I felt were often under utilized but had been shown (through teacher and academic research) to be beneficial and educationally sound.

The school in which I conducted my research is a kindergarten through sixth grade elementary school that has 863 students. Though the school is relatively diverse in terms of ethnicity, it has a large number of Hispanic students (see Figure 1) and nearly forty percent of the student population is made up of English Language Learners, with a majority classified (based on CELDT levels) as "intermediate" or higher (see Figure 2). The school is located in a rural town known for its farming and agriculture. The town's population has grown considerably in the past few years, and is currently home to 51,000 people. There are twelve elementary schools within the district and the school in which I conducted my research, Jefferson Elementary[1], is the newest school within the community, opening its doors only eight years ago.
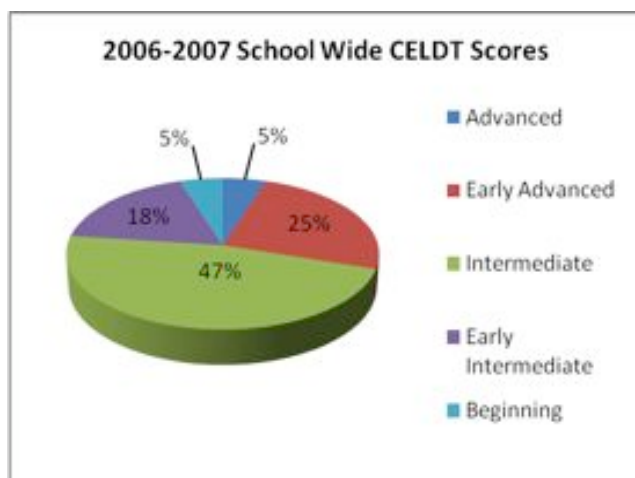
Figure 1
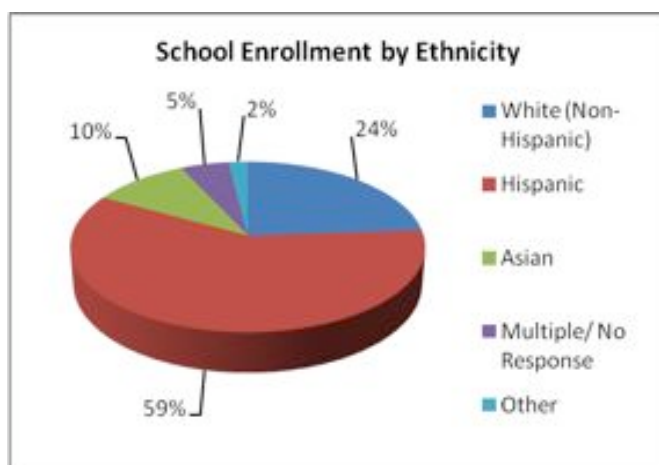
Source: California Department of Education Educational Demographics Unit.
School Enrollment by Ethnicity. 2006-07

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[1] All names and places are pseudonyms

Figure 2

2006-2007 School Wide CELDT Scores

- Advanced — 5%
- Early Advanced — 25%
- Intermediate — 47%
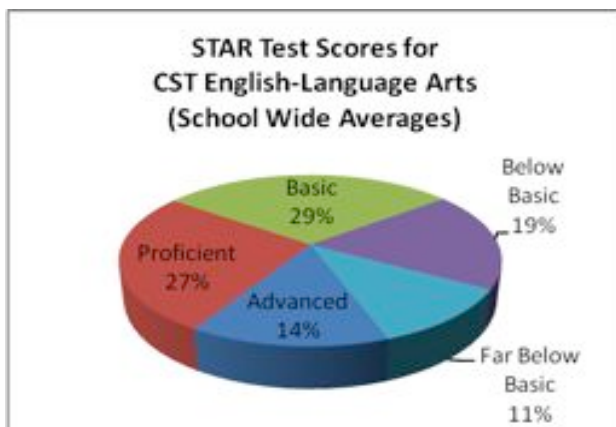- Early Intermediate — 18%
- Beginning — 5%

Source: California Department of Education. *California English Language Development Test*. 2006-07

Jefferson Elementary is a Performance Improvement school that has worked extremely hard over the past year to improve their standardized test scores and reevaluate their student's academic needs and challenges. When I was working at the school last year and writing my credential intervention, I noted the disappointing API and AYP scores from the 2006 school year. Last year the school did not make its AYP goals and had a _negative_ growth score. Needless to say these scores were a huge blow to the faculty and staff of the school and I am proud to say that the past year has led to enormous advances in student performance and standardized test scores. This year the school met all of its AYP goals in both mathematics and language arts, with 21 of 21 criteria being met. The school's API goal for the past year was an increase of 5 points, and the school managed to demonstrate a growth of 11 points, not only meeting but far exceeding their target accountability goal. Many of the teachers attribute this growth to a greater emphasis on individualized instruction in the area of language arts. The development and implementation of "target time" classes, which place students in cohorts based on their achievement scores, CELDT levels, and current performance in

language arts, has given students opportunities to work within a curriculum that better suits their needs and abilities.
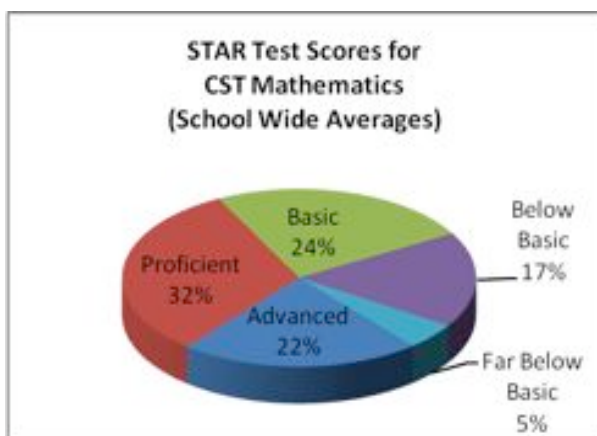
Despite these exciting academic advances educators within the school and district are still concerned about the low English-Language Arts scores of elementary students within the community. For years language arts standardized test scores have been relatively low when compared to state-wide averages. Due to this fact, schools within the district have developed a variety of programs to help address the growing need for additional academic assistance in the subjects of reading and writing and the many sub-categories that correspond with these language arts areas. The following graphs demonstrate the discrepancies between standardized mathematics and language art scores on both a school wide level and within my own classroom (See Figures 3-6). At the school wide level there are twice as many students scoring "far below basic" in language arts as there are in mathematics. In this same vein, more students are scoring above average in mathematics, as demonstrated by the eight percent difference between "advanced" scores in these two STAR subjects (14% for language arts and 22% for mathematics). These same trends can be seen within my classroom, as more of my students scored "advanced" or "proficient" in mathematics when compared with their language arts scores. These standardized test scores point to a need for even more language arts interventions and programs.

Figure 3

STAR Test Scores for CST English-Language Arts (School Wide Averages)

Basic 29%
Below Basic 19%
Proficient 27%
Advanced 14%
Far Below Basic 11%

Source: California Department of Education. *California Standardized Testing and Reporting*. 2007.

Figure 4

STAR Test Scores for CST Mathematics (School Wide Averages)

Basic 24%
Below Basic 17%
Proficient 32%
Advanced 22%
Far Below Basic 5%

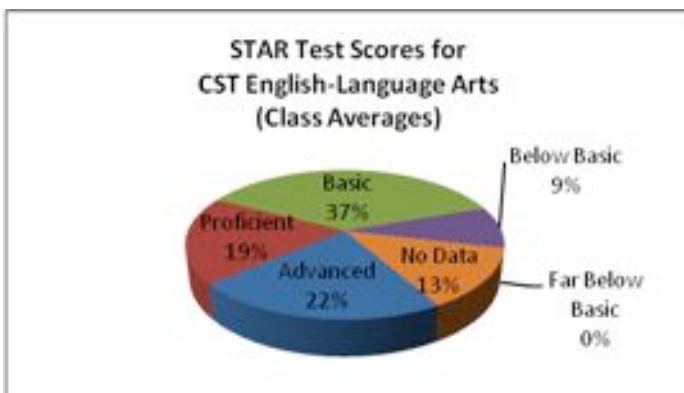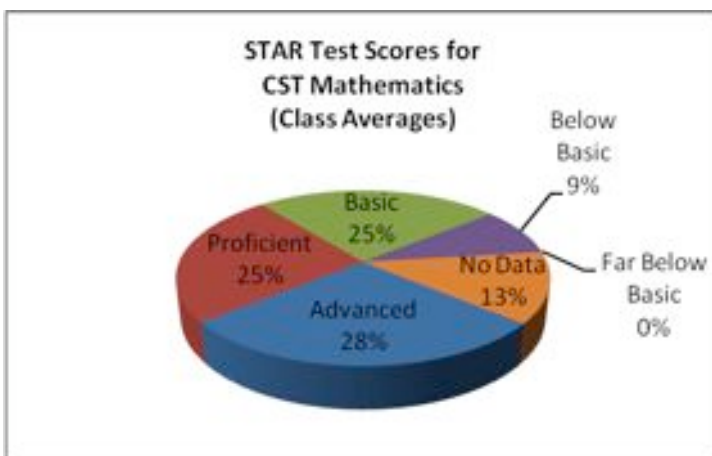Source: California Department of Education. *California Standardized Testing and Reporting*. 2007.

Figure 5

STAR Test Scores for
CST English-Language Arts
(Class Averages)

Below Basic 9%
Basic 37%
Proficient 19%
No Data 13%
Advanced 22%
Far Below Basic 0%

Source: California Department of Education. *California Standardized Testing and Reporting.* 2007.

Figure 6

STAR Test Scores for
CST Mathematics
(Class Averages)

Below Basic 9%
Basic 25%
Proficient 25%
No Data 13%
Advanced 28%
Far Below Basic 0%

Source: California Department of Education. *California Standardized Testing and Reporting.* 2007.

English Language Learners make up a disproportionally large percentage of the students receiving CST Language Art scores of "Below Basic" and "Far Below Basic". Jefferson Elementary has a high percentage of English Language Learners (nearly 40%), with the two largest language categories being Spanish (86%) and Punjabi (7%). With such a large number of English Language Learners, our school breaks up all classes into "target time" clusters that enable students to receive specific language arts instruction based on their CELDT levels or overall abilities in the academic area of language-arts.

Target time is just one of the many programs adopted throughout the district to target

students who are performing below average in language arts. At Jefferson Elementary

the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers break their students up into groups that meet

during the first forty-five minutes of school. Target time cohorts are chosen based on

their standardized test scores, English proficiency level, GATE classification, and overall

academic progress in language arts. Student's academic growth in target time is

evaluated every trimester and students are able to move to different target time classes

based on their performance. Some of the proposed benefits of this program include the

hope that teachers are better able to focus their curriculum and teaching style to the

needs of their particular target time group. Many teachers that I have spoken to at

Jefferson Elementary believe that students often feel more comfortable with the material

that is presented to them during "target time" class because it is created especially for

their unique academic needs. However, there are those who have argued that the "target

time" classifications could lead to unfair ability grouping and could restrict the ways in

which students are able to express their academic potential. Although the school has

seen academic advancements since the implementation of "target time" classes, the

debate over ability grouping is ongoing.

<u>Context: My Classroom and Target Students</u>

My research was conducted in a self-contained, English-only fifth grade class

with thirty-one students. A majority of my students were Hispanic and all twelve of my

English language learners came from Spanish speaking households (See Figure 7).

Figure 7
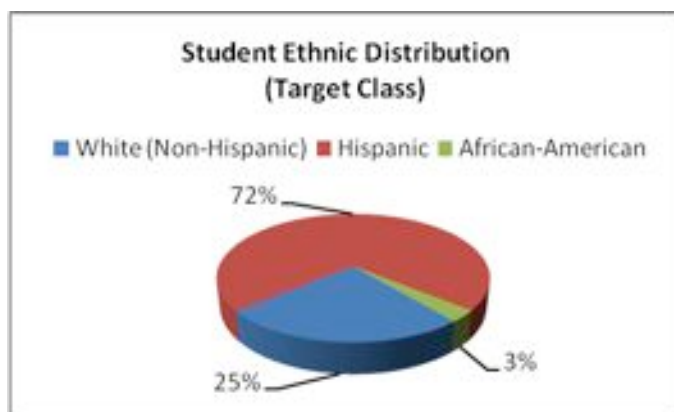
Source: Based on student records for my current class, 2007.

My target class's standardized test scores corresponded with the trends seen at the school wide and district level insofar as their mathematics scores were higher (on average) than their language art scores. Nearly fifty percent of my class scored "basic" or below on the state's Language Arts STAR tests and thirty percent of my students read below a fourth grade reading level (see figures 5 and 6). In terms of classroom grades, class averages for mathematics scores were higher than those for language arts. After collecting class data in the form of standardized test scores, writing samples, and progress reports, it became clear that many students are struggling with language arts and its related sub categories.

In order to better understand how my students felt about language arts and reading, I administered an interest inventory that allowed students to give written responses to questions such as: "What school subject do you find most challenging", "Do you enjoy readings?", and "What types of books do you enjoy reading?". Students were also asked to rate how often they read "for fun" (i.e. as a leisure activity beyond school assigned readings) on a scale from 1 (never) to 4 (all the time) (See Appendix 1-3 for examples). After administering my interest inventory, I noted a number of students chose reading and writing as most challenging to them and many expressed negative or

discouraging feelings related to these subjects. Some of the responses I received were quite similar and included the following: "Sometimes when I read I just don't understand", "I find writing challenging because I just hate writing and I don't know why", "reading and writing is challenging because you might have to write words you don't understand". A common thread that I found was that students often became frustrated when they could not make sense of material and those feelings lead to a negative view of certain curriculum or academic subjects. After reviewing all of my data, it was clear that my intervention should focus on language arts and, more specifically, reading comprehension and response to literature, two extremely important academic areas that seemed to pose the most difficulty for my students.

After discussing possible intervention models with my collaborating teacher and the principal of our school, I decided to choose only four students from within the class who would be part of my intensive, small group intervention. I also decided to hold my intervention meetings after school and during lunch recess rather than pull students out of their regular class time which I believed would place them even further behind in their studies. I wanted to choose students that were performing below the class average in language arts and whose standardized test scores were basic or below. I also wanted to work with both English Language Learners and English-only students because I believe these two groups, who are often separated from one another due to ability grouping, could learn a great deal from each other's strengths. I also wanted to choose students who were at roughly the same reading level and thus could work together in shared reading activities (see figures 8 and 9). I began by choosing a mixed gender group that included two girls and two boys, however the two young girls had scheduling conflicts and could not attend our after school meetings. After looking through whole class data I noted that a higher percentage of boys versus girls was scoring below the class average in nearly all language arts subcategories. Using the same guidelines as previously stated I

chose two additional boys creating an all male intervention group. Although issues of gender would not directly play a role in my intervention, I believed it would be interesting to note any unique outcomes or occurrences that arose due to the homogeneous makeup of my intervention subjects in terms of gender.

<u>My Target Students</u>

The first student I chose was Chris, a fairly quiet young man with a very sweet disposition. Although I have heard Chris refer to himself as "shy" on a number of occasions, when confronted with small group experiences he can often become outgoing and rather chatty. Chris is an English Language Learner who scored "Basic" on the STAR testing for language-arts and a 511 CELDT score (placing him at the intermediate level 3). Chris scored a 67% on the district language arts benchmark exam placing him only one point below the class average of 68%. Chris' independent reading level was 3.8 and his progress report grades showed relatively average marks in "reading comprehension" and a need for improvement in the areas of "response to literature" and "writing". All of Chris' language arts grades for the first grading period of the school year were at least five percentage points below the class average. In his interest inventory Chris wrote that he enjoyed reading because, "you can learn new words". Yet when asked about his most challenging subject Chris listed language arts and stated, "you have to write different word you might not understand." I was impressed with Chris's enthusiasm and genuine interest in reading and believed that an intervention targeting reading comprehension and response to literature would not only be beneficial for him, but possibly extremely engaging as well.

The second child I chose for my intervention group was Roberto. Roberto is the youngest of eight children and lives in a household where Spanish is the predominant language spoken. In social situations, such as out on the play ground and during

classroom free time, Roberto was a relatively outgoing young man who could light up the room with his infectious smile. However, during class time Roberto rarely raised his hand or volunteered to speak, and when he was called on he often seemed to become very nervous and answered questions with an unsure and hesitant vocal expression. Roberto scored "Basic" on the STAR test for both language arts and mathematics and was placed at an English proficiency level of 3 (intermediate) based on his CELDT scores. Roberto's independent reading level was 3.5 and he scored a 53% on the district language arts benchmark. I was impressed with Roberto's interest inventory and his candid and thoughtful responses. Roberto wrote, "I enjoy reading because when I find a book I am always excited to see what happens." I believed that Roberto's personality and interest in reading would potentially add a great deal to our intervention discussions.

The third student I selected was Sam, a non English Language Learner who was having difficulty in the areas of reading and writing. After observing Sam for a number of weeks I was shocked to notice that he never spoke during whole class discussions and was rarely called on by the teacher. It seemed to me as though Sam was going unnoticed by his classmates and teacher and felt most comfortable engaging in pair activities rather than whole class or small group. Sam was in the "extra support" group for language arts (one of four ability group titles used in the class) and scored rather low on his STAR language arts test barely qualifying for "basic". Sam's independent reading level was 2.8 and he scored a 46% on the district benchmark, placing him twenty-two percentage points below the class average. On his interest survey Sam wrote the following, "Sometimes I enjoy reading because there are good books out there." He also stated that the subject he found most challenging was language arts because, "some of the questions are really hard." Sam was a rather quiet young man who hung out with a different "crowd" than the other students participating in the intervention. My hope was that he could benefit from the intervention both academically and socially. Sam needed a great

deal of help with his writing and I believed that narrowing the focus of his writing to shared readings could be extremely helpful and enable him to feel more empowered and able to answer literature response questions with greater confidence. I had also hoped that working with a smaller group Sam would feel more comfortable sharing his insights and actively participating in discussions.

The fourth and final student I chose was Juan. Juan scored "basic" on his language arts STAR exam and received a CELDT score of 479 giving him an English proficiency level of 3 (intermediate). Juan scored a low 29% on his district benchmark exam, one of the lowest scores in the class. I first noticed Juan during a class discussion, where students were arguing about bullying in the classroom and an apparent class wide prank that had been played on the student teacher. Juan was one of the boys reported to have played the joke and his reaction, I noted, was different from the other students implicated. Juan seemed incredibly upset that he was being fingered for the wrongdoing and fervently denied being a part of the mischief. He very carefully and thoughtfully explained what had happened and seemed genuinely distressed, not so much because he was going to be in trouble, but because he did not want to be connected with the act itself as he, "would never do anything like that" (his words). I knew Juan was struggling in school and had received low scores on all of his recent standardized tests, so I was somewhat intrigued by how impressively he was able to articulate his feelings. What I found most interesting about Juan was that although his current independent reading level is 2.4, his interest survey answers indicated that he loved to read. I was under the incorrect assumption that students who were far below grade level in reading most likely did not enjoy the subject. Juan certainly proved that assumption wrong as he was one of the only students to indicate on the survey that he reads for fun "all the time". In his interest inventory Juan wrote the following: "I do enjoy reading because you get to relax and learn new stuff like back then. I enjoy reading because it makes me happy." Under

the question "what is your favorite thing to do?" Juan answered, "Read a good nice long

book." I believed that Juan's passion for reading would enable him to truly connect with

the intervention material. Although his scores were lower than any of the other

intervention subjects, I believed that his interest in reading would be an advantage that

would enable him to feel comfortable and confident engaging in reading discussions and

dialogues. Juan had demonstrated his academic potential and I believed that the

intervention would enable him to utilize his zeal for reading to make academic gains.

Though these young men came from different walks of life and had varied

academic strengths and weaknesses, each would be able to offer his talents during

intervention meetings and hopefully all would benefit from an intervention that was

narrow in scope and built around the specific academic needs of the group. I hoped that

by having an all male intervention group I would be able to create a safe and supportive

environment in which these gentlemen would feel comfortable taking risks and

approaching reading with more maturity and intellectual curiosity.

Figure 8
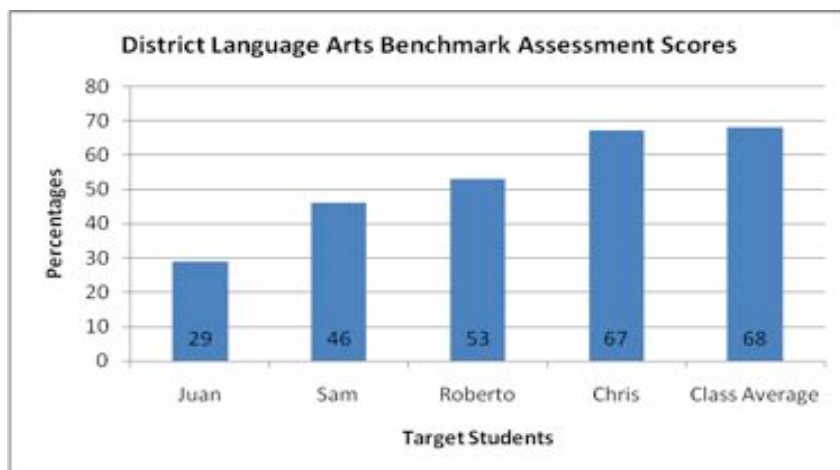
Source: Data based on district language arts benchmark test, fall 2007

Figure 9

Independent Reading Levels

Source: Data taken from computer printout of AR reading level scores based on a computer generated test

Preliminary Data

Achievement Data

Prior to beginning the intervention I collected several types of achievement data including: CELDT scores, STAR test scores (figure 10), District Language Arts Benchmark scores (figure 8), AR reading level classifications (figure 9), reading assessment scores, progress reports, and first trimester grades.

Figure 10
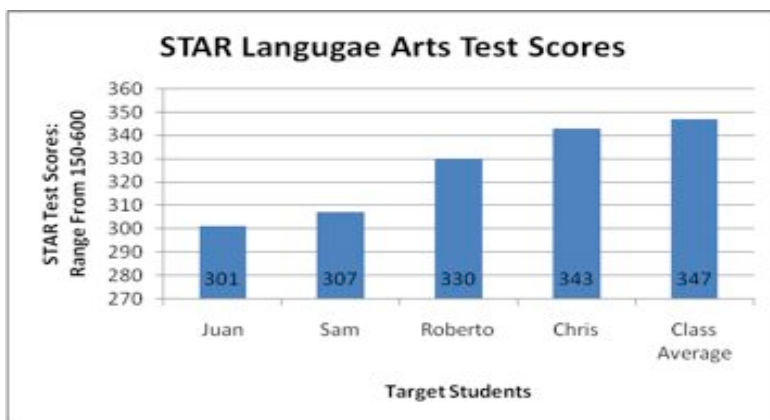
STAR Langugae Arts Test Scores

Source: California Department of Education. *California Standardized Testing and Reporting*. 2007

All of these achievement scores gave me insight into the class as a whole and to how my target students compared with their classmates in terms of academics. As stated earlier, all of my target students were performing below the classroom average in language arts and also scored "basic" or below on standardized measures such as the STAR exam. In an effort to obtain even more standardized data I administered a fifth grade leveled reading passage and a graded word recognition test to each of my target students. I used a classroom reading inventory text that contained both pre and post exams that were comparable and could potentially be used to show any advances in vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Silvaroli & Wheelock, 2004). Although I was confident that the achievement data collected would help guide my inquiry, I did not believe that the academic progress I was looking for would be best measured through standardized means. I believed that, based on the nature of my inquiry and the timeframe under which it is being undertaken, observational and attitudinal data would prove most beneficial when drawing conclusions for my research findings.

<u>Attitude Data</u>

In terms of attitude data, I began by administering an interest inventory to the entire class and would later administer a reading reflection/self-assessment survey to my chosen target students. In the self-assessment survey, students were asked to rate themselves as readers and speakers on a numbered scale and then explain their answers. Students were also asked about their confidence with reading and oral presentations or speeches and what type of classroom set up they preferred: whole class, small group, individual work, etc. I hoped to use at least two additional self-assessment surveys, one during the intervention (midway through the intervention) and one following the intervention to observe any attitude or self perception changes that may occur between

these times. I believed that these surveys, administered at different points throughout the intervention, would give me greater insight into how the students perceived themselves as learners and participants, and my hope was that their confidence would grow over the course of the inquiry.

The four target students that I chose for this intervention all voiced some common concerns about their abilities in the area of language arts and when I compared the pre and post interest surveys I would be looking for any changes in either self perception or overall interest in reading. I was also interested in seeing if my target students' answers to the post intervention survey would indicate the use of any additional reading or comprehension strategies that were not mentioned prior to the intervention. My hope was that, following the intervention, my students would feel a greater sense of confidence when it came to the area of reading and would be better prepared to explore more challenging reading material.

I also planned on conducting individual interviews throughout the intervention process (at the end of every week of the intervention) in order to track student's performance, progress, and attitudes. During these interviews I wanted to discuss with my target students the various aspects of the intervention that they found beneficial and those they saw as unnecessary, distracting, or otherwise detrimental in some way. I believed it would be important to obtain this information so that I would be able to change and adapt my intervention as necessary to enable all of my target students to feel comfortable with the program and their participation in it. I believed that these individual interviews would give me better insight into my student's understanding of their own progress within the intervention. When analyzing these recorded interviews I would be most interested in discovering which aspects of the discussions were most beneficial and which were uninteresting or confusing. I was also eager to see if students

were able to not only comment on the overall quality and accessibility of the intervention, but also be able to offer suggestions and means of improvement. I wanted students to take on more active roles in our intervention discussions, and therefore wanted my data to be able to reflect and take into account greater student involvement and participation. I wanted to be able to note any instances of students taking risks and seeking leadership responsibilities, thus demonstrating a shift to more active and engaged participation. I believed that these interviews would give me greater access to the thought processes of my target students and would help direct my intervention, while also giving me insight into possible further research that would need to be undertaken in order to fully understand the potential of my chosen research method.

Observational Data

Throughout the intervention process I would be audio taping all conversations and discussions that took place between the group members and me. I hoped to later code these audio tapes in some way that would be comparable to a frequency check or tally system based on student participation (who asked questions and who answered questions) and also note any changes in the quality of discussion (from shallow to more meaningful discussion input). Using the audio tapes would be rather straightforward when looking for objective information such as rate of talk time among the four participants, overall teacher talk time, and number of times students need to be redirected to the topic at hand. However, rubrics would have to be used when attempting to compare and illustrate changes in the overall "quality" of the discussion in terms of the use of higher level questioning and strategy use. Throughout the course of the intervention I hoped to observe improvements in students' overall verbal participation, but was most interested in seeing if the students' overall conversational and discussion abilities are able to become more mature, more deliberate, and more thoughtful. I

wanted to see if students were able to feed off of one another's input and create a dynamic discussion session that had few lulls or off task behavior. By audio taping our meetings I believed I would be able to use direct student quotes to demonstrate any powerful changes that took place throughout the course of the intervention. My aim was to see noteworthy transitions take place in terms of my students' roles as learners. Throughout the course of the intervention I hoped to see transitions from more passive involvement to active engagement and from student dependency on teacher guided discussion to independent, peer-directed discussions that maintained a certain level of maturity and complexity. The types of questions asked, the duration and consideration of student responses, and the use of more complex reading strategies (questioning the author, predicting, referencing previous text selection, etc.) were all areas of improvement that I would be able to track using audio recordings.

I planned to take notes and keep a journal of what I saw and experienced during our intervention discussions, focusing mainly on the mannerisms or nuances that I observed and which the audio would not be able to fully capture. I also took some observational notes of my students during class time in both journal and frequency check form. I tended to observe my target students during their language arts period and took notes on their overall behavior and participation in the class. I knew that chronicling student involvement could be both objective (frequency checks, tallies, sequence sampling) and somewhat subjective (the changes I would witness in a student's attitude or confidence level). However, I believed that by journaling my experiences I would be able to capture the attitude changes and any possible non-academic transformations that might take place throughout the course of the intervention (new friendships, greater confidence, etc.).

I knew that, based on the data I had collected, my intervention needed to focus on the areas of reading comprehension and response to literature, and after looking through the interest inventories of the class I was somewhat surprised to find that most students had positive attitudes towards reading in general. However, despite their interest in reading, many students (including my target group) alluded to feelings of discomfort and insecurity when it came to academic reading and writing. I wanted to find an intervention technique that would incorporate high interest reading and strong student participation in such a way as to elicit academic growth and gains in the areas of reading comprehension and response to literature. After conducting additional research I concluded that one promising intervention technique was student-led book clubs, which enabled the subjects to actively participate in the intervention while using high interest and grade level appropriate reading material. In addition, book discussions could lead to greater reading awareness, the ability to candidly respond to questions and prompts regarding shared readings, and an opportunity to further develop reading comprehension strategies.

<u>Literature Review</u>

In order to fully develop my research question and sub questions I needed to look for relevant research that supported my intervention topic and I was overwhelmed by the amount of research articles that I was able to collect that dealt specifically with book clubs and reading discussions at the fifth grade level. One such article, by Celani and Mclntyre (2006), was based on an action research study emphasizing the various scaffolding techniques that promoted "developed" discussions of shared literature. The study was conducted on students within the very same age range as my target group and focused on the importance of "developed discussions". "Developed" discussions, as noted by the authors, are those discussions that include substantial topics that go beyond

surface or superficial aspects of a text and include interpretations of the text and responses supported by evidence found in the book. "Developed" discussions are those in which students are utilizing higher level thinking skills such as prediction, questioning the author, etc. rather than basic summarizing of plot points or remembering character's names (Celani & Mclntyre, 2006). The authors discuss how they conducted their research using fifth grade literature groups and based on their analysis of coded audio tapes, found a number of strategies and methods than allowed for and encouraged "developed" discussion. The research indicated that although teacher guided prompts and other methods of scaffolding are vital, there were a number of other important influences, such as the literature selected and the need for teachers to adapt their responses and questions to fit the needs and abilities of each participant, that contributed to "developed" discussions (Celani & Mclntyre, 2006).

In a similar vein, another article by Scharer, Lehman, and Peters (2001) described at length the benefits of a "quality" discussion. Similar to Celani and Mclntyre's "developed" discussion, a "quality" discussion takes place when students are given opportunities to openly and candidly express differing view points in an environment that is not teacher dominated (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001). The authors maintain that classroom discourse and teacher control plays a large role in creating and maintaining a true "quality" discussion. When literature discussions consist of teachers asking questions that are intended to elicit a single correct answer, students' freedom, creative expression, and individual opinions become irrelevant. Such discussions can leave students feeling disconnected and uninterested. These seemingly one-sided discussions can also give students a false understanding of their role as reader by masking the opportunity for individual interpretation and critique that, arguably, should accompany all reading. In contrast to this discussion style, "quality" conversations are those that incorporate student generated questions that often

"stimulate deeper thinking" (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001). Such discussions focus on "why" questions rather than "who" or "how" and enable students to expand on their current knowledge while also incorporating their background knowledge and life experiences into the book discussion. The authors go on to cite a number of relevant research studies that highlight the advantages of "quality" discussions. These advantages include: increased comprehension, creation of new meanings about text, and a greater propensity to engage in leisure reading (reading for one's own pleasure) (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001). The authors conclude that the best types of discussion questions are those that are open ended and open for debate. In order to truly engage students, teachers must relinquish some of their control and authority, thus enabling students to feel more at ease and comfortable sharing divergent viewpoints.

Another article that I found to be relevant was one that focused on how *students* perceived their own experiences in discussion groups. The author, Karen Evans, was surprised to find that few research studies had been undertaken that focused solely on the student's perception of reading discussions and she hoped to explore factors such as gender and social-cultural backgrounds and how they might influence a student's perceptions (Evans, 2002). Similar to the previously mentioned article, Evans conducted her research in a fifth grade classroom during the student's language arts period. Evans would videotape small group literature discussions and later have the group members watch their discussion on tape. Students were able to discuss and reflect upon what they had seen on the video tape in terms of their own answers, insights, and behavior. Evans also presented general, open-ended questions that helped to initiate further discussion regarding student's individual perceptions of their original small group discussion. The author concluded that three themes emerged from her research and she described these themes in detail, including a large number of transcribed student discussions in her article. The three major themes that the author discusses include: students knew the

conditions necessary for an effective discussion, the gender make up of the group played a factor in the participation level of the discussion, and students noted that "bossy" group members influenced other student's participation in the discussion (Evans, 2002). It is important to note that, according to Evans, these major themes were consistently and candidly expressed by the student participants and these same issues arose in a number of different discussion groups.

In an effort to find more specific information on planning and implementing a student directed book club I turned to a very informative book entitled *Moving Forward with Literature Circles (*Pollack Day, Lee Spiegel, McLella, & Brown, 2002). The information presented in this text related to planning, managing, and evaluating literature discussion groups in an orderly, thoughtful manner. The text lays out the various stages of the book discussion "process", beginning with setting up the literature groups and preparing the students, followed by strategies for encouraging real discussions and candid student responses. This text will be helpful when planning the overall format and timeline of my intervention.

The above mentioned articles contained a wealth of information on the types and quality of discussions I would be striving for and also the various ways in which to approach my book club discussions. After reviewing additional texts, I was able to find even more compelling information regarding the effectiveness of my chosen intervention strategy for English Language Learners specifically. It was vital that I take into account the specific needs of my three target English Language Learner students and the research that I found further endorsed and supported the small group discussion method that I had chosen for my inquiry. Many sources highlighted the importance of "learning through collaboration" as an effective and beneficial learning strategy for second language learners' (Gibbons, 2002). Combined with appropriate teacher scaffolding,

cooperative and group learning can give students the opportunity to learn from one another in unforeseen and dynamic ways (Larson-Freeman, 2000). Not only are students able to practice their social skills of turn taking, respectful disagreement, and opinion sharing, but they are also given opportunities to observe and interact with their peers in an oral/verbal context that supports and develops language acquisition and vocabulary development. Often times, when children work together collaboratively they are able to accomplish far more than any individual child could under the same circumstances, thus further demonstrating the inherently collaborative nature of learning (Gibbons, 2002). Much research has shown that "both student-student and teacher-student talk can provide rich contexts for second language development", as well as enabling students greater practice with verbal fluency and expression (Gibbons, 2002). However, as stated by each author above mentioned, getting students to speak is not enough. Of even greater concern is the quality of the "productive talk" that takes place during a discussion and also the role of the teacher in scaffolding, rather than dominating, the dialogue (Gibbons, 2002). All of the research supported my intervention approach and provided me with specific guidelines and strategies that would be advantageous not only to my second language learners but all of my target students. By using a variety of research and expert practitioner sources, coupled with my knowledge of my students and their educational needs, I was able to develop a research question that encompassed the purpose and focus of my intervention.

<div align="center">Research Question and Sub-Questions</div>

The research sources that I found further reinforced the purpose and rational for my intervention. Time and time again the research data pointed to the many benefits of shared reading discussions and their ability to not only check comprehension but *teach* comprehension (Pollack Day, Lee Spiegel, McLellan, & Brown, 2002). Student-led

reading discussions give students a voice and enable them to use their prior knowledge to teach others and in turn learn from different perspectives. High quality reading discussions can lead to increased reading comprehension (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001), greater awareness of story structure and story elements, the creation of new meanings and understandings about text and the world in general (Celani, & Mclntyre, 2006), and foster a deeper interest in reading. By allowing students to lead their own shared reading discussions, you are enabling them to take an active role in their own learning and construct meaning that is significant to their lives. Students learn best when "learning is meaningful, interesting, and functional and when they can make choices about learning" (Davenport, Arnold, & Lassmann, 2004). Creating a student centered, student directed intervention empowers participants to make choices about their learning and take on greater responsibilities that promote feelings of self-confidence and self-assurance. Small group discussions also give students opportunities to work cooperatively and productively with peers, thus further developing social, verbal, and interpersonal skills. Although I have chosen to focus my inquiry on advancing students reading comprehension skills and written responses to literature, I believe that an intervention incorporating reading discussions will directly and indirectly benefit students in a multitude of academic, emotional, and social levels.

Using all of the research sources I collected I was able to finalize my thesis question and generate appropriate sub-questions. My research question is as follows:

In what ways can a student-directed book club incorporating shared reading discussions lead to academic growth in the areas of reading comprehension and response to literature?

My sub-questions relate to how I will carry out my intervention, how I will assess student progress, and how I will define certain terms. My sub-questions are as follows:

- How will I define "student directed" book discussions?

- How do I model reading and reading comprehension during our book clubs meetings?

- When and how should I transition from teacher-led discussions to mainly student-led discussions?

- What types of prompts or questions should I use and how can I encourage students to generate open-ended questions?

- How do I incorporate writing activities into this research inquiry?

- What pre-assessments can I give the students in order to measure their potential growth in terms of reading comprehension, strategy use, and response to literature?

- How should I choose the types of books we read for our discussions?

Undoubtedly more sub questions would be generated as the project progressed and I was determined to stay open-minded about the information that would arise during the course of the intervention. Although these were the preliminary questions I hoped to address, I also wanted to remain flexible and open to new avenues of research and inquiry. After reading a variety of practitioner research studies it became apparent that more often than not a researcher's assumptions or preconceived notions regarding the precise direction of their study will undergo many changes through the course of the project. With this in mind I hoped to use my sub questions as a general guide for exploration rather than a fixed or static plan.

<u>Intervention/Instructional Strategy</u>

Having defined and narrowed my research topic and selected my target group, I had to finalize times and dates for our intervention meetings with parents and my collaborating teacher. After much consideration I decided that, based on the nature of

my intervention topic and the timeframe in which I was working, it would be best if my
students and I met at least three times a week to maintain consistent discussions of the
text we were reading. If I left too large a gap between meetings I was afraid students
would become disengaged or simply forget the material they had read the days
previously. I would meet with my target group three times a week, twice a week for one
hour after school and once a week for thirty minutes during the student's lunch/recess.
With two and a half hours of meeting time a week I hoped that students would have
enough time to read while still being able to retain what they have read and engage in
thoughtful group discussions.

<div align="center">Week 1</div>

Day 1- Introduction/Expectation: On the first meeting day I discussed with my
target students the rationale behind the research project, outlined my expectations for
the students in terms of respectful behavior and reading requirements, and presented an
outline of what they could expect from future meetings. Together the students and I
began discussing what makes for a high quality discussion and what factors the students
could control that would make our meetings more enjoyable and beneficial. I wanted to
begin by creating an atmosphere of acceptance and community, in which each student
felt comfortable sharing his thoughts and feelings. My ultimate goal for the first
intervention meeting was to explicitly present my expectations to the students and give
them an opportunity to ask questions and begin to feel comfortable with the group
dynamic.

Day 2- Modeling Effective Reading Strategies: At our second meeting I began
modeling the *reading* process with my target group by using a shared book to engage in
a read aloud session. Essentially I used elements of the "think-aloud method" for this
class period so as to allow students to witness the mental processes that take place when

one reads a book with the intention of later discussing it. The think aloud method is a strategy that models the cognitive processes that take place when reading is undertaken in a focused manner that emphasizes metacognition and the conscious awareness of one's own reading comprehension. In using the "think aloud method" I read a book aloud to the students and occasionally paused to ask myself questions about the plot or characters, made notes of important details in the book, or highlighted vocabulary words that might be challenging and discussed strategies for finding their definitions, thus explicitly modeling the reading process. After reading the text aloud I opened the floor for a discussion based on what I had taken note of during my "think aloud" reading. I asked students to consider their own reading habits and to determine if they ever engage in any of the thought processes I modeled during the read aloud. We then discussed the possible benefits of using such reading techniques as: predicting, questioning the text, questioning the author, noting unknown or confusing words or concepts, summarizing, rereading, etc., in an effort to demonstrate the effectiveness of these reading strategies. I also wanted to highlight how note taking could be very useful when attempting to prepare for book discussions. Lastly I asked students for examples of how the discussions could be affected if members of the group came to class unprepared or without written aids and, through this dialogue, enabled students to see how their actions would influence the group dynamic.

Day 3- Modeling Effective Reading Discussions: My ultimate goal was to give my target students the strategies and tools to lead their own "developed" discussions (Celani & McLntyre, 2006). However, in order to relinquish control as the discussion leader I had to enable my students to feel comfortable and confident in their abilities to lead discussions. I modeled, with the help of my students, how a high quality discussion was conducted and run and I also demonstrated what behaviors would take away from or hinder thoughtful discussions. I was confident that most of my students would have a

sense of what actions added to and took away from developed discussions, as they themselves engage in discussions daily with friends and family. One study by Evans (2002) reported that students, for the most part, had a "clear notion of the conditions that are conducive to effective discussions" and therefore were able to identify conditions such as respect, reading the text, taking the discussion seriously, etc. that would lead to less desirable discussions. I asked my students for examples of times when discussions had been negatively affected by someone's actions or comments, how discussions could be taken off track, or how discussions could be superficial and boring. I was able to elicit student-generated terms and conditions that I typed up and gave to each student reminding them of the various steps that would have to be taken in order to facilitate an effective group discussion.

At the end of our meeting I gave students a timeline that specified the dates and times of each meeting and included what readings needed to be completed on each date. Students were expected to read each night and take notes in their reading journal. Each student was given a role or job such as: Discussion Director, Summarizer, Connector, and Vocabulary Enricher, and each student was responsible for coming to our meetings ready to lead the group based on his particular job. Students were given a print out of the various duties of each reading role and together the target students and I went through each of the roles and discussed the responsibilities of that team member. Book Club roles rotated every week so each student had an opportunity to take on each of the four roles.

Weeks 2-3

Day 4/5- First Student Led Discussion: Each student was expected to bring his reading book and notebook to each meeting and was required to have some written response in their notebook for each night they read. This requirement was crucial to the success of the intervention because research indicates that students are more apt to

initiate conversation and actively participate in discussions when they have had an opportunity to write responses and notes as they read (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001). Jobs were assigned the week prior and students were responsible for initiating dialogue based on their role responsibilities. I assumed that this first discussion would require more coaxing and prompting on my part, but my hope was that as the days progressed the students would be able to lead the discussions with little input from me. I was able to actively scaffold their discussions during days 3-5, but after that I attempted to act as an observer or regular book club member, and not the authoritative, "in control" teacher figure. During each of the sessions that followed I took notes of what I saw and audio recorded all of the sessions, making it easier for me to go back and find direct quotes to use later in my inquiry discussion.

Days 6-12- Group Book Discussions: Each meeting began with the "Summarizer" giving a brief summary of the chapters that had been read, being careful to highlight the main events and significant or noteworthy occurrences that took place within the readings. Once the Summarizer was finished talking, the other students could add any other important details they believed the Summarizer may have overlooked. Then the Vocabulary Enricher would discuss any words, phrases, or concepts that were unclear or potentially challenging and together the group would discuss their meaning and significance in the story. The Connecter then pointed out ways in which the text and what occurred in the story could be applied to the lives and prior knowledge of the students present. The Connecter asked the group about how the story related to their own lives or if they could relate to any of the characters. During the discussion it was the job of the Discussion Director to keep the discussion on track, ask questions or offer prompts when the group seemed to have run out of things to say, make sure that everyone was getting a chance to speak, and monitor behavior and tone to make sure everyone was being respectful. Although I wanted the students to feel comfortable

leading their own discussions I had to always remain available and ready to scaffold and facilitate discussions when they got off track or when the students became overwhelmed. The students were always welcome to ask questions or seek clarification from me; however I wanted to encourage other discussion members to offer their opinions first before I took control of the group dynamic. Aside from wanting students to take on leadership roles, I wanted them to realize their own unique abilities and understand that they could learn a great deal from each other.

<u>Week 4</u>

Day 13 - Debrief/Student Perceptions of Intervention: On the final days of the intervention I conducted a debriefing of sorts with my target group and got their feedback on how they felt the intervention went, what were the highlights of our meetings, and what they had learned and taken away from the experience. On the final day I administered post-assessments as well as new self-evaluation surveys.

<u>Strategies for English Language Learners</u>

With three of my four target students being English Language Learners, it was important that I take into account their unique challenges and needs. Each of the three students were classified as CELDT level 3 (intermediate) and their conversational language seemed to be on par with most of their classmates. I believed that the vocabulary and difficulty level of the book might pose some challenges for my ELs, however I believed that with the modeling I was going to provide through the "think-aloud" method, coupled with constant scaffolding, I would be able to address questions and confusions as they arose. All of the strategies I set in place for my intervention (modeling, think aloud reading, role taking, written responses, using realia when applicable, etc.) would benefit all of my target students, especially my English Language

Learners, because these instructional approaches have been shown to help struggling

students with language development and response to literature. One study by McKeown

and Gentilucci (2007) documented the benefits of using the "think-aloud" method with

ELLs that are classified as "early intermediate" and "intermediate". The study concluded

that using this method to model, provide direct instruction, and then allow for individual

practice, will enable English Language Learners to identify strategies for monitoring

comprehension and using context clues to deepen their understanding of the text

(McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007). Many research sources pointed out the importance of

second language learners engaging in collaborative group work and the many

educational benefits such interactions provide. Gibbons (2002) devotes an entire chapter

of her book to "classroom talk" and its vital role in helping foster second language

acquisition and overall language development. Additionally, because I was shying away

from yes-or-no, factual based questions and rather utilizing more analytical lines of

questioning that leave room for multiple interpretations, my aim was to enable my

students to feel comfortable discussing without the fear of giving a "wrong" answer. I

believed that when creating an intervention for students who are struggling with a given

subject, it is important to create a setting and instruction plan that encourages students

to take chances with the knowledge that their comments and insights are in no way going

to be judged or critiqued.

<center>Data Collection</center>

When attempting to analyze all of the various data sets that I collected

throughout the course of my intervention, I knew that the most powerful data would

come from my student's own self-assessments and individual interviews. When

beginning to plan my intervention I knew that in order to create a powerful inquiry

project I needed to not only address my student's apparent academic challenges that

were visible based on numeric and statistical measures (achievement scores, classroom

grades, etc.) but also take into account my student's own self perceptions and perceived

strengths, so as to elicit participation and hopefully greater interest in the project. With

this in mind, much of my pre and post intervention data came from written self-

assessments, reading interest surveys, individual interviews, and audio recordings of our

book club meetings, all of which helped to shape the formation and implementation of

my intervention and gave me great insight into my students, myself as a teacher, and the

power of literature to teach and inspire.

<div align="center">Data Collection Procedures</div>

In terms of my achievement data, I collected student's progress reports and

quarter grades, STAR independent reading levels, STAR test scores, District Language

Arts Benchmark Test scores, graded word list scores, and CELDT scores. All of these

scores I obtained from their head teacher or from tests I administered myself. I

personally administered the graded word list test using Silvaroli and Wheelock's (2004)

"Classroom Reading Inventory". The District Language Art Benchmark test would not be

administered again until later in the school year, so for the purposes of this inquiry I

would not be able to use that data for post intervention comparison. Progress reports

were given out every other week and quarter grades took into account all student work

during the last three months.

I administered the self-assessment and reading interest surveys both before and

after the intervention. The pre-intervention survey was a two sided sheet that contained

10 questions and was administered to the entire class during their language arts period.

Students were given twenty minutes to answer the questions and before passing out the

surveys I explained to the class the purpose of the survey, how the information would be

used, and I asked each student to be honest with their answers. The post intervention

surveys were only filled out by my target students and I followed the same basic protocol when administering these nearly identical surveys.

The individual interviews that I conducted with my target students took place during recess in the student's empty classroom. I wanted to make sure students were able to speak to me candidly, without any distractions, and for this reason I chose to conduct my interviews in a quiet, familiar place. The interviews lasted no longer than ten minutes and included pre-scripted questions as well as dialogue about the book club, school, and how the intervention was progressing. During the interviews I took notes and used those notes in later data analysis.

During each of our book club meetings I audio recorded our fifty-minute discussions, being sure to always inform the students that they were being recorded and that they were to act naturally and not be preoccupied with the tape. Our meetings followed a rough format, but the audio tape allowed me to be fully engaged in the conversation without needing to take notes. The audio recordings and their subsequent transcripts would be used to analyze student's growing reading comprehension, use of learned reading strategies, and their verbal responses to the literature prompts and impromptu dialogue.

<center>Self-Assessment/Individual Interview Data</center>

Pre-Intervention Data

Before beginning my intervention I administered a reading interest survey that included a few self-assessment items. I gave the students a ditto that asked them a variety of questions regarding their personal interests, academic successes and challenges, and reading interest level and allowed the students ample time to fill in their answers. I reminded the students that they were not going to be graded on their answers

and that what I wanted most was for them to be truthful and honest with me so that I could help them through my intervention. Upon looking through these pre intervention surveys I noticed that all four of my target students listed language arts as one of their most challenging subjects in school. In order to better understand my student's feelings and discuss their academic challenges with them further, I conducted one on one interviews with each of my target students. During the interviews I asked students the following questions: "Do you think you are a good reader?", "Do you enjoy reading and if so, why?", and "What aspect of reading challenges you the most?" I took copious notes during these interviews and was able to capture many important and insightful quotes from my students. I was surprised to find that many of my students' answers were similar, some nearly identical, and with this information I began constructing the basis of my intervention.

In terms of the first interview question, which enabled each student to rate themselves as a reader, not one of my four target students identified themselves as a "good" reader. Juan, Chris, and Roberto all said that they were "ok" readers, while Sam stated that he was "not a very good reader" and went on to describe how he is often challenged by the content of chapter books and is overwhelmed by some of the vocabulary and language contained in these writings. I was interested in seeing how my target students' responses to this question related to both their scores on a graded word list and also their current STAR independent reading level. Based on their scores for the graded word list, Sam scored at the third grade level, Juan scored at the fourth grade level, and Chris and Roberto scored at the sixth grade level. The students' independent reading levels demonstrated similar trends with Roberto and Chris independently reading at a third grade reading level, while Sam and Juan's scores placed them at a second grade reading level (Figure 11). My hope was that through my book club intervention, target students would get an opportunity to read and discuss a shared text

and through these discussions develop a variety of reading strategies that could help

them with their reading comprehension and verbal response to literature. I hoped that

participation in the book club would enable students to build their confidence with

reading and give them opportunities to interact with a text that included more serious

themes and more challenging vocabulary than they were used to. Knowing that I would

administer the same individual interviews during and following the intervention, it was

my hope that students would walk away from the experience feeling better equipped to

handle more challenging reading and through their successes with the book club,

hopefully reevaluate their ratings of themselves as readers.

Figure 11
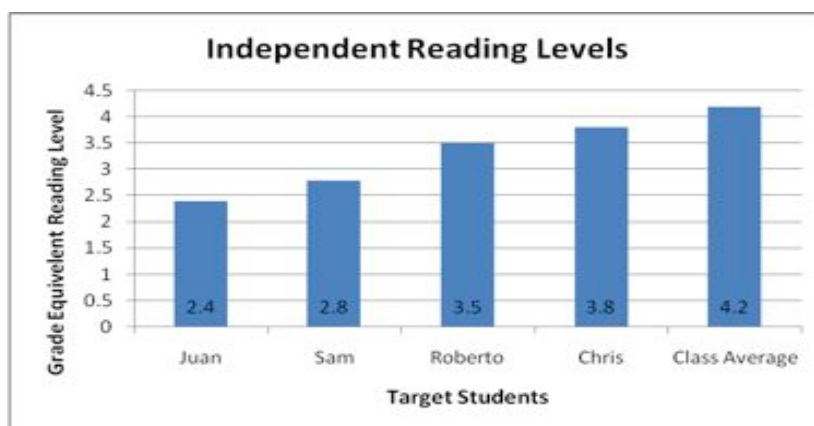
Independent Reading Levels

Source: Data taken from computer printout of AR reading level scores based on a computer
generated test

Despite the fact that my target students voiced concerns about their reading

abilities, they all responded positively to my second interview question regarding

personal enjoyment of reading. All four of my target students stated that they enjoyed

reading, a fact that I was confident would help facilitate my intervention. In both our

individual interviews and on the written reading survey I administered to the class, my

target students discussed why they enjoyed reading (see Appendix 3). Based on the

written survey and interviews I was able to come up with three commonly voiced reasons

my target students enjoyed reading: when you read you learn new things, when you read

you learn new words, and it is exciting to see what happens next in a book. These student answers helped me when choosing the shared text we would be reading for the intervention and it also enabled me to see what aspects of reading most interested my students. I knew that focusing on vocabulary, the personal significance of the story line, and novel concepts presented in the text would take into account my target student's reading interests and would also aid in the development of reading comprehension strategies. My hope was that my student's high interest in reading would help promote strong group participation in terms of responding to literature prompts and student initiated discussions. I believed that my attitude data, coupled with my observational and in-the-midst notes, would be able to highlight any changes in overall student participation as well as changes in student's self-assessments.

The final interview question allowed students to share with me the challenges they face in the study of language arts and more specifically reading. I wanted to look beyond my target student's test scores, reading levels, and classroom grades, and get a sense of their own personal struggles in the areas of reading comprehension and response to literature. Throughout the four individual interviews it became apparent that my target group shared a common frustration and discomfort with their inability to fully understand certain text. Chris and Sam stated that often, when reading longer chapter books, they had trouble with some of the vocabulary and their overall comprehension was hindered when they had to skip over a word they did not understand. Sam stated, "Sometimes there are really big words and I am not sure what they mean so I keep reading. I just skip them if I don't know them, but then it just doesn't make sense." Juan wrote in his reading survey, "I do enjoy it (reading) because you get to relax and learn new stuff like back then." However, when asked about the difficulties of reading during our individual interview Juan stated, "Sometimes it's hard to read a whole book because I can get bored and the story isn't as fun so I just stop. And sometimes I just don't get

what is happening. Then I go find another book." It was clear from the individual interviews that my intervention needed to incorporate a variety of effective reading comprehension strategies in order to be truly beneficial for my target group. Without the appropriate strategies to tackle difficult vocabulary and unfamiliar concepts, my target students would have no choice but to continue using ineffective reading methods, such as skipping unknown words or lines, which would inevitably hinder their comprehension.

Post-Intervention Data

Following the intervention I met with students individually to conduct similar interviews to those administered prior to the intervention and I also asked my target students to fill out an attitude survey regarding their participation in the intervention and their current reading self-assessments. (See Appendix 4-7). In terms of the attitude survey I was pleased to see that all four students rated themselves as better readers than they had prior to the intervention. The post intervention surveys allowed my target students to discuss how the intervention influenced their reading and also what they learned from the experience. Each student had his own unique ideas about the usefulness of the book club, yet all four of my target students showed great enthusiasm and excitement over the intervention and even asked if we could start another book club after winter break. During their individual interviews I was able to use their attitude surveys as a springboard to discussing their feelings about the intervention in even greater detail. I asked each student to discuss what he learned from the intervention and I was surprised by what I heard. I had hoped that my students would walk away from the intervention with greater confidence in their reading ability and some new reading strategies; however I had no idea that the content of the book would have such an impact on the students. The intervention shared reading book I chose was a challenging young-

adult book by Cynthia Lord entitled <u>Rules</u> (2006) that incorporated a variety of serious and mature themes including family turmoil, dealing with disabilities, bullying, and issues regarding self-image and peer pressure. I knew that the serious nature of the book would lend itself to more mature discussion topics and possibly more meaningful dialogue, but I could not have anticipated how powerful the book's message would be in the lives of my students.

The surveys and interviews allowed me to receive feedback from my target group and a vast majority of the feedback was positive. Students discussed how the book club had helped their overall reading abilities and had even heightened their interest in reading. When asked how the book club had influenced their reading, Chris said, "I read more now because I never read a book that long, so reading <u>Rules</u> I got used to it and now I like reading long books." Sam discussed how the book club had introduced him to a new literary genre, "After the book club I wanted to read more interesting books. Before I read mysteries and scary books. I've never read a book like <u>Rules</u> before, it was funny and interesting because of David (a character in the book) and it lets me learn about what sicknesses there are." All four of my target students mentioned autism during the course of their final interview. Because the book dealt so heavily with developmental disorders and physical disabilities, students were eager to learn more about autism and paraplegics. Juan discussed how he had never heard of autism before reading the book and liked learning about, "...how they (individuals with autism) communicate and where they go to get help." I soon learned that the book club had even altered some of my student's independent reading activities, as Sam informed me that he was rereading the book with his mother because, as he put it, "I liked it so much I wanted to read it again. And my mom had read a little without me and wanted to read it for herself. We both really like it even though it is a sixth grade book." Roberto also reread the book over winter break and said that he enjoyed it even more the second time

because he knew all of the "hard words" and could better understand the plot. These examples certainly point to a change in students' reading activities.

On the attitude survey, two of the students wrote that they could "read faster" following the intervention and others said that they were "better at reading". When questioned as to how the intervention aided their reading fluency, Juan stated, "Now I like finding new words I don't understand. I reread it and then reread the sentence and sometimes I get it. It's kinda fun." In response to the same question Roberto recognized that the group dynamic had facilitated his reading growth because the students were able to take notes and discuss unfamiliar concepts. Roberto explained, "I learned because when we read we had a vocabulary person and we all wrote about what the words meant. Talking about the words and about the story helped me remember things like 'mimic' (one of the vocabulary words discussed during a meeting)". All four target students recognized that they were reading more often than they had prior to the book club and as stated previously indicated that their overall interest in reading had been elevated after their participation in the intervention. It was apparent, after speaking with each of the students individually, that my target group had thoroughly enjoyed the intervention, and even more notably, the text that I had selected. Although my attitude data and interview transcripts are not as easily analyzed as numeric or standardized test scores, I am no less impressed with the information these data sets provide. Looking at my intervention through the eyes of my students will help me determine its effectiveness and capacity to maintain student interest and participation.

In-the-Midst Notes/Analysis of Recorded Data

Some of the most compelling and noteworthy data that I collected during the course of my intervention can be found in the audio recordings from our weekly book club meetings. These recording proved to hold a wealth of information regarding the

overall progression and implementation of the intervention and documented the transition from teacher to student led book discussions. Throughout the course of the intervention I listened to my weekly recordings in hopes of finding data that would compel me to alter or adjust my intervention to fit the changing needs of my students. The audio tapes allowed me to not only transcribe the book discussions for further analysis following the intervention, but it enabled me to take a second look at my own involvement in the group discussions.

Early on in the intervention I noticed, after listening to the week's recordings, that I was falling into the same traps indicated by the researchers. In an effort to encourage student participation, I was monopolizing the conversations with my own insights, questions, and ideas. I even caught myself interrupting my students and finishing their sentences. Had I not had the opportunity to review my audio tapes throughout the course of the intervention, I fear I would not have been able to identify my flawed conduct and subsequently alter it. I had to make a conscious decision to sit back and relinquish control of the dialogue to my students. Although I would inevitably have to continue encouraging students and scaffolding the discussions, I knew that in order for my students to truly participate in a "student led", high quality discussion I needed to bite my tongue and allow my students to take responsibility for their own participation.

A great deal of the literature I had used to support my intervention warned teachers not to overly dominate literature discussions. One study by Alvermann, O'Brian, and Dillion (1990) found that although the teachers in their research study could "define the qualities of a good discussion, the discussions in their classrooms rarely matched their definitions" and teachers were unable to integrate their knowledge of effective teaching practices into their own teaching methods. The authors then stated that teacher

directed discussions often focus too narrowly on "covering text material" and therefore do not encourage "students to create meaning by interacting with the text." Another research article that I had consulted early on in the creation of my intervention highlighted the importance of peer-led literature discussions. Researcher Evans (2002) emphasizes the instructional benefits of supporting genuine student led discussions because such learning contexts "help students take ownership of their learning and provide a forum that allows all students' voices to be heard." It was obvious that my early interactions with the group were not helping to support my students' participation, but were in fact obstructing their ability to engage in dialogue. After recognizing that I was succumbing to the same errors that were made by the teachers in the case studies I had read, I knew I had to make changes to my intervention that would give students more opportunities to be prepared and open to discussing the text on their own terms.

Although I had assigned roles at the start of the intervention and had given each student a notebook in which to take notes while reading, I decided, after listening to the first weeks audio tapes, to provide additional scaffolding for my students. I gave students daily worksheets that mapped out their roles and included spaces for them to write questions, page numbers, vocabulary words, and quotes. By enabling my students to be better organized, have more well-defined roles and responsibilities, and be held more accountable for their written and verbal input, I felt less tempted to infiltrate the conversation and take over. Once students were provided with more direct scaffolding in the form of written worksheets, they not only wrote more, they were able to use their writings to prepare for our weekly discussions. As research demonstrates, providing students with adequate time and opportunities to write their responses and take notes during shared readings, they are often better prepared and more willing to share during group discussions (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001). I soon found that once I loosened my control over our book club meetings and allowed my students more freedom to

discuss the topics of their choosing and ask questions that were relevant to them, the discussions became more authentic and better matched the characteristics of a "high quality" discussion (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001).

Results

Changes in the Amount of Student/Teacher Talk Time

With over ten hours of audio recording I knew it would be a challenging task to try to analyze every hour of recorded material. In an effort to be objective without being overly ambitious, I randomly selected three days (out of the 13 intervention meetings) that represented the beginning, middle, and end phases of the intervention (day 2, day 9, and day 12). I decided to analyze and compare the three days, focusing my analysis on student participation, the transition from teacher-led to student-led discussions, and the overall quality of the discussions in terms of staying on track, discussing important plot events, using new reading strategies to better understand text and vocabulary, and incorporating more abstract and less superficial commentary into the discussions.

I began by listening to my day 2 audio recordings and, with the use of a stopwatch, documented the amount of time I spoke (see Figure 12). I knew that in the early stages of my intervention I would have to model the book discussion process as well as reiterate the meeting guidelines and book discussions roles. Though I suspected my overall talk time would be greater than that of my target students, I was shocked to find that on the second meeting day I alone had spoken for thirty-nine of the fifty minutes, which calculated out to be 76% of the meeting. As previously mentioned, I had recognized my overactive role in the meetings very early on in the intervention process and was able to reorganize the intervention so as to allow my students to have more opportunities to voice their own questions and discuss plot points and vocabulary that

was important or significant for them. I was confident that the changes I made to my intervention after the first week would establish the meetings as student rather than teacher led.
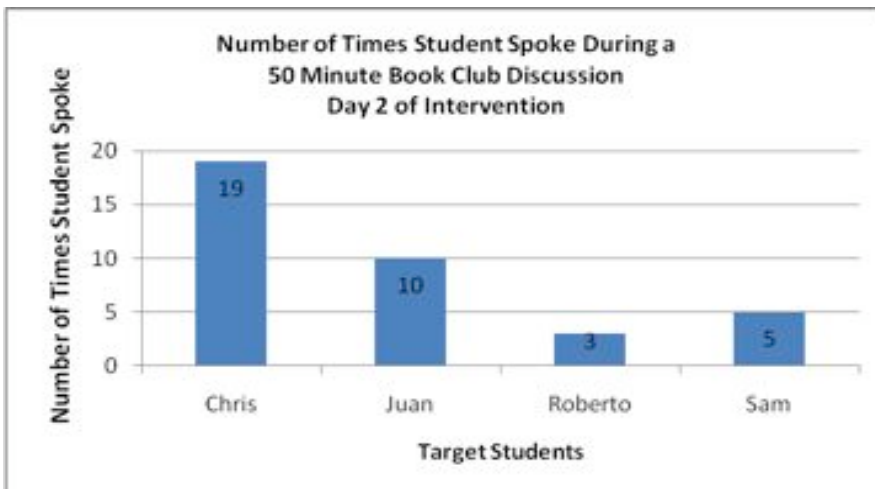
Figure 12
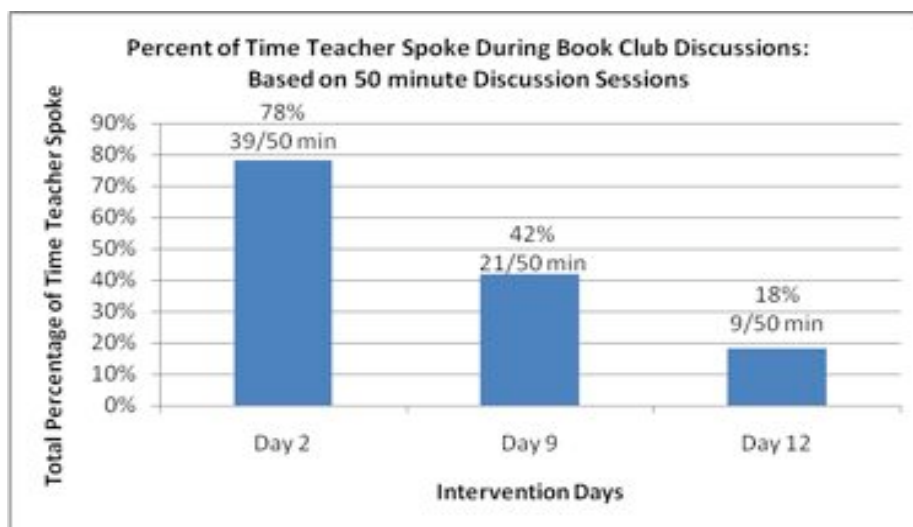
Source: Based on timed audio recordings

I listened to the audio recordings for day 9, as well as day 12, and using the same method as I had for day 2 I calculated the amount of time I had spoken during the course of the meeting. The data seemed to reflect my modifications to the intervention and also demonstrated how quickly the students took control of the group. During the ninth meeting I spoke for twenty-one minutes, which was 42% of the time, a sharp contrast from only seven meetings prior when I had spoken for over three-quarters of the meeting. Even more notable was the data collected from the twelfth meeting, during which time I had spoken for a total of nine minutes, only 18% of the total fifty-minute meeting. I believe that this data confirms the fact that there was a gradual shift in control over the course of the intervention, and a majority of the thirteen weeks were truly student led. Had the intervention continued, I believe that my role would have further

diminished and the students would have had the experience and confidence to manage the meetings with only occasional assistance from myself.

Aside from noting changes in the overall structure of the interviews, I wanted to use the audio recordings to chronicle my student's participation in the intervention meetings. In group discussions, student participation can be a significant indicator of both reading comprehension and response to literature. The nature of my intervention would enable me to focus more on verbal responses to literature through reading discussions and by analyzing student participation and involvement in weekly book discussions, I hoped to document any changes in my target student's ability and willingness to respond critically and thoughtfully to the literary text we were using. Using audio tapes from the second and twelfth meetings, I used a tally system to track the number of times each student voluntarily spoke during the course of the fifty minute meeting (see Figures 13 and 14). There is a significant difference between the two meeting periods, in so far as three of the four students voluntarily responded more often in the later portion of the intervention when compared with audio taken from early on in the intervention process. I believe that the numeric data alone does not fully capture the transition that took place throughout the thirteen book club meetings. Although the student's overall participation, in terms of number of times each student vocalized a response, question, or comment, only seemed to fluctuate slightly, the overall length of time the students spoke and the quality of their discussions differed significantly throughout the course of the intervention, a fact which is demonstrated by the significant drop in teacher talk time that was replaced solely with student talk time. (see figure 12)

Figure 13

Source: Based on audio recording and the use of a basic tally system

Figure 14
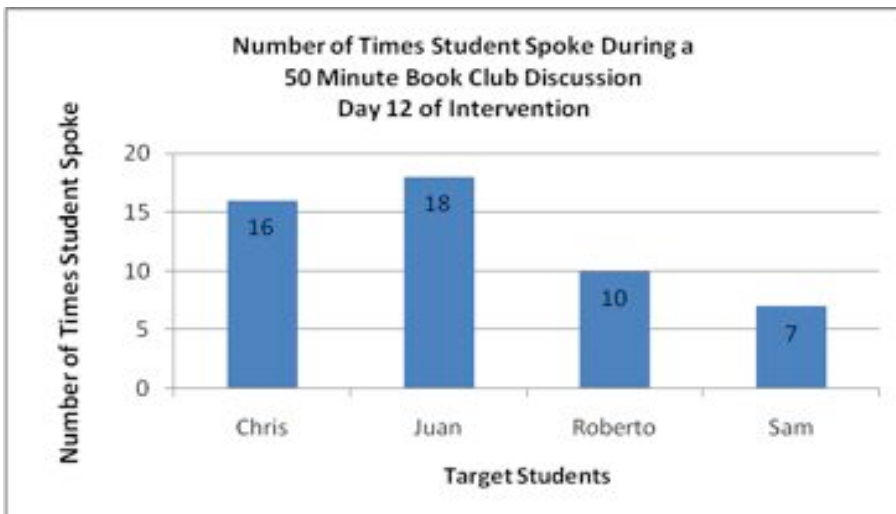
Source: Based on audio recording and the use of a basic tally system

Changes in the Quality of Discussion

During the first week of our book club meetings one student in particular was dominating the discussions. Chris seemed to feel more comfortable talking and sharing with the group early on in the intervention process and although I was happy to see how eager he was to share, I also feared that his control of the conversation would prevent other students from voicing their opinions. Therefore, after the first week, once I had

listened to the audio recording and determined that I was talking too much and Chris was dominating the student-led portion of the conversations, I decided to implement a more structured framework for our book club meetings. Each student was given a specific role and a ditto that corresponded to that role. The four roles (Vocabulary Enricher, Literary Illuminary, Connecter, and Summarizer) would switch every week, thus giving each student the chance to experience all four responsibilities. Each student was responsible for bringing their notebook and ditto to every book club meeting and for the first twenty minutes each student was given a chance to speak to the group using their written notes. After the students had shared with the class what their role sheets had designated, the conversation was then opened and students were free to address other areas of the text that interested them and also ask questions that the other three group members had to respond to.

After reviewing the research literature that I had collected prior to my intervention, my new tactic seemed to be reinfoced by a number of studies. One such study in the Reading Research and Instruction noted that, "Student initiations tended to occur when (students are) provided the opportunity to write responses to their reading and share during discussions." (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001). Therefore, students who are allowed to prepare for group discussions by taking notes or following some basic written questioning guidelines will be more comfortable and confident sharing their thoughts and questions with their peers. Sure enough, once I had given my target students more explicit guidelines and roles, and actively encouraged them to use their notes during group discussions, they were better prepared and able to engage in genuine student-to-student dialogue. I realized that my speaking was not necessarily providing the appropriate or necessary scaffolding for the students, but rather they benefited more from being given specified responsibilities that enabled them to generate their own

questions and discussion topics, thus giving them more active oppertunities for participation and engagement.

The progression from teacher-directed discussions to genuine student-led conversations was apparent in the audio recording of our meetings. Not only did overall student talk time increase significantly, but the overall quality of talk also improved drastically. During the first week of discussions students focused their responses and questions on very superficial aspects of the story and often their comments seemed to rammble without a definate purpose. When asked to discuss the characters, the students only noted physical attributes of the person or they used very general terms such as "nice" or "mean". More often than not students answered questions without going into any detail and without incorporating their own ideas into the dialogue. Student responses tended to come directly from the book and included little personal interpretation or creativity. I believe that much of this early awkwardness stemmed from students' lack of experience engaging in group discussions that were predominantly student led and initated. I noticed that my target students seemed hesitant to speak and even when they did work up the courage to interject they often became embarrassed and would say, "I forgot what I was going to say." Without a clear understanding of what was expected of them and without defined roles that enabled them to feel both empowered and responsible for their participation, students seemed to have no direction.

Once I implemented my written support system and better defined student book club roles I witnessed an enormous change in student participation and engagement. While earlier conversations focused on general, more shallow interactions with the text, students began to engage with the plot and characters and began to pose questions that were thought-provoking and facilitated genuine discussions. For instance, during week one some of the questions posed by the students included the following: "Why did

Katherine get mad at David?", "Why does Katherine like going to the clinic", and "Why does David get mad all the time?". Though these questions are in no way off topic or irrelevant, they are not necessarily conversation starters. All three of these questions can be answered using facts from the book and do not involve the application of students' prior knowledge or personal insight. Such fact-based questions led to short answeres and did not increase self-awareness or individual interpretations of the text. However, during the third week of the intervention the questions posed by the students were more thoughtful, higher-level thinking questions that required students to make connections between the lives of the characters and their own experiences.

During the third week of intervention the following questions were posed by the students (it is important to note that all of the previous and following examples are completely student generated and initiated): "What would you do if you were Katherine and a new girl moves in, would you tell her your brother has autism or would you keep it a secret?", "What would you do if your dad paid more attention to his tomatoe plants than you?", and "How would you handle Ryan making fun of your brother? Would you tell on him?". These questions led to lengthy discussions on such topics as "bonding" with your parents, dishonestly with friends, feelings of neglect and depression, and the power of bullying to ruin lives. Students began to use personal examples to make deeper connections with the text and were able to share these experiences with the group members, which inevitably led to more multifaceted discussions and more complex lines of questioning. Throughout this process students were also being introduced to new reading strategies such as questioning the author, predicting, rereading, summarizing, and using context clues to find the meaning of unfamiliar words. Although I had incorporated these strategies into my intervention and had discussed them during the first week of book club meeting, I was pleased to see that once the discussions became more involving and students became more engaged with the story, many of these

strategies seemed to come naturally to the students and many of them began to spontaneous use these strategies throughout the discussion. I believe that this shift from shallow to deeper engagement with the text and the transition from superficial questioning to abstract, more conceptual interactions with the book, paralleled a change in the student's overall reading comprehension and ability to thoughtfully respond to the literature. Once students were free to ask the questions that were important to them and receive feedback from their peers, their interest and overall understanding of the text seemed to be hightened.

<div align="center">Achievement Data</div>

Prior to the intervention each and every piece of achievement data I collected from my four target students revealed the same basic trend. All four of my students scored below the class average on their STAR test scores, District Language Arts Benchmark scores, AR reading level classifications, and first trimester language arts grades (see Figures 3, 8, & 9). Within each of these measurements the four students scored in the same basic order, with Chris outscoring each of the other three students, followed by Roberto, then Sam, and finally Juan, who in nearly every measure scored far below the class average. The data seemed to be consistent and pointed to a need for improvement in language arts, and more specifically reading comprehension and response to literature. Although the achievement data I collected prior to the intervention helped me narrow my inquiry focus and gave me better insight into my target student's academic challenges, I knew that my chosen intervention would not necessarily lend itself to standardize measures for determining student progress. Because so much of my intervention relied on student's verbal participation and informal peer interactions, I believed that standardized measures of accountability alone could not sufficiently demonstrate the academic growth that I had set out to achieve.

After reviewing the various achievement data sets I collected, I reasoned that much of the data had no direct connection with my research question and I would be unable to properly analyze the data in any meaningful way. As stated earlier the District Language Arts Benchmark exam was given at the beginning of the school year and again at the end, therefore time constraints made it impossible for me to have an equivalent post intervention measurement to use for analysis. Additionally, although the student's CELDT score enabled me to narrow my target intervention group to four students (three of whom are English language learners) and helped direct the focus of my intervention topic, my inquiry focus would have little immediate impact on overall CELDT levels, and therefore I could not use that measurement in post intervention analysis. Therefore, I concluded that the only achievement data that would provide any possible insight into my student's academic growth would be my target student's quarter grades.

Prior to the intervention all four of my students were scoring at or below the class average in nearly all language arts subcategories. For the purposes of this research study, I focused my attention on the student's "reading comprehension" grade and "response to literature" grade, both of which are defined subcategories in the grade book and on report cards. Figures 15-18 graphically represent the student's numeric scores in both of these subcategories both before and after the intervention. When attempting to analyze these scores I determined that because my intervention took place outside of the students' regular classroom and because the intervention itself was independently formulated and therefore did not mirror what the students were learning during their classroom language arts period, these data sets would most likely not be able to capture the growth I had witnessed during our meetings. Upon looking at the classroom grades I was somewhat disappointed that the achievement data I had collected was not reflecting the changes I had observed in my target students. Three of my four target students did raise their reading comprehension grades, while all four students' response to literature

grades were lowered, some considerably. I do feel it is important to note that the classroom average for response to literature dropped significantly over the course of the two grading periods, from 71% in October to 59% in January (See Figures 15 & 16). These results, therefore, seem to reflect a possible change in classroom curriculum or teaching, which would be beyond the scope of my intervention.
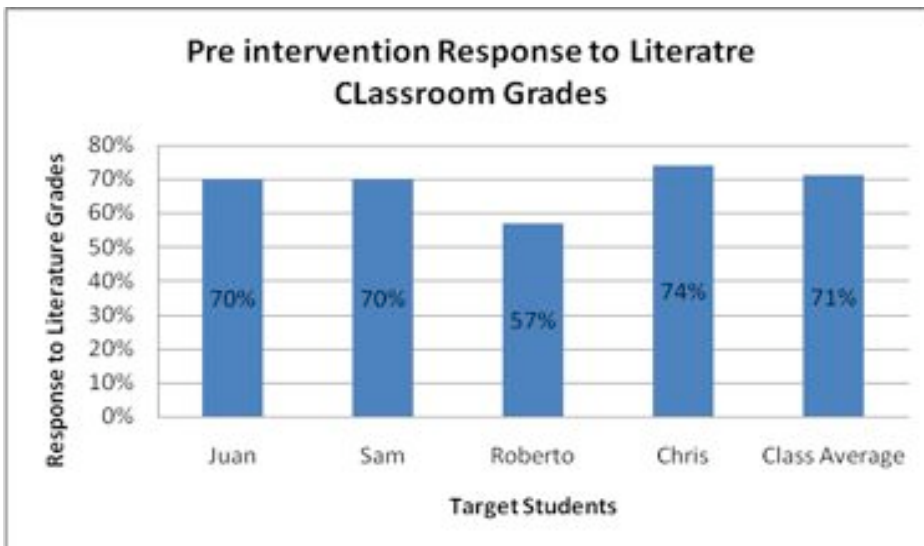
Figure 15
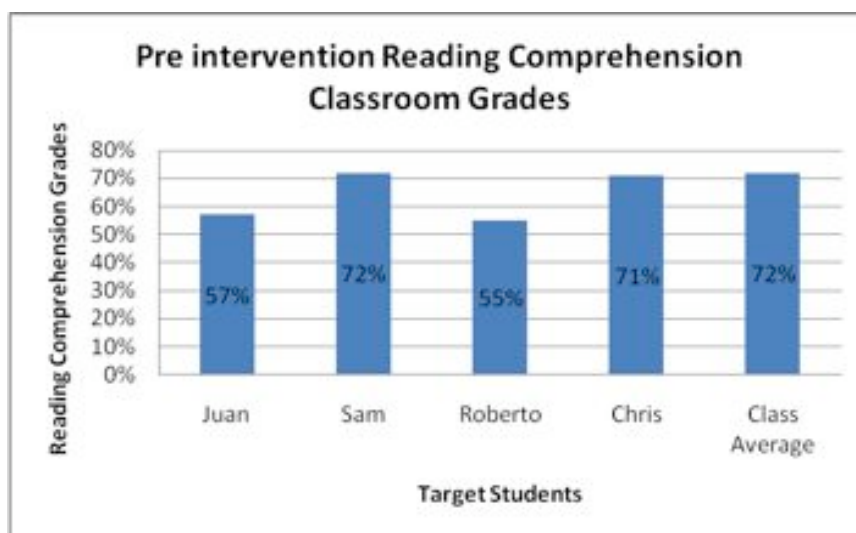
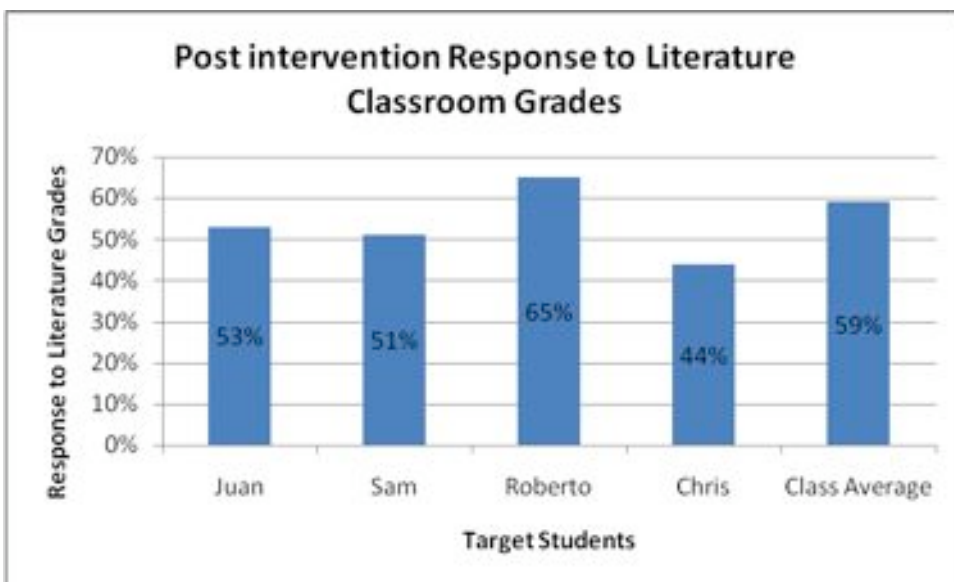Source: Classroom grades given out on 10/07/07 (pre) and 01/13/08 (post)

Figure 16
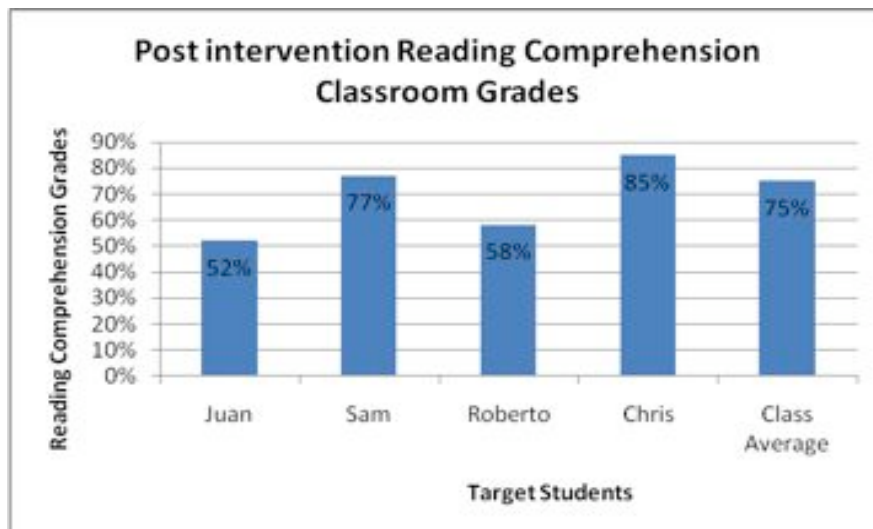
Source: Classroom grades given out on 10/07/07 (pre) and 01/13/08 (post)

Figure 17

Pre intervention Response to Literatre CLassroom Grades

Source: Classroom grades given out on 10/07/07(pre) and 01/13/08 (post)

Figure 18

Post intervention Response to Literature Classroom Grades

Source: Classroom grades given out on 10/07/07(pre) and 01/13/08 (post)

I formulated my intervention based on the educational gap that I saw between my target students and a majority of their classmates, and I also incorporated what I believed would be creative and less typical teaching strategies so as to use my Master's

opportunity to truly undertake innovative teacher research. Because I was not teaching my own class I was able to create a thesis inquiry that was not shaped around pre-designated state curriculum or mandated teaching methods. Quite frankly I found this opportunity to be rather liberating and inspiring as it gave me the freedom to undertake a research project that I truly believed in and one that, while supported by literature, is underutilized in the current education system. Therefore, my intervention did not directly parallel what was being taught in the students' regular language arts class, nor were my students' school grades in any way directly impacted by their performance in the after-school intervention. Due to this fact, I believe there are too many factors that contributed to my students' quarter grades, many of which have little bearing on what was discussed during our book club meetings, and for this reason I do not feel comfortable utilizing these grades as a means of validating my intervention or verifying my target students' growth. As with so many teaching strategies and learning approaches, standardized methods and tests cannot always capture student growth and achievement, and at times can even demean it. With a great deal of attitude and interview data, coupled with transcripts of actual student dialogue, all of which clearly demonstrate student growth, I am confident that even without significant achievement data analysis, my intervention can be seen as a success and a starting point for further investigation and research.

<u>Benefits for Diverse Learners</u>

Despite the commonly lower expectations enacted toward students with diverse backgrounds my target students were able to successfully read, comprehend, and discuss a text that was seemingly "above" them. I believe that prior research in the field of education, coupled with the findings of my own inquiry, shed light on significant advantages to using book clubs to encourage and support independent reading, increase

reading comprehension, and elicit developed, student-led discussions. The three dimensions of the book club that I found most noteworthy include: the importance of encouraging oral responses rather than relying solely on written responses, the need for challenging material that encourages higher-level thinking, and the potential for significant home-school connections to emerge when students use their prior knowledge and invite their family to be a part of their reading experience.

While formulating my intervention outline I attempted to find ways of monitoring students' learning, specifically in the area of response to literature. Although I wanted the students to be accountable for their reading and participation during our discussions, I was not convinced that written responses would be necessary or optimal measures. Though I understood that students benefit from writing during the course of reading, I wanted to focus more heavily on students' oral expression because I suspected that by doing so I would promote greater participation and reduce student anxiety. All four of my target students were greatly challenged by writing activities and I knew from our interviews and from the students' initial attitude surveys that their writing abilities did not match their oral/verbal capabilities. I wanted to use the communication mode that my students were most comfortable with. It was clear that verbal exchanges would allow my target students to respond candidly and promptly during our discussions without having to be concerned with spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other writing conventions. Having so much of their school day monopolized by writing activities, I hoped to emphasize the importance of verbal communication in conveying oneself clearly and thoughtfully in both academic and social settings. In many cases, I believe that relying solely on written responses as a means of demonstrating academic understanding or knowledge acquisition can be very limiting for students. Excessive reliance on written forms of expression can be problematic "since a student's written response often varies from oral ones" and limiting the ways in which students represent

ideas can discourage critical thinking (McMahon, 1992). Not only were my students able to eventually lead high-quality discussions, their journal writing and notes developed as their verbal dialogues progressed. There is undoubtedly a connection between written and verbal communication, however my aim is to demonstrate that verbal dialogue can be an extremely powerful and useful measure when attempting to identify student growth. Yet, all too often schools rely solely on written measurements, thus discounting the potential of many students.

Initially I was reluctant to use the text Rules for our shared reading as I knew that it was at least 2 grade levels above the students' current independent reading levels (Lord, 2006). However, as a firm believer in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and having great confidence in my students, I knew that with the appropriate scaffolding they would be able to undertake the challenge. As research indicates, "instructional scaffolds assist learners to extend the current skills and knowledge they bring to the classroom to a higher level of competence." (Kong & Fitch, 2002). Students can often achieve far more when assisted and supported by teachers and peers than they could independently. Although I believe that the organization of my intervention and my continuous scaffolding played an important role in the success of my students, I suspect that there is another underlining factor that contributed to my students' achievement.

Based on typical standardized measures of achievement and current educational practices, my four target students would not have been granted the opportunity to lead their own book-club discussions. As four of the lowest performing students in the class, Sam, Chris, Roberto, and Juan might not have been given the chance to read a young adult fiction text that was two grades above their independent reading level, contained 208 pages, and dealt with issues of discrimination, disability, family conflict, and personal identity. When presented with the task, even my students were hesitant to

believe they were capable of accomplishing the task. Yet, at no point during this intervention did I doubt their abilities and potential, because I was convinced that they were more than capable of achieving the goals of the inquiry. I strongly believe that as teachers we have an enormous responsibility to challenge our students to do more, want more, and achieve more in their education. Over the years a significant amount of research has demonstrated that, "the expectations teachers have for their students and the assumptions they make about their potential have a tangible effect on student achievement." (Lumsden, 1997). Teachers' expectations can, in fact, become "self-fulfilling prophecies" that often impede student growth and undoubtedly influence students' self-perceptions. I fear that all too often students, especially English language learners, are perceived as being less capable in some way and are therefore often met with unchallenging, "dumbed-down" curriculum that only further discourages their performance in school. My hope with this intervention was to not only defy the current educational norms that often prevent "low performing" students from engaging in challenging assignments that require higher level critical thinking skills, but to show my students they were capable of exceeding their own expectations. There is no doubt in my mind that the respect and encouragement I provided my students impacted their ability and willingness to take risks and tackle challenging curriculum. Our public school system could benefit from helping our students find pride in themselves, their work, and their education.

There is significant research in the field of education that highlights the importance of a home-school connection for successful learning. Home literacy practices, such as parents reading with their children, students discussing books at home, and families encouraging voluntary reading, can greatly influence a student's academic performance and can promote reading (McKool, 2007). During my intervention I saw various examples of effective and positive home literacy practices.

Following the intervention, one of my target students reread the text with his mother and stated that he enjoyed talking with her about the story and characters. Sam later told me that he and his mother would laugh at the same time while reading the book and he proceeded to ask me if I would recommend "some more books like Rules." Not only was Sam's mother able to encourage her son to reread the text, Sam was given the opportunity to share the knowledge he had attained while being a member of the book club. Similarly, Roberto came to one of our meetings and informed the group that he had spoken with his older brother the night before, and he had not known what autism was. Roberto, with a large smile on his face, announced to the group, "Even my big brother doesn't know this stuff. I bet our parents might not even know it. That's pretty cool." These examples help to demonstrate that students' experiences at home and with family members can further cultivate their interest in classroom activities and school curriculum.

<div align="center">Teacher Insights: Importance of Text</div>

Prior to the intervention I had struggled to find a book that I felt could truly engage the students, while still being age and reading level appropriate. I knew that in order to conduct dynamic, interactive book discussions the text needed to not only be interesting, but contain ideas, characters, and story lines that would spark debates and discussions among the students. I had seen the book Rules a few times before in the classroom book orders and was intrigued to see how the text would represent autism. Having a close friend and roommate who is a behavioral specialist who works exclusively with autistic children, I knew that autism was a spectrum disorder that many people, to this day, are still misinformed about. However, once I learned that the author, Cynthia Lord, based the character of David loosely on her own autistic son, I felt more comfortable with the authentic nature of the text. After reading the book myself and

reflecting on the multitude of talking points that it offered, I decided to use the text, even though it was listed as being a sixth-grade reading level. I had certainly hoped that the students would take away some important social justice ideas relating to the respectful treatment of individuals with disabilities, but my students demonstrated that they connected with the text in an even deeper, more personally meaningful way.

Prior to the intervention not one of my students knew what autism was nor had they heard the term paraplegic. Both ideas were discussed in detail throughout the book and my target students became fascinated with autism and also how the characters in the story were able to deal with their disabilities in unique ways. Not only were my target students able to learn about the behavioral symptoms of autism and the various clinical treatments used for behavior modification of children with autism, they demonstrated rather mature insights into how a family is affected by the stress that often accompanies having a family member that has a disability. During one discussion Juan became rather upset at the father character in the book that was seemingly avoiding his children and using his work schedule as an excuse not to be an active member of the family. Juan said, "It isn't really fair though. The mother is always taking care of David all day and taking him places and making him quiet when he gets upset. But the dad only cares about his plants and work." This comment sparked a discussion on the challenges faced by parents and siblings of children with disabilities. We discussed discrimination, feeling overwhelmed, financial issues that can arise if a parent has to stay at home, and many other issues that I would have never imagined four fifth graders would be able to speak on.

During another discussion the group discussed Ryan, a character that bullies David and makes fun of his autism. All of the boys agreed that Ryan's actions were wrong and unfair; however they were able to go beyond his actions and began discussing why

he might be picking on David and also how they would have handled the situation differently. Sam quietly raised his hand and said, "I think everyone in the world has been made fun of at least once. But I bet it's even harder for kids like David." The group members somberly nodded their heads in agreement and then Roberto interjected, "Yeah, but that's why we can't make fun of people like that. Because now we know how it makes them feel and it isn't funny, it's mean." These are only two examples out of the dozens that I found throughout my data collection that demonstrated the power of text to change people's assumptions and prejudices simply by feeling connected with fictional characters. Many of the research studies that I consulted prior to choosing our shared reading text emphasized that, "the choice of literature mattered in how involved students were in discussion", and I believe that my research further supports this fact (Celani & McLntyre, 2006). I believe that the mature nature of this text, including its serious themes, relatable characters, and use of universal emotions, coupled with the author's superb writing and familiarity with autism, helped to sustain our book club discussions and provided us with a wealth of information to discuss and debate.

If nothing else, this intervention enabled my target students to experience first hand how a text can come to life and truly impact one's life and beliefs. I believe that fictional children's books are often untapped resources that could have the power to teach children life lessons in a meaningful and engaging way. Issues of racism, discrimination, intolerance, depression, poverty, and a host of other social, familial, and personal topics could potentially be addressed through the use of fictional literature that presents these subjects in a realistic, yet age-appropriate way.

<u>Conclusions</u>

In many ways this intervention raised more questions than answers for me, however I believe that, as a teacher researcher, it can be a very positive outcome that will elicit further research and study in the future. There is no doubt in my mind that my students walked away from my intervention with more confidence and a greater appreciation for literature. According to their post intervention self-assessments my target students felt as though they had become better readers and each student voiced a strong connection with the content of the text, specifically their interest in autism. My data indicates that low performing fifth graders are, in fact, fully capable of taking on the responsibilities necessary to lead and conduct a genuine book club discussion that focuses on the content of the book, while connecting with higher-level thinking skills such as questioning the author, predicting, and inference. With the appropriate amount of teacher scaffolding, students are able to take on tasks and responsibilities that may not have been thought possible based on prior student performance and behavior.

Essentially, my students were able to accomplish something that even they would not have thought possible, and in so doing, developed stronger reading skills, expressed themselves verbally in a group environment, connected with the text on a personal level, and found greater self confidence with each meeting's accomplishments. Early on in the process I could tell that my students were unsure of their abilities to independently run a book club. I remember telling my students on the first day of the intervention, "Don't worry, you all can do this. I know you can!" They seemed unconvinced by my speech and Chris said, "But Ms. Gebhardt, what are we going to say? How will we know what to do?" Yet, within days my target students were not only leading the discussion but having to be timed because the discussions began to spill over past hour designated fifty minutes. Eventually, I would find the students discussing the book during recess or between

classes and began to get requests for more book club meetings. The students were enthusiastic and passionate about the discussions and were not only learning, but truly enjoying the process of discovering the power of literature. I believe that there is still much to learn about the potential that lies in book club discussions, but I know for certain that my students were forever touched by our book club and their experiences with <u>Rules</u> has helped them develop as learners, readers, public speakers, and has given them further insight into the world around them.

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Appendix 1

What is your favorite thing to do? What are your hobbies?

My favorite thing to do is Skate-
bording.

What is your favorite subject in school? Why is it your favorite?

My favorite subject in shcool is Math
because I like adding mutolpling and
rounding.

What school subject do you find challenging? Why do you think this subject is difficult for you?

The subject I find challenging
Language Arts because some of the
qutins are eley hard.

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?

Sometimes I enjoy reading because
ther are good books out ther

Describe yourself in three words

cool funny with my friend respon-
sibil,

Appendix 2

What is your favorite thing to do? What are your hobbies?

My hobbies are to read, do sience and study about bee's. and play soccer.

What is your favorite subject in school? Why is it your favorite?

Language Arts, Math, Social studies.

What school subject do you find challenging? Why do you think this subject is difficult for you?

The one I find challenging is Language Arts. because you have to write diffrent word you might not understand.

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not.

Yes because you can learn new words.

Appendix 3

Student #1

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?

I do enjoy it because you get to relax and learn new stuff lik back than.

Student #2

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?

I enjoy Reading because when I find a book I am always excitide to see wat happens.

Student #3

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not.

Yes because you can learn new words.

Student #4

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?

Sometimes I enjoy reading because ther are good books out ther

Appendix 4

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not.

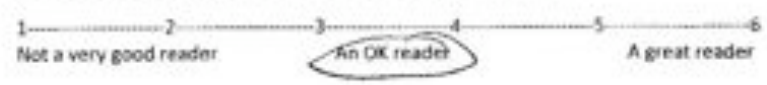yes because when
I read a book I'm exited
to see wat happens!

How have your reading abilities changed since beginning our book club meetings?

because when I wasn't in the
book club I wasn't a fast
reader and now I can read
faster.

What did you enjoy about our book club meetings?

I liked when we first started
because I was excited
to see was will nateN in
this book

How would you rate yourself as a reader **before** the book club?

1————2————3————4————5————6
Not a very good reader   (An OK reader)   A great reader

How would you rate yourself as a reader?

1————2————3————4————5————6
Not a very good reader   An OK reader   (A great reader)

Did the book club help you learn about reading?

yes it helped me with other
stuff like I learned about autism.

Appendix 5

Ch

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not.

yes beacause you can learn new words and know things you didn4 know. You can also get better at reading

How have your reading abilities changed since beginning our book club meetings?

my abilities changed like how they were talking about autism how I know what it means and now by reading this boot I think I improved.
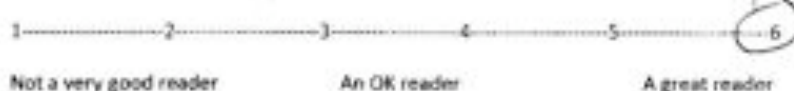
What did you enjoy about our book club meetings?

I enjoyed how everybody was talking Clearly and every night People read.

How would you rate yourself as a reader **before** the book club?

1————2————3————④————5————6

Not a very good reader   An OK reader   A great reader

How would you rate yourself as a reader?

1————2————3————4————5————⑥

Not a very good reader   An OK reader   A great reader

Did the book club help you learn about reading?

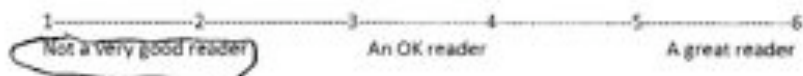It helped me improve and become better than before I like "Book Clubs".

Appendix 6

E

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not.

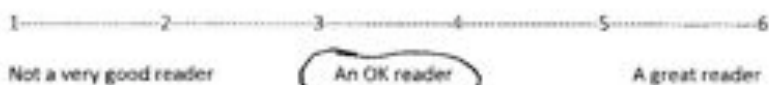I sometimes like because I like reading cool and funny books like rules.

How have your reading abilities changed since beginning our book club meetings?

yes it has changed from being in the bookClub I can read faster.

What did you enjoy about our book club meetings?

I enjoyed when we talked about Krist and Ryan.

How would you rate yourself as a reader **before** the book club?

1————2————3————4————5————6
(Not a very good reader)   An OK reader   A great reader

How would you rate yourself as a reader?

1————2————3————4————5————6
Not a very good reader   (An OK reader)   A great reader

Did the book club help you learn about reading?

The book club has teached me about atisom and Perlaplevck.

Appendix 7

J

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not.

I think I did at the last. Then becaue ~~the~~ at the last few chapters it got ~~better~~. better.

How have your reading abilities changed since beginning our book club meetings?

The first time I was shy then I got exited more about reading.

What did you enjoy about our book club meetings?

That we had turns of different time.

How would you rate yourself as a reader **before** the book club?

1————2————3————4————5————6
Not a very good reader   An OK reader   A great reader

(An OK reader / 3–4 circled)

How would you rate yourself as a reader?

1————2————3————4————5————6
Not a very good reader   An OK reader   A great reader

(5–6 circled)

Did the book club help you learn about reading?

I think it did becanse I was Doing bad ant then I got it higher