

SELECTING SHORT STORIES BASED ON STUDENTS' INTERESTS
TO FOSTER COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT

By

Tiana LaCross

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Tiana LaCross

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By

Lester Krupp, M.A., Member of the Faculty

ABSTRACT

To make English Language Arts more engaging for students, educators must create authentic learning opportunities that relate to students' personal experiences and interests. Literature is the gateway to a better understanding of ourselves and those around us; therefore it should be a priority to select texts for a classroom that expand across different topics and include multiple perspectives. This action research study aimed to explore the ways selecting short stories based on students' interests affected their cognitive engagement with texts. A preliminary survey, weekly surveys, weekly written responses, and a detailed research journal led to a deeper understanding of the ways one's cognitive engagement with short stories was impacted by the relationship between each story's topic and participants' personal interests. Additional insight was gained about students' application of cognitive skills while reading, as well as the relationship between academic engagement and student behavior.

Keywords: engagement, cognitive engagement, academic engagement, short stories, culturally relevant literature.

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CHAPTER 1—ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

In order to be successful in school one must be actively engaged in the institution. All schools—rural, urban, or suburban—are capable of providing a space where students feel they belong. Regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic class, any and all students need to be engaged to prevent the worst-case scenario of drop out. Engagement is necessary in any student's achievement, and disengagement affects students differently. For example, when students from advantaged backgrounds become disengaged, they may learn less than they could, but they usually get by or they get second chances; most eventually graduate and move on to other opportunities. In contrast, when students from disadvantaged backgrounds in high-poverty, urban high schools become disengaged, they are less likely to graduate and consequently face severely limited opportunities (National Research Council Institute of Medicine, 2004, p.1).

If a student is unable to graduate with a high school diploma or obtain a general education degree, her chance of unemployment and poverty increases immensely (National Research Council Institute of Medicine, 2004, p.1).

Some factors that affect engagement exist outside of the school or classroom environment. For example, cities or regions with high poverty face economic and social marginalization which impacts adolescents, their families, and their communities (Daly, Shin, Thakral, Selders, & Vera, 2009; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder Jr., 2001; National Research Council, 2004). Also, the type of home environment and social class an adolescent is raised in affects her skills, behavior, and language (Lareau, 2011). However, with support and skillful instruction from teachers, students are more likely to be actively engaged in school. This reduces the risk of students dropping out before high

school graduation (National Research Council, 2004).

In an English classroom, factors exist that contribute to a students' engagement with literature. Classroom populations continue to become more culturally diverse, but the literature most often taught in secondary English classrooms does not match every learner or his style of learning. Theories on responses to literature explain how readers utilize social and cultural background knowledge and personal experiences to construct meaning from texts (Beach, 1995). Therefore, it is important that teachers select texts that are culturally relevant to students, so those who are typically marginalized can cognitively engage with literature too.

I worked in a ninth-grade Humanities classroom for a six-month period as a pre-service educator, and I noticed that students showed varied levels of engagement with literature and classroom curriculum. The population in this classroom included a range of academic abilities that affected the levels of engagement. Students with individualized education plans were present in this group of learners. Students who did not receive accommodations for learning and were labeled high-achieving by their teacher also showed a range of levels of cognitive engagement with literature. Although this school was urban, low-income, and had high English as a Second Language (ESL) population, I noticed a similar phenomenon in a different classroom from a school with very different student demographics. My observations led me to wonder what affects students' cognitive engagement with literature and what a teacher could do to foster higher levels of cognitive engagement with texts.

Research Question

Available research and my personal experiences in classrooms make clear that drawing from students' interests and culturally relevant topics to select literature used in

English classrooms creates more opportunities for learners to cognitively engage with texts that are relevant to their lives. In this study I used direct input from students to select culturally-relevant short stories to enact teacher responsiveness and provide authentic opportunities for students to cognitively engage with literature. This approach aimed to answer the following research question: How does teacher responsiveness to students' literary topics of interest affect their cognitive engagement with short stories?

Literature Review

Types of Engagement

In order to better understand the type of engagement that is the focus of this action research study, one must understand the definitions of four types of engagement and what distinguishes one from another. One type of classroom engagement is *academic engagement*, which includes behavioral norms that directly relate to the learning process. The definition commonly used in researchers' framework is "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, p.12). Contributing to class discussion, preparing for and attending class, and submitting assignments by the deadline are examples of norms that are measured in this category (Archaumbault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Students' effort toward meeting learning goals and overall achievement falls under this category of engagement.

Another type of classroom engagement is *social engagement*, which focuses on "...the extent to which a student follows written and unwritten classroom rules of behavior. Examples of social engagement norms include perceived social and anti-social

behaviors, student attendance, attentive or disruptive behavior, speaking when appropriate or speaking out of turn, and willingness or unwillingness to follow directions” (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). If a student exhibits a high level of social engagement, she is likely to have a high level of academic engagement because of the interdependent relationship between following classroom rules and cognitive expectations required of students to complete their work and participate in class activities (Yi & Lerner, 2013).

Affective engagement is a third type, measuring the “emotional response characterized by feelings of involvement in school as a place and a set of activities worth pursuing” (Finn & Zimmer, 2012, p. 104). Researchers use the term *peer norms*, factors or behaviors that are socially accepted by peers and within the school community, to describe the variables of involvement in school (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007). According to Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992), students’ involvement with secondary schools is affected by parents, siblings, boyfriends, girlfriends, bosses, coaches, salespeople, media figures, and many others who interact with adolescents. What distinguishes this category of engagement from social engagement is that affective engagement occurs in the school community, while social engagement occurs within the classroom community.

The fourth category of student engagement, and the type I will focus on in my action research study, is *cognitive engagement*. This type of engagement is demonstrated by the exertion of thoughtful energy towards comprehending complicated ideas in an effort to go beyond the minimum expectations (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). In the context of reading literature in an English class, students who simply follow directions and read a

text are not demonstrating cognitive engagement. A student is cognitively engaged if she is attempting to understand elements of the text to construct deeper meaning. The following elements of text can serve as avenues for a learner to cognitively engage: the characters, conflict, plot, themes, and author's craft.

Interrelatedness of Engagement Types

The different categories of student engagement are interrelated. Relationships between the categories of engagement have been examined, and findings of various studies reveal complex dynamics and interrelationships. These relationships are important to understand because often times, as the studies below will reveal, more than one type of engagement is affected simultaneously.

Several studies examined the ways peer culture affects levels of social engagement to school in an effort to better understand why students' level of engagement changes over time. According to numerous research studies, peer culture influences a student's sense of belonging in school based on how socially accepted an individual feels (Daly, Shin, Thakral, Selders, & Vera, 2009; Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, & Steinberg, 1992; Shin et al., 2007; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Observing the relationships a disengaged student has with peers can help an educator begin to see possible motivating or non-motivating factors that affect her engagement in school.

One interesting relationship was revealed in a study that examined whether academic engagement and affective engagement could be predicted based on an individual's earlier social engagement (Yi & Lerner, 2012). They concluded that academic and affective engagement of their ninth- and tenth-grade participants was a predictor of their cognitive engagement in eleventh grade. Participants with highly stable academic and affective engagement in their ninth- and tenth-grade years demonstrated

moderately stable cognitive engagement in their eleventh-grade year. This study monitored participants over multiple school years, so the results concluded from this study were focused on change over time. One implication from this study was that a students' affective and academic engagement from prior academic years affected their future performance.

In another study monitoring the effects of affective and academic engagement over time (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008), researchers found that students' behavior had a profound effect on students' motivation and engagement with a sample of participants who were in middle school. These researchers examined participants' engagement levels over a total of seven years and found that "In terms of internal dynamics, emotional components of engagement contributed significantly to changes in their behavioral counterparts" (p. 765). This was an important implication for educators to understand because teachers only have so much influence on a students' behavior and emotions. Other factors such as home life, relationships with family and friends, mental and physical health, and feeling a sense of belonging to school all affected one's behavior and emotions, which then affected how one learned.

Other researchers found that academic engagement can be impacted by affective engagement through students' relationships with teachers and peers, their socioeconomic status, age, race/ethnicity, and parental involvement (Archambault et al., 2009; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2012). This finding is relevant to classroom research studies because students in any classroom have different bonds and relationships with many types of people, thus influencing the conclusions about engagement that a researcher can draw.

Relationships and students' perceived peer-social support also played a role in one's academic engagement according to Lynch, Lerner, and Leventhal (2012). Researchers examined whether or not peer culture related to individual academic outcomes, and found that friendship quality is related significantly and positively to academic engagement. The key finding was that attending a school with high levels of friendship quality predicts high levels of engagement the following year (Lynch et al., 2012). Similarly, researchers in a separate study (Shin et al., 2007) focused on whether peer norms affected academic engagement, and the results showed peer norms were significantly correlated to academic engagement. The more positive peer norms a student holds, the more the student is engaged in the classroom. A second key finding was a statistically significant relationship between negative peer norms and academic outcomes (Shin et al., 2007). Similarly, Newman, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) found that a student who feels accepted and involved with peers has higher levels of academic engagement because "personal support counteracts alienating aspects of competitive learning" (p. 22). It is important for educators to recognize that peer interactions and the peer norms of a learning community can affect academic engagement. Recognizing social dynamics inside the school and within a classroom enables a researcher to better interpret trends and research data in relation to students' cognitive engagement with literature.

One longitudinal study examined how social support affected three dimensions of school engagement in middle school students as they moved on to high school (Wang & Eccles, 2012). This study examined 1,472 families from 23 different schools in one large, ethnically diverse region in Washington D.C. Families were selected using a stratified sample. The results showed peer social support was positively correlated to school

compliance, participation in extracurricular activities, school identification, and subject valuing of learning, which means the level of value a student places on learning, but the unconditional growth model researchers used in this study found peer social support caused a decline in school compliance over time and a decrease in extracurricular school activities (Wang & Eccles, 2012). If researchers knew that gender differences were a factor in growth, they would have to set parameters and use a conditional growth model.

The decline in compliance and participation in extracurricular activities could have been caused by the peer and surrounding community norms in the participating schools. One weakness of this study is that researchers did not include an “implications” section in their writing about the results that demonstrated a change in engagement. This was an important section to read because it would have contained specific details and exceptions from the study that the researcher attributed to the results. Also, researchers did not address possible biases. For example, peer culture varies at each school, so depending on the peer norms of each institution, students might be influenced by peers to be more engaged or less engaged (Shin et al., 2007). However, the large sample population used in the study and the triangulation of data add credibility to the results. This study provides a more complex picture of the ways peer social support can play a role in students’ lives.

It is important for educators to observe the type of peer culture that exists in their institution as an external factor contributing to students’ engagement in the classroom. By not acknowledging the influence of peer culture on student engagement, teachers could make incorrect assumptions and generalizations that could perpetuate the disengagement of students. This also connects to the findings from the study about peer norms and

academic engagement (Shin et al., 2007). As Shin, Daly, and Vera (2007) showed, paying close attention to the peer norms and peer culture of an academic institution helps one begin to understand the possible social factors affecting students' academic engagement.

These studies demonstrate how the different types of engagement are interrelated and dependent upon one another. It is important to be mindful of these interrelationships when attempting to engage or when monitoring engagement of students in the classroom because there are more factors and dynamics contributing to a student's level of engagement than one perceives initially.

Motivation and Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement is the focus of this research study because of its direct relation to intrinsic motivation, which is a type of motivation that is driven by internal gratification (Deci, 1995). My prior observations and conversations with various learners shaped my understanding of why some individuals claim to dislike reading. Students frequently questioned why they were being asked to read a piece of literature, and they expressed a lack of interest in doing so. According to Morgan (1997), a reader is intrinsically motivated to engage with literature out of a "[response] to particular characters and ideas, to an author's particular vision or eloquence. Books [make] us think, feel, and reflect, [giving] us the joy of discovery and the pleasure of testing and articulating our own beliefs" (p. 492). Literature that is culturally relevant to students' lives should lead to more authentic learning experiences.

Motivation is interconnected with self-efficacy and academic engagement. When someone is confident and thinks positively about her ability to complete a task, she is more motivated to engage in it (Deci, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). Students who are

academically engaged are motivated to complete class assignments, and students who are naturally successful at a given task will have higher levels of self-efficacy and motivation than students who are not successful (Bandura, 1997; Lynch et al, 2012; Zimmerman, 2000).

Academic engagement is affected by an individual's level of self-efficacy in a single subject and her perceived intelligence overall (Zimmerman, 2000). Academic self-efficacy is defined as "students' beliefs about their academic capabilities" (Zimmerman, 2000, p.82). If a student does not believe she is capable of succeeding in school then she is more likely to give up and stop trying (Zimmerman, 2000). Research studies conducted by Berry (1987) and Schunk and Pajares (1981), which have been further analyzed by self-efficacy expert Barry Zimmerman, concluded the following: "Self-efficacy beliefs increased prediction of academic outcomes as much as 25%... Clearly, students' self-efficacy beliefs are responsive to changes in instructional experience and play a causal role in students' development and use of academic competencies" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 87). We know that self-efficacy can positively impact academic engagement and learning outcomes, but it is also important to understand how these are all interrelated, so educators can understand how to improve their instructional strategies and pedagogy in ways that will increase student engagement by increasing students' self-efficacy. Although the focus is on culturally-relevant texts, it is interesting to note that students' self-efficacy increases student engagement.

Competency is another major factor of motivation that influences academic engagement in school (Harter, 1982; Lynch et al, 2012; National Research Council, 2004; Newmann et al., 1992; Zimmerman, 1990). How students perceive their own competency

is called self-competency (Harter, 1982). Self-competency can refer to an individual's perception of her ability in school in general, or it can refer to a student's perception of her ability in a specific subject area (Harter, 1982). Self-competency differs from self-efficacy in that self-competency refers only to an individual's perception of her ability to succeed in something, where self-efficacy is specific to one's perceptions of her capability to do something regardless of the outcome (Harter, 1982; Zimmerman, 2000). Competency relates to academic engagement. If a student feels she will be successful in completing a learning task or an entire course, she is more motivated and engaged to make that happen (Lynch et al, 2012; Newmann et al., 1992).

Understanding psychological factors that influence decision making is essential to this research study. Without considering students' motivation, self-efficacy, and perceived competency in relation to reading and constructing meaning from literature, important factors affecting their cognitive engagement go unrecognized.

Teacher Responsiveness and Engagement

Numerous studies have focused on ways a teacher's support affected different types of engagement. Researchers from these studies concluded that students who perceived high levels of teacher and peer support had higher levels of engagement in the class (Lynch et al., 2012; Murdock and Miller 2003; Shin et al., 2007; Wang, Lin, Yu & Wu, 2013; Woolley and Bowen 2007). There were numerous strategies and research studies with different actions a teacher could have taken to show support to students. In the next example, researchers studied the effects of increased teacher support, via a social network page, on participants' levels of social engagement and overall support for their learning.

A study conducted by Wang, Lin, Yu, and Wu (2013) examined the effect of creating a supportive environment using a Facebook page in a college-level class. Its goal was to increase peer and teacher support through social media communication, which is a part of the students' culture. Researchers analyzed data that was collected to measure student-faculty interactions and relationships and student-student interactions and relationships. Out of the 134 participants, 60.6% reported their instructor devoted attention to students' needs, 62% reported their instructor acted openly and honestly, and 66.6% reported their instructor cared about them.

Researchers analyzed data collected for student-to-student relationships and calculated that 93.9% of the participants reported they enjoyed chatting with friends and felt that interacting with friends was enjoyable. About 75% of participants reported that other students cared about them, and 95.5% reported they cared about their peers. When asked if peers and the institution were supportive, 95.5% reported that they were supported and they felt they belonged. Participants were asked to report whether they felt connected with the college because of their Facebook interactions with classmates and 74.2% reported that they felt more connected because of the social media page. It is very interesting to compare the previously stated results with what participants reported about how the Facebook page contributed to their class preparation. Surprisingly, only 49% of participants reported they used the Facebook page to share links and information with peers. The percentage of participants who felt connected with the college because of Facebook interactions with classmates is much higher than those who used it to share information with classmates. The Facebook page was intended to offer more academic support to students in the class. However, the participants report feeling more connected

to the institution and to their classmates in comparison to the 49% who utilized the social media page to share information and links. Although a lower percentage of participants reported using the Facebook page for academic purposes, the social media page was able to increase the support and sense of belonging for 74.2% of participants.

This study's detailed description of the procedures and processes add to its confirmability and transferability to similar contexts. The surveys and questionnaires provide opportunities for participants to voice their thoughts and feelings in relation to teacher and peer support, data that could not have been collected solely by researcher observations. The researcher's qualitative methods of data collection add to the study's credibility.

The high percentages of students who reported feelings of engagement, or belonging to school, demonstrated that students felt supported because of the open communication of the Facebook page. A social media page for a class strengthens the relationships between students, and between students and teachers. However, the study found there was not a statistically significant relationship between the Facebook page and preparing for class.

The findings emphasize the benefits of being a flexible and responsive instructor. The social media page provided instant communication between students and their instructor, making students feel supported in the class. Providing a learning environment with open communication and teacher responsiveness creates fewer barriers that impact students' cognitive engagement.

Supportive teachers and adults play a significant role in students' academic engagement. Murdock and Miller (2003) examined the relationship between students'

achievement motivation and their perceptions of teacher caring. This study had 206 participants from the same middle school, whom researchers observed over a two-year period. These students were in seventh and eighth grades. The racial demographics for participants were 50% European American, 44% African American, and 6% identified as other. Approximately 45% of participants received free or reduced lunch. Determinations of teachers' influences on motivation were based on students' self-reports. Each participant reported on two variables: teacher caring and teacher-rated efforts. Teacher caring assessed teacher respect and fairness, and teacher expectations, and teacher-rated efforts measured competence and commitment. One key finding was that students' perceived relationships with teachers affect the development of their motivation. Students who developed positive relationships with their teacher showed more motivation than those who did not. The researchers' implications section noted that while their study did not focus on dynamics that affect relationships, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and age, they did recognize that those factors could have potentially affected the outcome. This research study was peer reviewed and provided a rich, thick description of the process. Researchers provided justification for their methods of data analyses and they also identified weaknesses of these methods. These researchers used triangulation in analyzing the data, making this a highly dependable source. The findings reinforce why teachers need to be aware of their highly influential role in students' lives and academic achievement.

Similar to the previous study by Murdock and Miller (2003), researchers Woolley and Bowen (2007) examined how supportive adults affect academic engagement of middle school students.

This study focused on the relationship between the number of supportive, caring adults in the home, school, and neighborhood and the psychological and academic engagement of students in early adolescence.

This study had 7,764 participants, of whom half were females and half were males. There were 2,576 sixth-grade participants, 2,570 seventh-grade participants, and 2,618 eighth-grade participants. Researchers used the School Success Profile (SSP) to gather the data for this study. The SSP is a student survey, and students who completed it had to qualify as at-risk to participate in the study. Students completed an academic engagement survey that included eleven items that focused on psychological and academic engagement. Students also responded to a contextual risk index to collect data about their neighborhood, school environment, and family and peer relationships. A social capital index was also administered to participants to collect data about their positive adult relationships with teachers, family members, and neighborhood adults.

The data from the survey and the two indexes were analyzed separately using linear regression. Researchers concluded that demographic variables of at-risk students were significantly related to levels of academic engagement. Analyzing data collected from the contextual risk index revealed that differences in gender, lunch program, and grades in school were also significant to levels academic engagement. Analyzing data collected from the social capital index revealed an interesting finding. Social capital assets “mediate the negative influence of contextual risk on school engagement” (Murdock & Miller, 2003, p. 99). *Social Capital* pertains to the personal relationships one shares with others (Yosso, 2005). Similar to a network, the more social capital a person possesses, the higher number of resources—in the form of relationships—she has.

The more social capital a student has, the more it compensates for factors of risk that can affect academic engagement.

This important finding reaffirms results from other studies that examine how adult relationships affect academic engagement. The more positive adult relationships and social capital a student has, the less at risk she is of being disengaged in school. By establishing positive relationships with students, educators can add to students' social capital, which prevents disengagement or dropout.

Culturally Responsive Approach

A culturally responsive approach to teaching strives to be conscious of, and relevant to, different aspects of students' cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In the context of an English classroom, using texts that are relevant to students' culture prevents the marginalization of learners by including texts students can relate to on personal and cultural levels. The use of the term *culture* has meaning that goes beyond racial and ethnic culture. Behavioral norms, familial values, and location of residence are some of the other elements that make up an individual's cultural identity.

Ignoring the spectrum of cultures existing in a class of students alienates minority groups and increases the probability of cognitive and academic disengagement (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003; Wang & Eccles, 2012). In English classrooms all over the country, teachers assign texts that have little or no cultural relevance to some of the learners who will read them. The reader has less to identify with and relate to in the text, yet she is expected to cognitively engage like the student who has extensive background knowledge and personal experiences that help him form connections.

Extensive research has been conducted to examine readers' responses to literature, and a large part of research examined reading comprehension in general. Prior research about the relationship between student interest and reading comprehension concluded that high-interest produced greater comprehension for low-achieving students (Shnayer, 1968). Only recently have researchers and theorists focused on the influence of culture on reading comprehension and engagement. Research studies now look specifically at ways students' cultural schemata and connections to literature affect their responses and interactions with text, reading comprehension, and cognitive engagement.

Webster (2001) examined the effects of ninth-graders' culture-specific schemata on their responses to multicultural literature. Seventy-six ninth-grade students from four English honors classes responded to writing prompts about their self-identified cultures, self-selected level of cultural development, and responses to three multicultural stories. Participants written responses were analyzed using Banks' Typology of Ethnic Identity. Banks's typology was modified for use as a response measure.

The findings revealed that students' self-perceptions of their own cultural awareness were similar to the majority of the participants. Also, the participants' self-awareness of their cultural backgrounds aided their engagement with a literary text, but not in all cases.

The sample population of this study was not entirely random, which decreases its transferability. The participants were all enrolled in English honors classes, which is not a randomly assigned population. Students had to be successful in mainstream English courses and specifically register for honors to be a part of these classes, so the range of ability levels of these learners was narrower than the range in a heterogeneous English

course. The rich, thick description of data collection methodology and analysis strengthen its confirmability. This study is transformative for educators as well as learners. One of the key findings from Webster's study was that participants developed a stronger understanding of their own development and responses to literature from going through this process, but not all participants in this study benefitted from understanding their own cultures before responding to three pieces of multicultural literature. The researcher concluded that when a participant read a piece of multicultural literature related to their culture, she was able to gain a stronger understanding of her own culture.

Another research study examined the effects of cultural schemata on reading processing strategies (Pritchard, 1990). Sixty 11th-grade readers participated in this study. According to the researchers, all participants had a proficient reading level prior to this study. Thirty of the participants lived in the United States, and the other thirty lived in the Pacific island nation of Palau. Participants read culturally familiar and unfamiliar excerpts written in their first language. As participants read the passage, they were asked to express any reading strategies they used orally. After reading the text, they were asked to retell what was in the passage.

One key finding from this study was that participants were able to retell more ideas and produce more elaborations for the culturally familiar passages. Although there is no evidence of whether students were more or less cognitively engaged while reading the familiar and unfamiliar passages, this finding does suggest that readers showed higher levels of comprehension when texts were culturally familiar. This is an important finding for educators to keep in mind. If a student is from a minority culture and in a classroom

where she is reading texts that are unfamiliar, she may show signs of lack of comprehension even if she is a proficient reader.

The following chapter draws upon the research described here to explain the design and methods of the study that aims to answer my overall research question: how does teacher responsiveness to students' literary topics of interest affect their cognitive engagement with short stories?

CHAPTER 2—METHODS

Introduction to Action Research Study

After reviewing available research and observing cognitive engagement in two high schools, I came to the belief that using what we know about students' cultures, interests, and literary preferences when selecting texts prevents marginalization of certain groups and creates opportunity for transformative learning experiences. Reading literature connected to students' lives or background knowledge empowers readers and reinforces the fundamental values of interacting with a text; literature taps into individuals' thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences. Texts provide space for the reader to discover and experience new ways of life through different characters, perspectives, and conflicts.

The focus of this study is how students' cognitive engagement with short stories was affected by enacting teacher responsiveness to students' literary topics of interest to select texts that connected with learners' preferences about text features, and personal interests and culture. I aimed to select culturally-relevant short stories based upon students' literary topics of interest, to provide them with the experience of reading something that felt connected to their lives. During week one of the new school year, I administered a literary-topics-of-interest survey (see Appendix A) that included a modified version of Havighurst's stages of adolescent development (Havighurst, Robinson, & Dorr, 1946). This survey asked each student to identify any appealing topics in short stories from the course textbook. In addition, the survey asked students to identify and preferences they have about features of a text, such as the gender, age, and ethnicity of the protagonist and the setting of a story. I used the data to select three

culturally relevant short stories from the course textbook to use in weeks two, three, and four. The class spent approximately one week with each of the three short stories.

Table 1

Practice and Procedures Overview

Week	Teacher Action
1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Distribute preliminary survey. 2. Calculate preliminary survey responses.
2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read short story 1 with class. 2. Administer weekly interest survey. 3. Administer written response prompts. 4. Write in research journal.
3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read short story 2 with class. 2. Administer weekly interest survey. 3. Administer written response prompts. 4. Write in research journal.
4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read short story 3 with class. 2. Administer weekly interest survey. 3. Administer written response prompts. 4. Write in research journal.

Participants and Setting

South Neumann High School¹ is a public high school in a developing suburban community located in the Pacific Northwest. The location of the school is between a busy four-lane street, filled with businesses and restaurants, and a large stretch of homes

¹ Pseudonym

separated by the occasional vacant field. The school serves approximately 1,400 students from ninth through twelfth grade. About 60% of the students are European American, 13% Hispanic, 14% Asian, 14% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% African American, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native. The number of students receiving free/reduced-price meals is approximately 30%.

South Neumann High School has a four-year cohort graduation rate of about 85%. The tenth-grade reading assessment has a passing rate of about 84%². The South Neumann High School report card, published in 2011, indicates that one of their goals for the 2012-2013 school years is that the “percentage of students passing the state reading assessment will exceed state average by 5% at the end of the school year³.” The 2012-2013 standardized tests results for reading showed a 3% increase from the district average.

The school has three ninth-grade English teachers, together teaching a total of seven classes. One section of ninth-grade English students participated in this study, containing 29 students. Each class met for 55 minutes every day. Fifteen students were female and fourteen were male. Although only one class of ninth-grade English students participated, I was teaching two classes of ninth-grade English at the time of this study, which allowed me to develop results with a higher level of reliability because I could compare and contrast observations from two groups taught in the same classroom setting, at a similar pace, and with the same structure of curriculum. Participants were randomly assigned to English classes in their ninth grade year, adding credibility to the findings.

² This data comes from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction’s website

³ This information comes from the 2011-12 School Performance Report for South Neumann High School

Data Collection and Analysis

This is a qualitative research study in which I am the teacher-researcher. I collected data over the course of a four-week period in which the first week served as an opportunity to gather preliminary data about students' literary preferences and topics of interest. Identifying literary preferences and topics students were most interested in reading about allowed me enact teacher responsiveness by selecting short stories that were most intriguing and relevant to students' lives. To construct my study, I referred to Jerry Webster's (2001) study, analyzing how students' cultural-specific schemata affected their responses to multicultural literature. Specifically, I drew from the approach he takes in his study. Webster's observations and interactions in the classroom led him to the same approach that inspired me to conduct this action research study: we are both interested in the ways students' cultural backgrounds affects their classroom performance in a secondary English Language Arts class. My own classroom observations and interactions led me to focus my study on what I, the teacher, could do to increase classroom performance and participation when reading and responding to texts, which are ways of demonstrating cognitive engagement in the English discipline area. Similarly, Webster (2001) is examining the ways cultures within different texts are affecting students' responses. In my study, I gathered preliminary information that I used to select texts that appealed to the majority of the class, basing my text selections off of the preliminary literary-topics-of-interest survey (see Appendix A). The detailed description of the data collection methodology and analysis allows an outside party to audit the stages and procession of this study, increasing its credibility as well.

In week one of this study I gathered data about students' preferences about a text and their interests and personal cultural values, using the Havighurst's Developmental Issues for Adolescents stages (See Appendix A). Text preferences is a phrase I used to represent what an individual prefers in regards to different elements within any text; the character, setting, and factors that affect a reader's relatability with a piece of literature. Students' responses to this survey were analyzed quantitatively. I selected the three short stories that spanned the course of this study based upon the response to each survey question with the highest percentage.

Weeks two through four were spent gathering data to analyze students' cognitive engagement with and interest in the literature after reading each of the three short stories I selected. The data collected throughout weeks two through four came from three different sources. My research journal to note observations, weekly survey responses, and additional written responses were used to determine the ways my teacher responsiveness to students' literary topics of interest affected their cognitive engagement with each of the three short stories.

The short stories I selected came from the course textbook⁴. Before the term began, I identified information about each potential short story to correlate with week one's literary-topics-of-interest survey. I focused on the following elements of each piece: protagonist's race/ethnicity, protagonist's age, setting and time period, major themes, and stages of adolescent development (Havighurst et al, 1946) that are relevant to

⁴ Applebee, A. N., Bermudez, A. B., Blau, S., Caplan, R., Elbow, P., Hynds, S., & Langer, J. A. (2000). *The Language of Literature*. Boston: McDougal Littell.

each story's plot⁵. The literary-topics-of-interest survey, presented in a multiple-choice format, asked students about their preferences in regard to the age and gender of the protagonist and the setting and time period. Students also selected the most interesting literary themes from a list that contained all possible themes from the group of available short stories.

Research Journal

At the end of each class period we spent working with each of the three short stories, I wrote any observations or questions I had in my research journal. On average, I spent ten minutes writing in my journal. I wrote down observations related to students' behavior while reading the short stories. If a student made a comment to me about their opinion of one of these short stories, that was also noted in my research journal. The journal was a source of student voice throughout the different forms of data I gathered. I also noted questions that came to mind while in the classroom, which I reflected on outside of the classroom. Notes in my research journal were a source of evidence I coded using an open-code system (Auerbach, 2003). I grouped recurring observations and in-class interactions into themes around anticipated and unanticipated outcomes.

Surveys

In week one of the study, students completed a literary-topics-of-interest survey (See Appendix A) that required the participants to identify their preferences about multiple aspects of a short story. The preliminary survey questions about major literary themes used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0=*Not interested* to 5=*highly interested*.

⁵ See Appendix for developmental stages

This preliminary survey also gathered data for each participant's preference about the race/ethnicity of the protagonist, the gender and age of the protagonist, and major themes within literature provided data about students' interest on whole-group and individual levels. These survey questions asked students to select one response from a short list of possibilities. This data was one major factor that guided my selection of short stories to be used in weeks two through four. I analyzed the data quantitatively and calculated the response to each question on the survey into percentages. I then compared the findings from this data set with students' responses to weekly surveys which focused on their interest and engagement with each short story.

The second part of the literary-topics-of-interest survey, focusing on themes, derived from Havighurst's Developmental Issues for Adolescents stages (See Appendix A). Survey participants considered whether each stage is important to the people in her age group; participants then marked *agree*, *disagree*, or *do not know* for each statement. The following statements make up Havighurst's stages and are not meant to be interpreted chronologically:

1. achieve mature relations with age mates of both sexes;
2. achieve a comfortable masculine or feminine social role;
3. learn to accept your physique and to be able to use your body effectively;
4. achieve emotional independence of your parents or other adults;
5. being or becoming prepared for an occupation;
6. working toward economic independence, or having economic independence;

7. being prepared or preparing for marriage and family life;
8. developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic independence;
9. being a socially responsible adult;
10. having a set of values and an ethical system that serves as a guide to behavior.

I also analyzed each of the available stories for the presence of these developmental stages. The data I collected from this initial survey enabled me to create a short story unit that was responsive to students' interests. By selecting short stories that contained the Havighurst's stages that students from each class found most important, I responded directly to students' literary topics of interest.

I also administered weekly surveys after students read each short story for the first time (See Appendix B). The same weekly survey was administered in weeks two through four. Students were asked to identify their level of interest with the story, and whether the story was able to capture their attention and hold it until the end. Participants' responses to these weekly surveys provided data about how relevant or interesting each text was to each student. These surveys were administered to the whole group and were triangulated with students' written responses and any observations in my research journal that served as additional evidence.

Written Responses

Participants' written responses to in-class writing prompts, related to each short story, were analyzed for evidence of cognitive engagement with the piece of text, using Finn and Zimmer's (2012) definition of cognitive engagement as the exertion of thoughtful energy towards comprehending complicated ideas in an effort to go beyond

the minimum expectations. Students' cognitive engagement with each short story was measured weekly with an in-class writing assignment.

The writing prompt was modified for each story we worked with during weeks two, three, and four (See Appendix C). The prompts asked students to write about their reactions to a complex idea in the short stories and to share an experience from their own lives that related to the texts. There was no maximum length requirement, but participants were asked to write a half-page at minimum to ensure that I had enough data to analyze. Not all learners prefer to express their ideas and understandings orally, so providing individuals with the opportunity to respond to complex ideas in writing prevented exclusion of participants. Students' written responses were coded using an open-code system (Auerbach, 2003). I grouped recurring ideas and turned them into themes. Themes were based upon evidence I gathered and grouped. I compared and triangulated these themes with the quantitative data I gathered in my preliminary and weekly surveys. This evidence was used to determine whether my teacher responsiveness to students' literary topics of interest affected their cognitive engagement.

These written responses were collected from every student in each class with the exception of participants who were absent. This extended my findings to a larger number of the participants, and increased generalizability and credibility of the data and findings. The length of this research study limited the number of surveys and written responses I asked participants to complete. Since I was the only researcher in this study, my existing knowledge and experiences affected my observations and perceptions, and certainly influenced the ways in which I interpreted the behavior of participants that I noted in my journal entries.

Students' survey responses, written responses, and my personal observations in my research journal were triangulated to ensure the most reliable and accurate findings possible. These findings were analyzed and interpreted at the whole-group level.

CHAPTER 3—FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings

The following sections include an in-depth explanation of major themes that developed from the analyzing and coding processes applied to my sets of data for each of the three short stories. These analyses led to important findings that help answer the question: how does teacher responsiveness to students' literary topics of interest affect their cognitive engagement with short stories? I used themes to organize recurring findings that explained the ways I perceived enacting teacher responsiveness with literary topics of interest and how these interventions affected students' cognitive engagement. I begin with my analysis of the preliminary survey results, which guided my selection of the three short stories we read for this research study.

Preliminary Literary-Topics-of-Interest Survey

Students responded to this survey before I selected the three short stories we read. The results of each survey question helped guide my text selections. I tallied the number of responses for each survey question and calculated a percentage for each (see Table 2). The majority of responses to questions 2-5 resulted in no specific preference, but for the first question about the protagonist's age, the majority of students responded by identifying a preference for the protagonist being around their age. Before calculating the responses for this survey, I anticipated that students would have a specific preference for questions 2-5. The results of this part of the survey left me with little criteria to help narrow down the short stories I selected.

The other part of the preliminary survey asked students to identify how important ten themes were to themselves and people in their age group (see Appendix A). Months

before I began this action research study in the classroom, I spent time reading through all possible short stories I later selected from, and I identified which of these ten themes appeared in each story and how. I referred back to these documents after getting the

Table 2

Quantitative Analysis of Preliminary Literary-Topics-of-Interest Survey Front Side

1. The protagonist's age				
Prefer the protagonist to be around the student's age.	Prefer the protagonist to be much older than student's age.	Prefer the protagonist to be much younger than student.	No preference.	
15/28 (54%)	2/28 (7%)	0/28 (0%)	11/28 (39%)	
2. The protagonist's race/ethnicity				
Prefer the protagonist's race/ethnicity to be the same as the student's.	Prefer the protagonist's race/ethnicity to be different than the student's.	No preference.		
2/28 (7%)	3/28 (11%)	23/28 (82%)		
3. The protagonist's gender				
Prefer the gender to be the same as the student's.	Prefer the protagonist's gender be different than the student's.	No preference.		
4/28 (14%)	3/28 (11%)	21/28 (75%)		
4. The setting of a story				
Prefer setting to be suburban.	Prefer setting to be rural.	Prefer setting to be urban.	Prefer setting to be in nature.	No preference.
1/28 (4%)	1/28 (4%)	6/28 (21%)	3/28 (11%)	18/28 (64%)
5. The time period of a story				
Prefer time period to be in the past.	Prefer time period to be in future.	Prefer time period to be in present.	No preference.	
2/28 (7%)	4/28 (14%)	6/28 (21%)	18/28 (64%)	

results from this preliminary survey. I compared students' responses to this part of the survey to the stories I could select from. Any story that contained a theme that the majority of students identified as important on this survey was still in the selection pool.

Any story that did not contain the themes that students identified as most important was no longer a part of the selection pool. Table 3 presents the results of this portion of the survey:

Table 3

Quantitative Analysis of Preliminary Literary-Topics-of-Interest Survey, Back Side

Theme	Total number of students who identified theme as important to self and age group	Percentage (%)
Have friendships or bonds with males and females your age.	24/28	86%
Have a masculine or feminine identity.	9/28	32%
Accept your physical appearance.	18/28	64%
Be independent of your parents or other adults.	14/28	50%
Be or become prepared for a career.	23/28	82%
Be economically independent (supporting yourself financially).	18/28	64%
Be prepared for marriage and family life.	17/28	61%
Improving your intellectual skills.	19/28	68%
Be a responsible adult.	21/28	75%
Act in ways that demonstrate your personal values.	23/28	82%

It would be impossible to select one story that contained every one of these ten themes, but I was able to select stories that contained at least two out of the five themes this group identified as most important. The five themes that received the highest number of responses indicating it was important to the individual and the individual's age group were: (1) Have friendships or bonds with males and females your age; (2) Be or become prepared for a career; (3) Improving your intellectual skills; (4) Be a responsible adult; and (5) Act in ways that demonstrate your personal values.

“The Most Dangerous Game”

The first short story I selected was “The Most Dangerous Game” by Richard Connell (1924). This short story contained evidence connecting to two themes the group identified as important to themselves and others in their age group. The first is to act in ways that demonstrate your personal values, and the second is improving your intellectual skills. In the story, the protagonist Rainsford acts in ways that demonstrate his personal values and beliefs about hunting and harming innocent people. The second theme connects to the story because Rainsford improves his intellectual skills when he faces the life-threatening challenge of survival while he is being hunted by the general. The results from my analysis of the first part of the preliminary literary-topics-of-interest survey showed that 54% of the class preferred the protagonist to be an individual who is around their age. These students are younger than the protagonist of this story by at least five years. However, I still selected this story because of the themes it connected to and based on the unexpected twist in the plot. I thought that the plot twist would surprise students and further encourage them to cognitively engage with the text.

Students completed a weekly interest and engagement survey in the same class

period that we finished reading the story (see Appendix B). Using a Likert scale, this survey asked students to identify how much they agreed with six different statements. The points on the scale were *strongly agree*, *agree*, *I don't know*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. After I collected students' surveys, I calculated the total number of responses for each question and examined the data for recurring themes.

The first statement on the interest and engagement survey was, "I enjoyed reading the short story." A total of 27 students responded to the story, and 30% strongly agreed while 41% agreed with that statement. The third statement was, "This short story captured and held my attention"; 22% strongly agreed and 48% agreed. The fifth statement was, "The topic of this short story affected how interested I was in reading it", and 15% strongly agreed and 41% agreed. These percentages were higher than I anticipated based upon students' verbal responses to questions about how they liked the story. When I asked students that question in class I received mixed responses, which I noted in my research journal. Some students were very excited and surprised by the ending, while others did not react with as much enthusiasm.

"The Necklace"

The second short story we read was "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant (1884). This story connected to three of Havighurst's (1946) themes about adolescent development. The first theme, preparing for marriage and/or family life, was evident in the story through the marriage between the protagonist, Mathilde Loisel, and her husband. It is clear that Mathilde's role in her marriage is to maintain the home. Because women had little status in society during the time period in which the story takes place, they spent much of their time at home while their husbands worked. Eighty-three percent

of students found preparing for marriage and/or family life important, fifteen percent found this theme to be unimportant, and two percent responded with not knowing if this theme was important to themselves or people in their age group.

The second Havighurst (1946) theme evident in “The Necklace” was achieving a masculine or feminine social role. Mathilde fulfills the female gender role of the time period, maintaining the home and caring for her husband. Before she and her husband attend a ball, Mathilde insists she needs a new dress and jewelry for the occasion. She is determined to present herself in a way that is socially acceptable by high-status men and women also attending the event. Forty-six percent of students found this particular theme to be important, fifty-two percent found this theme to be unimportant, and two percent did not know whether this theme was important to themselves or people in their age group.

The third Havighurst (1946) theme apparent in the story was acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior. Mathilde values luxurious items, and this guides the ways she behaves before the necklace goes missing. The protagonist’s age is never mentioned in the story, but one can assume that Mathilde is between the ages 20 and 30. I selected this story based on students’ responses to the second portion of the preliminary literary-topics-of-interest survey. The chart on the left shows the results from students’ responses to whether they thought this theme was important to themselves or to people in their age group. Eighty-two percent of participants found this theme to be important, no participants found this theme to be unimportant, and eighteen percent of participants did not know whether this theme was important to themselves or people in their age group.

“The Sniper”

The third short story we read in this study was “The Sniper” by Liam O’Flaherty (1923). This story connected to three of Havighurst’s (1946) themes about adolescent development. The first theme this story connects to is achieving a masculine or feminine social role. In the story, the character is a sniper in the Irish Civil War and is challenged with staying calm and focused while facing death head-on. Social constructions of masculinity are that men must be serious, courageous, and tough, so one can see that this theme is apparent in the protagonist’s characteristics and actions. On the preliminary literary-topics-of-interest survey, 32% of students identified that particular theme as important to themselves or people in their age group.

The second Havighurst (1946) theme of adolescent development prevalent in this story was accepting one’s physique and using one’s body effectively. This theme appears in this story when the sniper takes a bullet in his arm and has to accept his current physical state and do whatever he can to survive. Sixty-four percent of students identified that as important to themselves or individuals in their age group on the preliminary survey.

The third Havighurst (1946) theme of adolescent development in “The Sniper” was achieving emotional independence from parents or other adults. The protagonist, the sniper, runs to the opposing army’s side to see whom he shot and killed, and discovers that it was his own brother. This is the final scene of the story, so readers are left to form predictions and inferences about how they think the protagonist handles this tragedy. The sniper was a young male, so one can infer that he became desensitized towards death and suffering because it was all around him for an extended period of time. One can infer

that this affected the protagonist's emotional state, causing it to be more independent and less attached to people, since death was something he was used to. Students' responses to the preliminary survey showed 55% felt that this was important to themselves or individuals in their age group.

I selected this story to be a part of this action research study because I knew groups within this class had interests and experience related to the story. For example, I knew that a large group of male students within the class really enjoyed playing video games that simulate fighting in war. Also, I knew that a group of students had members of their family that were a part of the military, many of whom were deployed. I also thought that the surprise ending would engage students because it was something I did not think students would expect.

The analyses of the different sets of data were done using an open-code system, where I combined recurring ideas into themes. This process revealed three insightful themes that I will discuss in detail in the following sections. These themes are personal connections to text, exploring ideas from text, and behaviors of affective engagement that support cognitive engagement with each of the three short stories.

Personal Connections to Text

I analyzed students' written responses for each of the three short stories we read, searching for evidence of the ways selecting short stories based on students' textual preferences and literary topics of interest affected their cognitive engagement with each text. One outcome was that students were able to connect the texts to experiences from their own lives.

Twenty-four written responses were coded for the first short story, "The Most

Dangerous Game.” All but four students’ responses included a personal anecdote or some form of connection between text and self. Eighty-three percent of students who turned in a written response for the first story made a personal connection to their lives, which led me to wonder who or what in the first story was relatable to the group. I designated this type of personal connection with a label *PC*. After further coding and combining recurring ideas from students’ personal connections, I was able to identify a type of connection prevalent in the written responses.

Students made personal connections with internal and external conflicts within “The Most Dangerous Game.” Of the 20 students who included a personal connection in their written response, 14 of these connections were coded as *connecting with conflict* (CC). One student wrote,

I think Rainsford kills Zaroff because he had no other choice. It is not that he wanted to be a murderer he did it so he could live. Even though Rainsford did something he didn’t ever think he would do he still survived so it worked out for him. One thing I did that I never thought I would do is go on Splash Mountain at Disneyland.

In this example, the student made personal connections with the internal and external conflicts the protagonist faces in this story. In his response, the student recalled the dilemma Rainsford faces at the end of the story and compared it to a type of internal conflict he experienced in his own life. This type of personal connection was prevalent in students’ written responses to this short story. This evidence demonstrates how students were able to relate to the text and cognitively engage by forming personal connections to its conflict.

The theme of making connections also emerged in evidence from my research journal. I noted evidence of students forming connections when they made comments in class or to other students. In one specific instance, a student was intrinsically motivated to finish the short story. Because “The Most Dangerous Game” is a longer short story, it took two days for us to complete the reading as a group. On day two, a male student, who typically disrupted class by talking to peers at inappropriate times, greeted me outside of the classroom and asked, “Are we going to finish the rest of that story? I think the dude’s gonna die! This movie I saw was kinda like this...” The student proceeded into the classroom while describing to his friend what happened in the movie. “The dude in the movie got stranded on an island too...”. As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons I selected this short story was because of its surprising plot twist. I thought it would keep students interested and wondered if it had any effect on their motivation to engage with the text.

For the second story, “The Necklace,” participants also completed a written response (see Appendix C). I received a total of 24 responses, and analyzed and coded them in hopes of gaining more insight into the ways this practice affected students’ cognitive engagement with the text.

The theme of making personal connections with the text was also prevalent in this data set. Out of the 24 written responses I coded, 18 of them included personal experiences that related to an event that happens in “The Necklace.” I coded these 18 responses with the label *PC*, for *personal connection*. Seventy-five percent of responses included a personal connection to the text, which is interesting because I did not initially anticipate many students’ engaging with it since some of the preferences students’

identified on the preliminary survey did not quite align with some the elements of “The Necklace.” For example, students stated they preferred the protagonist to be around their age, but Mathilde Loisel is older than the age group of the participants. In addition, I thought that the length of “The Necklace” would have an impact on students’ cognitive engagement because it was not nearly as long as “The Most Dangerous Game.”

I was fascinated to discover that there was a prevalent pattern in students’ responses that contained a personal connection to the text. Very similar to the finding that emerged from coding “The Most Dangerous Game” written responses, in this data set students also made connections between a conflict in the text and their own personal experience. In “The Necklace,” the protagonist loses a necklace she borrows from another character in the story and never finds it. I noticed 12 out of the 18 responses (67%) included personal connections which were related to borrowing or lending a personal belonging and losing it, which was one of the conflicts of this text. Again, students were cognitively engaging with the text through forming personal connections with the conflict so I used the same code, *CC*, that I applied to “The Most Dangerous Game” written responses. One student wrote,

I don’t think owning expensive items is all that important because you’re always going to want more. Once I borrowed a pair of jeans from a friend and they were white and I got them dirty. When I tried to wash them the stain wouldn’t come out. Like Mademoiselle Loisel, I felt awful about it because my friend really liked those jeans.

This student was able to connect a personal experience to what the character went through in the story. In addition, this student also used this event from the story to justify

her personal beliefs about owning expensive items. In this same student's response, she wrote about why this short story was interesting and relatable to her:

"The Necklace" interested me because I like the way the author described Mademoiselle Loisel. In the beginning, he made it to where you could almost put yourself in her shoes. We've all had a time of greed in our life, and Mademoiselle Loisel felt it more often than usual. It didn't make her a bad person, she just knew what she wanted.

This is direct evidence of this student's cognitive engagement with the story. This student's response demonstrated how this student was able to cognitively engage with the text because she could identify with the protagonist and conflict.

Another example of a student's personal connection to "The Necklace" that demonstrated the type of response that I coded as *PC* and *CC* was,

I once borrowed headphones from my dad and damaged it by snapping one of the earphones off. I felt bad and nervous because I did not know how he would react and I thought I would get in so much trouble. When I told him what happened he wasn't really mad. It was the complete opposite of what I thought would happen and I didn't get in trouble. "The Necklace" was really sort of a lesson and the message of the story is about being honest to people.

In this student's response, she demonstrated being cognitively engaged to the internal conflict the protagonist faced, and she also connected her personal experience of borrowing and damaging another person's belonging to her interpretation of the lesson of this short story.

Observations from the days spent in class reading this story were noted in my research journal. After reviewing these notes and coding them for evidence of cognitive engagement, I noticed that students' behavior while reading the story also demonstrated their cognitive engagement. It is important to note that when we read this story in particular, I assigned characters to students who volunteered to read aloud, and that was something I did not do when reading the other short stories. This could have affected how engaged these students were with the story.

I analyzed and coded students' written responses to the story "The Sniper," and noticed a similar pattern of forming personal connections to personal experiences. Forty-eight percent of students' responses were focused on someone they knew who fought in a war. For example, a student wrote,

My great grandpa fought in World War II. He was a soldier on the big heavy cannons for some time and while he was on those cannons he lost most of his hearing doing it. He lost his hearing because the canons were so loud when they shot. The sniper has to fight even though he was hurt. He got shot in his arm. My grandpa had to fight even though he couldn't hear.

Another student wrote,

One person I know who has been affected by war is my grandma. She was in Cambodia when the war was taking place. She lost 2 of her sons and family members. After that she couldn't take living there anymore so she moved to the USA.

I noticed that in this set of written responses the personal connections were a recurring pattern, but they were more focused on how someone they knew from their personal life experienced and was affected by war.

Through my teacher-researcher lens, I viewed students' formation of personal connection to the text as an outcome of their sense of belonging through classroom content that felt connected to their own lives. Throughout students' written responses about each story, they made connections to different aspects of their personal lives and, in many cases, connected an event or character from a story to something they experienced. Morgan's (2007) theory about reader response directly aligned to this outcome. He wrote that a reader is intrinsically motivated to engage with literature out of a response to characters, ideas, and author's craft and vision. He goes on to say that "Books [make] us think, feel, and reflect, [giving] us the joy of discovery and the pleasure of testing and articulating our own beliefs" (p. 492). The more students related to the texts, the more they were able to cognitively engage with different elements.

Exploring Elements from Text

Students' written responses, weekly interest surveys, and in-class interactions noted in my research journal were analyzed and assigned codes which helped me notice patterns that emerged across all three of these data sources. I noticed that students were interested in exploring an element from the texts in further detail, both while reading and after we completed each story.

In each of the three sources of data that pertained to "The Most Dangerous Game," students demonstrated clear evidence of interest in an element of this story and motivation to explore it in further detail. Students took ideas, events, and/or characters

from “The Most Dangerous Game” and discussed them in greater depth in their written responses. Out of the 24 students who were present and completed the written response, 22 students cognitively engaged with an element or idea from the text by referring to textual evidence in their discussion. I coded this type of response as *EXP, exploring element of text*. An example of this type of response reads,

I think Rainsford kills General Zaroff even though it goes against his earlier beliefs because if he didn't Zaroff would have killed more people. I think Rainsford's experience on Ship-Trap Island changes him. He was being hunted and it taught him what real fear felt like. It also changed him because he thought about how his prey feels, and probably will sympathize with it.

In this example, the student explored an idea from this story in greater depth than what I perceive to be surface level. The first line of the student's response is what I considered as surface level, but the rest of his response shows evidence of cognitive engagement with a part of the story that deals with a contradiction made by the protagonist. Another student wrote,

I think the Ship-Trap experience changed Rainsford in many ways. For example, he had to deal with someone he thought was different. General Zaroff seemed like a nice, respectable guy who likes to hunt, but turned out that he (Rainsford) was going to be the prey. Rainsford also killed someone, even if it was a bad person he still killed someone and that is going to stick with him. Rainsford also had to open up the wild side of his brain so he will be more open and observant of his surroundings. So Rainsford will probably always have flashbacks of what he went through on that island.

In this example, the student explored the effects of Rainsford's experience on Ship-Trap Island beyond what I perceived to be surface level. This student focused her response on the ways Rainsford changed as a result of what he went through on that island. She wrote about how Rainsford went against his earlier belief of being against hunting and killing a human to provide evidence of how this character changed. Also, she formed an inference about how the protagonist will be affected in the future after his near-death experience by stating and explaining why he will have flashbacks. Ninety-two percent of students discussed ideas or elements of the story with a level of sophistication that was beyond the minimal expectation, providing evidence of cognitive engagement with this story.

For each of the three short stories we read, students completed a weekly interest survey that asked students whether or not they agreed with the following statement: After reading this short story I wanted to explore ideas or events within it more closely (see Appendix B). I analyzed students' responses for that item on the survey by calculating a total number for each of the possible responses, and then calculating a percentage for each so that I could compare those numbers.

The results from that analysis revealed that 33% of students strongly agreed or agreed with that survey statement, 52% stated that they did not know whether or not they agreed, and the remaining 15% stated that they strongly disagreed or disagreed. The results from this data set revealed findings similar to those from my analysis of students' written responses for this story. Although the majority of student responses indicated they did not know whether or not they agreed with this statement, there were more responses that indicated agreement rather than disagreement.

In-class interactions that happened while reading “The Most Dangerous Game” were noted in my research journal. There were instances that provided evidence of students’ motivation and interest towards exploring an element from this story in greater detail. For example, I recorded an interaction that took place between a pair of students who discussed what Rainsford could have done to change the outcome of the story. One student asked, “Why didn’t Rainsford try to escape from the island after he knew the general planned to hunt him down?” The partner responded with, “Well, I think that Rainsford must’ve known that he had no other way out. Think about how chill the general was when he was telling Rainsford his plans to give him a few days to hide. If the general knew that there was a way for Rainsford to escape I don’t think he would have been so relaxed.” This example provides evidence of cognitive engagement with the short story because these individuals were curious and interested in the plot, and they considered alternative outcomes to the story.

In another conversation between a pair of students, they discussed the character Ivan, who played a minor role in this short story. One student asked, “What happened to Ivan after Rainsford killed the general?” The other student responded with, “I don’t know. He probably became a servant to Rainsford since they were the only two people on the island, or he could have tried to kill Rainsford after he found out the general was murdered. Maybe Rainsford killed Ivan too? If Rainsford made it through all of that in the story, I can see him fighting Ivan to save himself.” This example provides evidence of cognitive engagement with the text through further exploration of the character Ivan and the events from the plot that led to the resolution in the story. These students were making inferences and predictions based on details and evidence from the text.

Cognitive engagement, demonstrated by the exertion of thoughtful energy towards comprehending complicated ideas in an effort to go beyond the minimum expectations (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), was also evident in written responses about the short story "The Necklace," because students were interested in understanding the protagonist and her actions and behaviors throughout the plot.

I analyzed and coded a total of 24 written responses for "The Necklace." Out of that total number, 18 responses were coded with *EXP*, *exploring element of text*. Seventy-five percent of students showed evidence of cognitive engagement by exploring an element from this text in greater depth. With this story in particular, students were engaged with the idea of materialism, and whether or not it is important for someone to own expensive items. An example of this type of response reads,

It's not important to own nice or expensive things because it's not exactly all about looks it's more about personality, and no one wants to hangout with someone who only cares about money and is worried about how they look twenty-four-seven. Many people in this class did not like the character Mathilde because of that reason. She only cared about having a new dress and necklace and made it difficult for her husband who kept trying to make her happy. Once in awhile it's nice to see something in very good quality and expensive and be able to say 'yep, that's mine' but most of the time it doesn't matter as long as you have what you need.

Another example reads,

I do not think it is important to own expensive items, but I would like to own expensive items. Most all expensive items are not really a need in life but

enjoying these items is a want. The story is a good example of what happens to people who think expensive items are a need and not a want. She (Mathilde) cared more about what other people thought about her at the ball than anything else. Greed was the reason she had to work the rest of her life.

Both of the responses above provide evidence of exploring an element of the text in further depth. Fifteen of the eighteen written responses I coded showed evidence of students' exploring one of the subjects in this story, owning expensive items to enhance one's perceived social status. In the story, Mathilde felt it was absolutely necessary to wear expensive items to the ball she attended because she wanted to impress and be accepted amongst the other high-status attendees.

Through my teacher-researcher lens, I perceived this pattern of exploring this element of the story to be so popular among students because of the school culture in which this study took place. Because this research took place in a predominately middle-class, suburban neighborhood, many students could relate to the desire to own expensive items and many understood how owning something nice affected how others treated them. I noticed that the students who wore expensive materials to school, like Beats by Dre headphones and Nike and Jordan sneakers, had higher social status among the rest of the students in the class.

Students' responses to the weekly interest survey for "The Necklace" provided additional evidence of their levels of interest and engagement that related to the theme of exploring elements of text. One of the items on this survey asked students to state whether they *strongly agree*, *agree*, *don't know*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree* with the following statement: After reading this short story I wanted to explore ideas or events

within it closely. I analyzed this survey data by adding the total number of responses, and then I calculated percentages for each, which I then compared with my additional data sources. For this survey item, 12 of the 24 survey responses (50%) identified that they strongly agreed or agreed, six of the 24 responses (25%) identified that they did not know whether or not they agreed, and the remaining six of the 24 responses (25%) identified that they strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. This data aligns with the theme of exploring an element of the text in further detail because half of the participants stated the text inspired them to do so.

However, it was interesting to note that not all students identified that they agreed with that statement on the survey, yet ninety-two percent clearly demonstrated exploration of an element of the text in their written responses. Later, in my implications section, I discuss why I think students' responses on the surveys did not equally represent the themes of cognitive engagement I analyzed and coded in the written responses for the different stories.

Another item on the weekly interest survey asked students to circle any and all of the skills (cognitive engagement actions) that they applied when reading this story. The five possible skills students selected from were asking questions, reasoning, summarizing information, making connections between the story and my own life, and making predictions; students could also mark *other*, and *I did not use any of these skills*. The following table presents the quantitative analysis of this item of the weekly interest survey:

Table 4
Quantitative Analysis of Cognitive Skills Students' Used while Reading "The Necklace"

Skill	Asking Questions	Reasoning	Summarizing Information	Making Connections	Making Predictions	Other
Number of participants who used skill (%)	6/24 25%	8/24 33%	5/24 21%	3/24 13%	14/24 58%	0/24 0%

The skills above related to the theme of exploring an element of text in further depth because any and all of those skills required effort beyond just simply reading the story, and the use of these skills helped one better understand and interpret the text overall. Not only does this provide direct evidence to support this theme, it is also evidence of cognitive engagement with the text from the students' perspective. Finn & Zimmer's (2012) definition of cognitive engagement, the exertion of thoughtful energy towards comprehending complicated ideas in an effort to go beyond the minimum expectations, clearly applies to the various ways students were cognitively engaging with "The Necklace" (see Table 4). This data was especially useful because it came from the students' perceptions of themselves, unlike the data from my analysis of classroom interactions and written responses, which provided my own perspective.

Two data sources from the story "The Sniper," written responses and the weekly interest survey, were analyzed and coded using the same label, *EXP*, exploring an element of the text. A total of 23 written responses were collected and analyzed, and 15 of those responses demonstrated evidence of cognitive engagement through the act of exploring the subject of the story, war, in greater detail. Many of these responses mentioned the impact of war on people and land. Some include personal connections to

family or friends that have experienced fighting in a war. An example of this type of response reads,

War is unnecessary. I feel like countries only go to war because they can't solve their problems in a more logical way and decided to settle it barbarically. But, I only blame governments for this, not the soldiers. I respect them because they are willing to risk their life for their country, even if it is because of a stupid reason.

Another example of this type of response reads,

War is important because it fights for our rights and what we believe in. If we didn't have war our country would kinda be all over the place. Having the power to fight against other countries in war adds structure to the world. I can see why the sniper and his brother both fought in that war. They both have to stand up for the country they come from and do whatever it takes to protect it. Even though people get hurt like the old lady in the story, war is a part of the world and it is not going anywhere.

Sixty-five percent of the written responses I received about this story included students' thoughts, opinions, and personal experiences related to war. This was a demonstration of engagement and interest with the story because students had to synthesize information from their prior educational experiences and personal experiences with this story in order to produce this written response.

In addition to written responses, I analyzed the weekly interest survey I administered for this short story. I collected a total of 23 surveys on the day we finished

reading the story as a group. I focused on the same two survey questions in my analysis of this set of surveys as I did with the weekly interest surveys for “The Necklace”.

One item on the survey asked students to state to what degree to they disagreed or agreed with the following statement: After reading the short story I wanted to explore ideas or events within it more closely. Using a Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, students had to select the response that best represented how they felt. Eleven out of the twenty-three surveys identified that they strongly agreed or agreed, six identified that they did not know, and six identified that they strongly disagreed or disagreed with that statement. This information comes from the students’ own perspective, which is very valuable to triangulate with my own coding of their written responses. Although a higher percentage of written responses provided evidence of students’ exploration with an element of the text, 48% of these surveys indicated the interest in exploring an element of the story in greater depth which was very close to half of the responses I collected in total.

The final question of the weekly interest survey asked participants to circle any and all cognitive skills used when reading “The Sniper.” Table 5 shows the results, which were quantitatively analyzed:

Table 5
Quantitative Analysis of Cognitive Skills Students’ Used while Reading “The Sniper”

Skill	Asking Questions	Reasoning	Summarizing Information	Making Connections	Making Predictions	Other
Number of participants who used skill (%)	6/23 26%	7/23 30%	4/23 17%	3/23 13%	10/23 43%	0/23 0%

As stated earlier, these cognitive skills demonstrated both cognitive engagement and the motivation to explore an element from the text in greater depth. When students are cognitively engaged, they are putting forth more than the minimal amount of effort to understand and make meaning from the text. Some of these skills in Table 5 could have gone unnoticed by the teacher, so having students identify any that they used was valuable input from those participants.

When reviewing the analyses of data for all three of the short stories, it was clear that most students were cognitively engaged with each text. Participants were exploring elements of the text in greater depth and applying cognitive skills to make meaning from the stories.

Academic and Cognitive Engagement

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the different types of engagement are interrelated in various ways. In order to find out the ways selecting texts based upon students' interests impacted their cognitive engagement, I gathered and analyzed data that had the potential to provide evidence of academic and cognitive engagement. The weekly interest surveys provided insight into students' self-perceived level of interest with each text, and students could also identify any cognitive skills they engaged in while reading and interpreting. My research journal held important observations about students' behavior while working through each text. Finally, I also analyzed students' written responses for various actions that provided insight into students' levels of engagement with each text. By looking at those three sources of data separately and then comparing them, I was able to form some conclusions about the ways students' classroom behavior was impacted when I selected texts based upon their interests.

Students' responses to the weekly interest survey for "The Most Dangerous Game" were analyzed quantitatively in order to reveal recurring patterns. Three items on the survey were analyzed. Each item asked students to state to what degree they agree or disagree with a statement using a Likert scale. The first statement was "I enjoyed reading this short story." If students enjoyed themselves while reading the story, then their physical behavior was more likely focused on engaging with the text. Thirty percent of survey participants strongly agreed, forty-one percent agreed, nineteen-percent did not know, seven percent disagreed, and four percent strongly disagreed. The majority of student responses agreed with that they enjoyed reading "The Most Dangerous Game."

The next survey item I analyzed asked students to state whether they agreed with the following statement: This story captured and held my attention. If a student's attention was invested in the story, and stayed that way throughout its entirety, her behavior was likely to demonstrate that by following along with the text and classroom behavioral expectations. Twenty-two percent of participants strongly agreed, forty-eight percent agreed, eleven percent did not know, four percent disagreed, and fifteen percent strongly disagreed. When I combined those who strongly agreed and agreed with that statement (70%), and those who strongly disagreed or disagreed with that statement (19%), it was clear to me that a majority of the class was interested in "The Most Dangerous Game," but a significant portion of the class did not feel the same.

The following table reflects the results from the final item on the weekly interest survey, which asked students to identify any and all cognitive skills they engaged in while reading "The Most Dangerous Game":

Table 6

Quantitative Analysis of Cognitive Skills Students' Used while Reading "The Most Dangerous Game":

Skill	Asking Questions	Reasoning	Summarizing Information	Making Connections	Making Predictions	Other
Number of participants who used skill (%)	3/27 11%	8/27 30%	4/27 15%	8/27 30%	14/27 52%	1/27 4%

Note: Nineteen percent of responses indicated "I did not use any of these skills."

The skills listed above used most often were making predictions, making connections, and reasoning. Students' who were cognitively engaged using any of these skills were less likely to demonstrate outward behaviors of disengagement, such as talking at inappropriate times, not following along with their copies of the text, or putting their heads down on their desks.

The analysis of this set of data and the weekly interest survey results revealed a pattern in students' academic engagement, which is defined as "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, p.12). The weekly interest survey for this short story allowed me to gain insight into how interested and captivated students' felt while reading, and when I compared that to the percentages of how many engaged in each of the cognitive skills (see Table 6), I gained a deeper understanding of the interrelatedness of participants' interest in a text and their academic and cognitive engagement. Seventy percent of participants enjoyed reading the story and felt that it captured and held their attention throughout, and the results in Table 6 clearly show the variety of cognitive skills students engaged in, many of which had a high-percentage of responses. Making

predictions, making connections, and reasoning were the three with the highest number of responses. Therefore, I concluded that students' interest in the "The Most Dangerous Game" affected whether or not they put forth effort to engage with the text in level of depth that went beyond simply reading the story.

When I analyzed students' written responses to "The Most Dangerous Game," I noticed that there was a clear connection between students' behavior and effort, which I measured through their demonstration of following directions for the writing task and meeting the length expectations, and their interest and cognitive engagement. I developed the codes *FD*, *following directions*, and *MEL*, *meeting expectations*. Eighty-six percent of the written responses I received met the expectations for the assignment and demonstrated that students' followed directions. Ten percent of the written responses were under the length requirement, but addressed the writing prompts. The remaining four percent of responses did not meet the length requirement and did not address the writing prompts. From this set of data, I was able to conclude that students' with an interest in a text affected their academic engagement. This finding related to the studies conducted by researchers Archaumbault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Finn & Zimmer (2012), who concluded that contributing to class discussion, preparing for and attending class, and submitting assignments by the deadline are demonstrations of academic engagement. Seventy-percent of participants identified that they enjoyed reading this story, eighty-six percent of participants demonstrated positive academic engagement with the writing prompt for this story, and over fifty-percent of students identified cognitive skills they engaged with while reading. I concluded that when

students enjoyed reading a story, they were more likely to engage with it both cognitively and academically.

This finding was also evident when the class read the second story used in this study, "The Necklace." Students' academic engagement with the written responses was also compared with their weekly interest survey and classroom behaviors to determine whether selecting texts based upon students' interests had any effect on their cognitive engagement.

The weekly interest survey for "The Necklace" was quantitatively analyzed using the same survey items as the analysis of "The Most Dangerous Game" surveys. The first item of the survey under analysis asked students to state the degree to which they agree or disagree with the following statement: I enjoyed reading this short story. Four percent of participants responded with *strongly agree*, fifty percent responded with *agree*, thirty-one percent responded with *I don't know*, and eight percent of participants responded with *disagree* and *strongly disagree*. The majority of participants identified that they enjoyed reading this short story.

The next survey item under analysis asked students to identify whether they agree with the following statement: This short story captured and held my attention. Eight percent of participants strongly agreed, fifty percent agreed, twelve percent did not know, twenty-three percent disagreed, and eight percent strongly disagreed. Like the results from the previous survey item, the majority of participants identified that the story captured and held their attention.

I also referred back to the data laid out in Table 4, which showed the quantitative analysis of cognitive skills students engaged in while reading. The application of any of

those skills provided evidence of students' cognitive engagement with the text. Selecting a text based upon students' interests could have been the intrinsic motivator that engaged students with this text.

Participants' written responses about "The Necklace" were also analyzed and assigned codes for following directions (*FD*) and meeting the expectations (*MEL*). Ninety-one percent of the written responses I collected were coded for following directions. Students who produced a written response relevant to the story demonstrated following the directions. Eighty-three percent of written responses were coded for meeting the expectations. This meant that these responses met the length requirement.

It was important to revisit the theme of forming personal connections to text when trying to make sense of these sets of data. The majority of participants made personal connections to "The Necklace," which I believed made it easier for students to academically engage with the written response for this story. When students related with and included personal experiences in their written work, they followed directions and met the expectations for the assignment.

In my research journal, I noted observations about students' behavior while reading "The Necklace". I had a post-it note attached to my copy of the textbook, and when students responded to a question I posed, for example, "What do we know about the protagonist so far?" And, "Who can retell what has happened in the story so far?" I made a tally mark on the post-it note to keep track of how many students were participating in class discussions about the story, as well as how many students were asking questions as we proceeded. Students who were putting forth effort to better understand the story by asking questions were demonstrating cognitive engagement with

the text. We were able to read the story in one class period and I recorded four tally marks for students asking questions. I posed five questions to the whole group and received responses from 2-3 different students per question.

I also noted comments and reactions students were expressing while we read. In one instance, a student responds to my question about what we know “I cannot stand the main character. She is annoying! She says she needs all of this new stuff, and then when she gets it, she needs something else again. Nothing is good enough for her.” The behavior of the protagonist went against this student’s values and beliefs. It was clear to me that this student felt frustrated about her behavior, but the frustration was generated because this student was engaging with the story. Had this student not been following along and interpreting Mathilde’s character over the course of the story, he would not have had such a strong reaction to her.

From the sets of data about “The Necklace,” I was able to conclude that students’ with personal experiences connected to the text demonstrated positive academic and cognitive engagement. Because the underlying message in “The Necklace” was relatable to students’ experiences, “the student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote” was evident in a vast majority of the participants (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, p.12).

Evidence of academic and cognitive engagements were also present when students read “The Sniper.” Students’ academic engagement with the written responses was also compared with their weekly interest survey and classroom behaviors to

determine whether selecting texts based upon students' interests had any effect on their cognitive engagement.

Weekly interest surveys were collected and quantitatively analyzed using the same items in my analyses of the previous two stories. The first item of the survey under analysis asked students to state the degree to which they agree or disagree with the following statement: I enjoyed reading this short story. Out of the 23 surveys collected, thirteen percent stated they strongly agreed, sixty-one percent stated they agreed, twenty-two percent stated they did not know, four percent stated they disagreed, and zero participants stated they strongly disagreed. The majority of participants (74%) stated they strongly agreed and/or agreed that they enjoyed reading the story.

The second survey item under analysis asked students to identify whether they agree with the following statement: This story captured and held my attention. The results of my analysis were almost identical to the results of the first survey item. Thirteen percent of participants strongly agreed, sixty-one percent agreed, twenty-two percent did not know, four percent disagreed, and nine percent strongly disagreed. For this survey item, more students stated they strongly disagreed with the statement in comparison to the first survey item. Similar to my findings for "The Most Dangerous Game" and "The Necklace" surveys, I concluded that the majority of participants' attention was captured and held as we read it. These results were impacted from selecting the text based on participants' interests.

Written responses about "The Sniper" were analyzed and assigned the following codes: *FD*, and *MEL*. The analysis and coding process allowed evidence to emerge that strengthened my finding about how students' interest in a text impacted their academic

and cognitive engagement. Sixty-six percent of students' written responses were assigned the label *FD*, *following directions*, because their writing addressed the prompts and was relevant to the story. Eighty-three percent of written responses were labeled *MEL*, *meeting expectations*, because the responses met the length requirement for the assignment. Students' academic engagement was observed and measured based upon evidence of following directions and meeting expectations for the written response. In both cases, over half of the participants submitted responses that demonstrated academic engagement. In addition, a majority of students' responses included personal experiences, which aligned with the cognitive process of forming personal connections (see section Personal Connections to Text).

Looking back at the survey data focused on cognitive skills students applied when reading "The Sniper," it was evident that participants engaged in a variety of actions that deepened their understanding of the text. I concluded that students' cognitive engagement in turn impacted their academic engagement (see Table 5).

The interrelatedness of academic and cognitive engagement was studied by experts of educational research. In one study, monitoring the effects of affective and academic engagement over time (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008), researchers found that students' behavior had a profound effect on students' motivation and engagement. That theme emerged in my study as well. I noticed that students' interest and level of enjoyment while reading the text impacted both their physical behavior and academic engagement. Students who expressed an interest in the text demonstrated positive academic behaviors in class, such as following along with their text, not talking at inappropriate times, and engaging in whole-class discussions about the

story as we paused throughout the reading of it. Students' cognitive engagement and academic engagement were affected by selecting texts based upon students' interests because their attention was captured, they enjoyed reading the story, and they were able to interact with each text by forming personal connections and using other cognitive skills to engage.

The analyses of this finding reiterated an implication for my own teaching practice. Teachers have some influence on students' behavior and emotions. Other factors such as home life, relationships with family and friends, mental and physical health, and feeling a sense of belonging to school all affect one's behavior and emotions, which then affects how one learned. By attempting to select texts based on students' interests and personal experiences, I am able to create a classroom environment that invites students into the curriculum and provides a space for them to feel a sense of belonging.

Limitations

The time span in which I was able to conduct this research study was limited due to my student-teaching placement being ten weeks long. This research is transferable to other settings and classrooms, but a longer period of gathering data would be necessary in order to confirm and extend students' engagement. For this study, I gathered data the second week of the new school year and stopped after four weeks. It would be valuable to extend the study through the entire first quarter so that more data about students' engagement with stories could be analyzed.

In addition, it would be beneficial to extend the time of this study to see if students' responses to stories, through their written responses and surveys, change in any ways. I imagined that the more students got acquainted with the process or routine of

responding to surveys and writing to prompts after each story, their understanding of the survey and writing prompt questions would become clearer.

In the school in which this study took place, it was required of English Language Arts teachers teaching ninth-grade English to use texts from the course textbook. This limited the texts I could select for this study. If students could have been more involved with the selection process of these stories by searching for texts that interested them, it would have impacted the outcome of this study. Looking back at the study (Webster, 2001) that most helped me in the design of my own, this researcher used multicultural literature to find out the ways students' cultural schema affected their responses to texts. This researcher was using texts from various sources, not limited to stories from a single textbook.

The practice of enacting teacher responsiveness to students' literary topics of interest using students' responses to surveys limited the type of information students could provide. My preliminary literary topics-of-interest survey focused on characteristics of the protagonist (race, ethnicity, gender, and age) and the time period and setting of a story. In addition, the second portion of that survey was focused on Havighurst's ten themes about adolescent development (Havighurst, et al., 1946). Students identified how important each of the ten themes was to themselves and others in their age group. I used the responses to that portion of the survey because these themes appeared in the short stories in various ways. Although this data was useful in narrowing down and selecting the short stories we read throughout this study, I believe I could have extended this survey to gain more information from students about their literary topics of

interest and preferences. The more information I can gather, the more impactful the practice has potential to be.

Finally, questions 1-5 of the first part of the preliminary survey limited the conclusions I could come to in my analysis of that data. I included “I do not have a preference” as a possible response for each of these questions. Unfortunately, this limited the results of those questions because so many students selected those responses (see Table 2). If I were to have excluded that as a possible response to those questions I would have been able to apply that data to my practice of responding to students’ literary topics of interest.

Implications

The themes that emerged from my analyses throughout this study, formation of personal connections, exploration of elements from texts, and how students’ behavior was affected based on my perceptions of their cognitive and academic engagement, informed implications for my future teaching and implementation of this practice. Students responded to a weekly interest survey about each of the three short stories. New questions emerged after analyzing students’ responses to these surveys and comparing them to other data sources. Also, numerous implications for my future teaching practice became visible, both of which I will discuss in this section.

In my analysis of students’ written responses it was evident that individuals were making personal connections with each of the three stories. One question on the interest survey asked students to identify whether or not they agree with the statement, “I was able to connect an element of the short story (plot, character, etc.) to my own life” (see Appendix B). Interestingly, only 11% of the class stated they agreed with that statement.

The final question of this survey asked students to identify any cognitive actions used while reading the story, and 30% of the class identified that they were making connections while reading. Why were these percentages so different? Were students unclear about what it means to make connections?

These interesting results made me want to revisit the way I gave students directions for the surveys. With this class, I went through each question of the survey and verbally explained any words I did not think students understood. I asked students if they had any questions or needed clarification about any part of the surveys. What I would do differently is spend more time going over what the different cognitive skills are and what it looks like to engage in them. I would facilitate a discussion where students generate these ideas themselves.

A second implication inspired by my findings was that the ways in which I informed my practice needed to be modified. As I began this study I thought the preliminary literary-topics-of-interest survey was sufficient in gathering enough information from students to gain a clear understanding of their preferences. It turned out that I was able to get the most valuable information from two sources that were not what I predicted would initially guide the implementation of this teaching practice.

The first was a questionnaire that I asked students to complete on the first day of the new school year (see Appendix D). This questionnaire was meant to gather general information about the individual students and their lives outside of school, like their hobbies and goals or dreams for the future. I read through students' responses to these questionnaires at the end of that school day and began the process of getting to know and making connections with my students. Using the questionnaire, I learned that I had some

students who lived in rural communities outside of the suburban setting in which the school was located. It also informed me about a group of students who shared the interest of hunting. I responded to this new information by using it as justification for selecting “The Most Dangerous Game” as the first story we read.

The second unintentional data source that helped guide my teaching practice of enacting teacher responsiveness to students’ literary topics of interest was getting to know my students based on in-class conversations and interactions. I noted many of these invaluable interactions in my research journal. I based my text selections for the second and third short stories on students’ reactions to “The Most Dangerous Game.” For example, I asked a female student what she thought of the story, and she responded with “Eh...I guess it was alright. I mean, I did not think that the General was crazy at first. He was just weird. Who hunts humans?!” Although this student found bits of the short story to be memorable, overall she did not show genuine interest in it. This was useful information. This implication made me realize that personal communication was more valuable information than what I concluded in my analysis of the preliminary literary-topics-of-interest survey in terms of supporting my practice of responsiveness towards students and their interests.

If I conducted this study again, I would still have implemented the practice from the beginning of the school year, but I would have spent more time interacting with and getting to know my students before basing a text selection on what interests students have. In my limitations section I discussed the ways the length of my student-teaching experience affected the design and implementation of this research study. As a preservice educator teaching for the first time, I felt very much under pressure because I balanced

teaching curriculum for the first time, completing my edTPA portfolio, attending to my graduate studies program requirements, and conducting this research study. Time was a major factor that affected the results of this study. The more time one devoted to getting to know one's students before forming a conclusion about what they were interested in, the more impactful the practice of teacher responsiveness would be.

Conclusion

This action research study provided me with the unique opportunity to try out a practice as a pre-service educator, teaching in a secondary English Language Arts classroom for the first time. In my prior classroom experience as a student, an observer, and a practicum-intern, I was intrigued and confused by students' levels of engagement and disengagement with literature. In my own experiences with literature, I was most inspired by texts that helped me make sense of what I was experiencing in life at that time, and texts that were about a topic or event that interested me. After reading theories about reader-responses to texts, I concluded that cognitive engagement would be the focus of this study because that type of engagement encompasses the different cognitive actions that take place as a reader mentally responds to text. Conducting this action research study allowed me to test out this practice, and because of it, I am now able to better understand the relationship between reader and text, as well as how to better refine this existing practice for future use.

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Appendix A Preliminary Literary Topics of Interest Survey

Name: _____ Period: _____
Date: _____

Student-Interest Survey

For numbers 1-5, select one of the possible responses listed

1. The protagonist's (main character's) age...
 - a. I prefer the protagonist to be around my age.
 - b. I prefer the protagonist to be much older than me.
 - c. I prefer the protagonist to be much younger than me.
 - d. I do not have a preference.

2. The protagonist's race/ethnicity...
 - a. I prefer the protagonist's race/ethnicity to be the same as mine.
 - b. I prefer the protagonist's race/ethnicity to be different than mine.
 - c. I do not have a preference.

3. The protagonist's gender...
 - a. I prefer the protagonist's gender to be the same as mine
 - b. I prefer the protagonist's gender to be different than mine.
 - c. I do not have a preference.

4. The setting of a story...
 - a. I prefer the setting of the story to be in a suburban area (a residential community outside of a large city).
 - b. I prefer the setting of the story to be in a rural area (countryside).
 - c. I prefer the setting of the story to be in an urban area (downtown or center of a busy city).
 - d. I prefer the setting of the story to be outside in nature.
 - d. I do not have a preference.

5. The time period of a story...
 - a. I prefer the time period of a story to be set in the past.
 - b. I prefer the time period of a story to be set in the future.
 - c. I prefer the time period of a story to be set in the present.
 - d. I do not have a preference.

(Turn Over)

Read each statement. Decide if it is important to you personally and/or to people in your age group. Check whether you agree, disagree, or don't know if it is important.

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
1. Have friendships or bonds with males and females your age.	___	___	___
2. Have a masculine or feminine identity.	___	___	___
3. Accept your physical appearance.	___	___	___
4. Be independent of your parents or other adults.	___	___	___
5. Be or become prepared for a career.	___	___	___
6. Be economically independent (supporting yourself financially \$).	___	___	___
7. Be prepared for marriage and family life.	___	___	___
8. Improving your intellectual skills.	___	___	___
9. Be a responsible adult.	___	___	___
10. Act in ways that demonstrate your personal values (what you think is important in life).	___	___	___

Appendix B Weekly Interest Survey

Name: _____ Period: _____ Date: _____

Interest and Engagement Survey for Short Story

Title: _____

Directions: Circle the response that best represents how much you agree with the following statements about the short story.

1. I enjoyed reading this short story.
 Strongly agree Agree I Don't Know Disagree Strongly disagree
2. I was able to connect an element of this short story (plot, character, setting, etc.) to my own life.
 Strongly agree Agree I Don't Know Disagree Strongly disagree
3. This short story captured and held my attention.
 Strongly agree Agree I Don't Know Disagree Strongly disagree
4. After reading this short story I wanted to explore ideas or events within it in closely.
 Strongly agree Agree I Don't Know Disagree Strongly disagree
5. The topic of this short story affected how interested I was in reading it.
 Strongly agree Agree I Don't Know Disagree Strongly disagree
6. While reading the short story, I used the following reading skills (circle all that apply to you):
 asking questions making connections between the story and my own life
 reasoning (think and make decisions using logic) making predictions
 summarizing information I did not use any of these skills.
 other: _____

Appendix C Written Response Prompts

Most Dangerous Game:

Directions: In paragraph form, respond to as many of the following questions about “The Most Dangerous Game” as you need to in order to write a thorough response. You are expected to fill at least the front side of this page.

The character Rainsford is disgusted by General Zaroff’s game of hunting the “ultimate quarry” (43).

- Why do you think Rainsford kills General Zaroff in the end if it goes against his earlier beliefs?
- Have you ever done something you thought you would never do? What made you decide to carry out that action?
- Do you think this experience on Ship-Trap Island changes Rainsford? In what ways?

The Necklace:

Directions: Respond to the following prompts about “The Necklace” in a paragraph.

Do you think it is important to own nice or expensive items? Explain your opinion.

Have you ever borrowed something from another person and then lost or damaged that item? What was it that you borrowed? Who lent the item to you? Explain how you felt about losing or damaging what you borrowed. What happened when you had to tell the person you lost/damaged their belonging?

The Sniper:

Directions: Respond to the following prompts about “The Sniper” in a paragraph.

Do you think war is necessary (something that must happen) at some point? Explain your opinion.

Have you been affected by war personally? If so, in what ways? If not, do you know someone who has been affected by war?

Appendix D Student-Interest Questionnaire

Questionnaire:

What is your name? _____

What is your birthday? _____

What language(s) does your family speak at home? _____

What extracurricular activities are you involved in? _____

What music do you like to listen to? _____

What do you like to do in your free time? _____

Do you have an after-school job? _____

What is your favorite song? _____

What do you enjoy reading most? _____

What is your favorite book? _____

What is your favorite subject in school? _____

What is one word that describes you as a student? _____

Do you have a favorite teacher? Why is he/she teacher your favorite? _____

Do you have internet access at home? _____

Why are you taking this class? _____

What do you think makes literature and writing valuable? _____

What job do you want after you are done with school? _____

Anything you want me to know about you: _____
