Building a Community of Learners Amongst Under-Performing Students in Literacy through the Use of a Book Club

By

Robert Walters

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Robert Walters (2011)
Building a Community of Learners Amongst Under-Performing Students in Literacy through the Use of a Book Club

Robert Walters
Master of Arts
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
University of Toronto
2011

Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of a community of learning, through a book club, on student performance for students underachieving in literacy. This first chapter introduces the study, the researcher and how they are situated within the research, and the context and rationale of the study. The second and third chapters detail current research in literacy, learning, and communities of learning. They detail the methodological approach and rationale. The fourth and fifth chapters explain what took place during the study, what it means, and why this is important for teachers and teacher practice. Despite its limitations, this study finds that communities of learning, established through a book club, positively affect both academic and social performance. Book clubs create interconnectedness between its members that increases student engagement, which increases the amount of authentic dialogue. From this, book club members collaboratively co-construct knowledge resulting in general improvement, both academically and socially.
Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without Dr. Mary Kooy, my supervisor and friend. Her encouragement, support, vision, and living room are what made this project possible. I also must acknowledge Ms. Dalia Alghamdi, my colleague, my partner, and my friend for whom I am indebted to and extremely grateful for. Her support is what helped initiate this project in the first place and it was her support that kept it going when times were difficult and frustrating. Finally, to the four girls in the study; Rebecca, Ashley, Samantha, and Leslie, thank you. Without your participation, dedication, and determination to prove me wrong, this project would not been as successful as it is.
Dedication

To all teachers who feel that they have something to say about teaching practice but do not know how to say it; you can be heard, you do have something to say, and it will make a difference. Make it happen!
# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction - Me, the Math Guy

I. Who I Am
   A. Learning to Read; The Beginning
   B. Who I Am Currently

II. Transformation of Self
   A. The First Change
   B. The Second Change

III. The Context of the Study
   A. How the Study Began
   B. The Purpose of the Study

Chapter Two: The Literature Review - What is a Community of Learning and How Can It Be Used to Improve Literacy Skills in Under-Performing Students

I. Overview of My Research

II. Current Relevant and Related Research

III. What the Research Tells Us To Do

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework and Methodology - Situating the Study

I. Research
   A. Goals and Objectives
   B. Key Words
   C. Rationale

III. Research
   A. Research Approach
   B. Research Design
   C. Paradigms and Worldviews

IV. Ethics

V. Analysis Plan
   A. Conceptual Framework
   B. Phenomenological Approach
   C. Concept Map

VI. Data
   A. Data Collection
   B. Data Analysis
   C. Validity and Reliability
   D. Confidentiality
Chapter Four: Interpreting the Results

I. Context of the Study
   A. In the Beginning
   B. Starting the Book Club
   C. Dalia Alghamdi
   D. Data Collection

II. General Observations from the Book Club
   A. Observations in the Book Club
   B. Observations Following the Book Club
      1. Community of Learning
      2. Increased Dialogue
      3. Bonding and Interdependency
      4. Impact on Members
      5. Large Community
      6. Academic Performance
      7. Social Interactions
      8. Individual Identity
      9. What Impacts the Book Club?
      10. Overall Findings of the Book Club

Chapter 5 – Interpretations, Implications, Limitations, and Questions and Future Research

I. Interpretation
II. Implications
III. Limitations
IV. Outstanding Questions and Future Research Considerations
V. Final Reflection of the Study

Bibliography
Chapter One: Introduction - Me, the Math Guy

I. Who I Am

   A. Learning to Read: The Beginning

      It wasn’t until almost grade 4 that I really learned to read. Certainly, I could read some of the sight words that were necessary at each previous grade level but actually reading fluently was not something I was comfortable with nor was it something I was interested in. All the letters blended together, there were so many sounds, and the rules were outrageous to say the least. But mathematics I understood. The numbers were organized, the patterns were easily understood and the rules were methodical. Counting seemed natural, almost inherent to me. Doing mathematics was something I could do to calm myself from being too hyper or bored. It allowed me to play games, and bond with my grandparents over cards, and to give me something to talk about when adults were having conversations.

   B. Who I Am Currently

      Flash forward almost 20 years and I am currently writing a paper about literacy. It is of course not solely about literacy but about how literacy can be used to build community within a classroom setting. Nonetheless, literacy is at the paradigm of my research. Without it the study would have been made very difficult, if not impossible. When discussing my work with my parents, they asked me “how is it possible, you the boy who hated reading, hated literature of any sort, is now doing research in this field?” This is a good question. Unfortunately, it is not easy to answer. I wish I could say that I worked hard and studied until I eventually succeeded, but this much is not true. I would also like to say that my research was solely my idea; that I was sleeping one night and
woke up with a brilliant idea. Again, this is also not true. Instead, the way that I came to research about literacy and communities is by complete accident.

Early in 2009, I decided that as an elementary school teacher I needed to develop better ways to teach mathematics to my students. Although I am proficient in mathematics and enjoy the field in its totality, teaching it was extremely difficult. My students were asking questions I had never thought of and were finding it difficult to learn concepts that seemed to come to me almost naturally. Therefore, approaching these pupils was frustrating and taxing on me as an educator. I recognized that, without some additional support and some intensive work on my part, I would never be able to truly help these students mature and develop the numeracy skills that I possessed.

As a result of this dilemma, I decided to apply to graduate school and take courses focusing on elementary school mathematics. Although there were numerous options of school for which I could attend, one school in particular interested me most: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OSIE). Once accepted at OISE, I was excited and nervous all at the same time but ultimately, I knew I had made the right decision.

In my first two classes, both in the mathematics area, I was able to explore the true understanding of what mathematics meant and how it was perceived which lead me to a greater understanding of how to teach mathematics in my classroom on a primary level. Slowly, I saw my students’ mathematics skills improving after using a plethora of strategies I had learned in my courses and from my readings. Over time, these strategies became normalized in the classroom and the students began to demonstrate greater abilities to express their mathematical thinking. Overall, I felt content but I was far from satisfied. My students were still unable to ‘do math’ the way I could as a child. I
was still missing something. I decided in the next semester to take more mathematics based courses. Seeing that only one was available, I settled into another course that I felt could be used to further my thinking in this area, Communities of Learning. It is in this class where several pivotal events took place.

II. Transformation of Self

A. The First Change

The first important event that took place during my studies was meeting Dr. Kooy. Dr. Kooy immediately made me feel welcome in her course and insisted that everyone pursue their own research interests in any area they felt most comfortable or was most important. Being the mathematician that I thought I was, I naturally chose a research inquiry project on mathematics anxiety in elementary students. This project is literally one of the reasons I decided that I would even consider doing graduate research. It was challenging yet rewarding, difficult and frustrating yet fulfilling. It filled in the gap that I felt I was missing.

In addition, while I was teaching full time and completing this study as well as my other courses, I had met a peer, Dalia, whom by pure coincidence, selected my classroom as a means to complete her research inquiry project. I suppose it was not entirely coincidental as I did volunteer my classroom as one to be used by students who did not have access to their own classroom, but there were several to choose from. Furthermore, Dalia and I did not know each other very well aside from the fact that we shared a class together at OISE. Other than this fact, Dalia and I knew very little about each other. I was aware that she was an international student from Saudi Arabia and
had previously taught older children in her country. I later found out that she personally attended school in single gender settings.

As Dalia began to visit my classroom more frequently, we began to get to know one another better professionally and personally. I was able to oversee her research as she required some of my class time in order to complete it. She was able to see me in my practice which, for me, is very personal and intimidating yet was necessary for her in order to complete her study. Over the weeks, we slowly began to have discussions with many personal tangents. I discovered that our cultures were completely different and, in any other context, may have completely prevented us from working together in any capacity. I also shared with her about my culture as well as my non-heterosexual identity to which seemed to pique her interest. Pointedly, Dalia and I seemed to have very little in common besides the fact that we were both attending the same program, at the same time, at OISE. In fact, Dalia’s research interests and mine were completely different; she focused on literacy and I focused on mathematics. It seemed as though this relationship was temporary and would expire upon completion of the course.

Surely enough, when the last class came and Dalia and I presented our different mini-research projects, we bid each other a congratulations and said goodbye to one another. That is until the two semesters later.

B. The Second Change

Having had such a transformational experience in Dr. Kooy’s earlier class, I decided that I would opt to take another course with her before graduating from OISE regardless of the topic matter. In the second summer semester, she was offering a Communities of Learning course which seemed interesting enough even if it didn’t necessarily fit with
my research interests. I enrolled hoping to have a similar experience in this course as I
did in her previous course. Not only was this wishful thinking but I was completely
unaware of what the future was to bring.

III. The Context of the Study

A. How the Study Began

During this semester, I also began teaching a Summer School course for under-
performing grade 7 and 8 students in the Toronto District School Board. It was an
extremely demanding class with various ranges of needs in all areas. Also
coincidentally, the teaching focus I was assigned was literacy. Me, the ‘math guy’, was
expected to help under-performing students improve their understanding in reading and
writing! I felt overwhelmed and excited all at the same time. Most concerning, I was
nervous how this teaching schedule would coincide with my learning schedule at OISE.
Nonetheless, I felt up to the challenge and pushed forward.

After my first week of teaching, my first class of the semester began. As the class
settled down, I recognized a few people, one of those people being Dalia. We said
“hello” to one another and briefly asked how each other was doing and the course got
underway. Again, we were asked to complete a research inquiry project and I feverishly
began preparing ideas focused in mathematics. While doing this, my teaching class
continued to move forward.

There was a significant learning curve for me teaching in the classroom that summer.
I was working with a group of students that; 1) had never really met one another as they
were all from different schools, 2) were at an age that I was vaguely familiar with
professionally but had limited teaching experience with, and 3) had significant learning
gaps and gaps of knowledge in their literacy understanding. Upon completion of a diagnostic assessment, I found that the majority of these students believed they were “stupid” or “dumb” and they felt as though they could not really read and write; these were tasks that were simply too difficult for them and they assigned themselves these labels accordingly. The general feeling I had for these students was sadness; these students were broken. Their self-perception had been made based on information they had gathered over the course of approximately 10 years of schooling that kept telling them they were not good enough and the label they applied to themselves reified it.

After holding a class discussion [which took a lot of prompting and re-assuring] about the results of their diagnostic tests, it became apparent that these students by no means fit the labels they had presented to me about themselves. Certainly, they had some struggles with reading and writing, but they had rich, deep, and meaningful ideas and had the capacity to learn and discuss a variety of different concepts. I knew I needed to act but I felt I was completely out of my realm on this matter. So, I reached out to my peers in my classes at OISE.

At OISE, many people leant a sympathetic ear and offered me a variety of different strategies I could try. But, given the fact that the summer school course I was teaching was so short, I was not certain they would be able to have any meaningful impact. I decided to curtail these conversations while at OISE and focus more on the work that I needed to complete there instead. One of the course requirements was to participate in a novel study. People were to select a book from the supplied list and then form a study group to discuss the events, the plot, the characters or their feelings; whatever they felt
was most important. I was so excited about this idea and about the book I was reading that this excitement spilled over to my teaching.

During an early morning discussion, I shared with my students that I was excited about my schooling as I was going to be participating in a book club. I shared the details and the reasons why I was excited and the book I was reading, ‘Still Alice’. After this discussion, I returned to our normal routine and stuck to the teacher guide provided to me by the TDSB. It had asked me to read them a picture book called ‘Listen to the Wind’. It is a great picture book but not necessarily one I would have selected for this age group as it seemed far below their level. Regardless, I read the book aloud twice as the students had a snack just as I would to my grade 2 class that I taught in the regular school year.

The students’ initial reaction to reading the book was annoyed as they too felt it was immature and childish but, after listening to the story, and with a few probing questions, a rich discussion took place. Some students were feverishly asking questions and yelling out answers while others were laughing and making snide remarks about the course. It was extremely chaotic. Out of this conversation came a brilliant idea from several of the students; “why don’t we do our own book club? Then we can pick our own books and not have to read these picture books?”

Some students laughed and made fun of this idea but after some time had passed, many of the students seemed supportive of this and the nay-sayers seemed to have stopped with their comments. I told the students I would consider it but that I needed to think about it some more first.
For the next several days, a few students continued to ask about doing a book club to which I reminded them that I was thinking about it. Finally, one student asked me “what are you thinking about exactly?” This student in particular was fairly articulate when she spoke but generally quiet. Her question caught me off guard. What was I thinking about? I knew exactly what my thoughts were but how could I say that to these students. These students are under-performing in literacy. They are unable to read or write to the government mandated standards. Several of them had difficulty staying on task, focusing, and answering basic questions about the picture book I had read to them only days earlier yet they wanted to be responsible to decide on a book to study in a book club? What I was thinking about was how this idea seemed ridiculous if not, impossible and I did not want to support it feeling that it would be a waste of time.

As I was not yet convinced, two students proposed that we should do a book club and the book that should be used would be ‘Three Cups of Tea’. Their reasoning was solid as this was the adult version of the children’s book we were using for the course, and the text could be used to help them better understand some of the many problems and questions they had with the picture book. I acknowledged their creativity and promised I would find out if I could make it work.

Once again, back in class at OISE, I needed to share what took place in that classroom with someone. Several of my colleagues listened as I shared with them the students’ proposal and my concerns for doing it and how to let them down gently as to not break their spirits any further. Again, class interrupted this discussion and we were forced to switch gears and begin to seriously think about what we would do for our research inquiry projects, an assignment I had been neglecting. A class list of topics or
topic ideas had been passed around including who’s ideas they belonged to so that people could collaborate on their research if necessary and logical. None of these topics seemed to interest me or match my research interests so I began to work alone.

At break, Dalia and I decided to go grab a beverage and discuss the book we were reading for our book club as we happened to select the same book. We shared similar feelings about the book and the structure of the book club itself which helped us to bond. Now having known Dalia for some period, I decided to share with her my dilemma with my Summer School students. She patiently listened until I finished. Although she did not respond immediately, when she did respond, she was very clear; “So what? Go for it!” Dalia felt as though there could be no harm done by letting the students read the text they requested. She then suggested I use this group somehow in my research inquiry project and shared with me how jealous she was that I would have actual students to research instead of completing some sort of project based on a literature review. It was at this specific moment that our research project began.

B. The Purpose of the Study

Two entirely different people, from different places, with different experiences and cultural upbringings, had a conversation over coffee that serendipitously led to an idea, or rather a multitude of questions, that would transform not only the people involved, but ultimately change themselves drastically in the process. It is from this conversation that we felt we had a solid research topic for the course. We began brainstorming ideas and talking about my initial resistance. “Why was I so resistant? How can a book club be used to help these students? Is it possible to actually complete a study of this magnitude in such a short period? Why can’t these students read this book?”
Immediately, we brought our concerns to Dr. Kooy, who insisted that these were valid questions to get us started but we needed to further narrow our focus. She seemed particularly interested in our final question: why can’t these students read *Three Cups of Tea*? Who says they can’t read it?

Dalia and I began to think of questions and ways to approach the study collaboratively. Shortly thereafter, we felt ready to share our ideas and questions with the students as well as our overall proposal; that we could use the students’ data in our inquiry project. The questions that arose did so organically and naturally. It seemed as though Dalia, despite our many differences, were thinking exactly alike. Although we had a difficult time focusing the study opportunity we had available to us, several questions kept arising from both of us: how will a book club impact the students’ academic knowledge and competence given the fact that they are currently under-performing in traditional methods of study? Does a community of learning impact students’ identity of self and competence levels and, if so, in what capacity? Does a community of learning, investigated through a book club, help students’ construct knowledge in an authentic manner? Can this format of study help students increase their abilities in critical and megacognitive thinking both of their selves and ideas? Will a book club stimulate such conversations that they will begin to co-construct new knowledges with their peers in this setting? If so, how does this co-constructed knowledge benefit students on an individual basis? Once Dalia and I agreed that these were the beginning questions that we both felt our study could address and could be supported in our evidence even given our short time period, it was time to begin the study itself.
The *math guy*, through the course of many different events, embarked on a journey of studying the effects of community and community learning had on its learners through a literacy lens. Although it sounded completely ridiculous to me as well as my parents, it was an opportunity I felt compelled to take.
Chapter Two: The Literature Review - What is a Community of Learning and How Can It Be Used to Improve Literacy Skills in Under-Performing Students?

I. Overview of My Research

A. Why My Research is Important

The importance of this research in comparison to current research in its area is that it explores the re-identification process that the students underwent during their time in the book club that changed their reading, writing, oral communication, and eventually critical thinking habits. Current literature argues that this type of transformative practice is necessary and important but fails to provide enough concrete evidence supporting its outcomes. Thus, this research acts upon informed classroom practices and their findings in order to attempt to better understand its effects as well as why these practices are failing to connect with students’ learning strategies and realities.

B. How Am I Situated in The Research?

In the summer of 2010, I taught a literacy summer course for approximately 20 under-achieving students. In this course, the students initiated a book club which transformed their lives, their self-perceptions, and my life as well.

When they arrived at school, all of the students agreed that they were not able to read and write proficiently. In fact, some students believed they were unable to read or write with any level of success. If students arrive at summer schools feeling this way, how does a teacher act and plan in order to help them? These students were identified by teachers and schools as under-performing students. Although this label will not be found officially in any of their records, simply by the fact of being enrolled and participating in the summer course is enough evidence to suffice that they were labelled this way as it is a program to assist struggling learners.
This research argues that further investigation needs to be conducted to examine the underlying reasons for these students' under-performance and search for alternative ways to resolve it instead of holding summer courses. Why are we waiting until students reach high levels of failure in literacy before beginning to deal with this issue? Summer school is a place where students, who are already having a difficult time learning in a regular classroom, are asked to learn concepts and ideas in a significantly shorter period of time in a classroom full of struggling learners as support. In these environments, most teachers revert to using traditional methods of teaching and learning such as transmission, which are proven to be ineffective and useless, especially for students who already struggle. Students are less engaged in the classes which eventually affect their performance as well. Moreover, those teachers identified them as "non-readers" and "non-writers" which eventually perpetuate their already internalized identity of poor readers and writers. "Trusting that students are able to learn will not guarantee learning, but losing faith in them may ensure their failure" (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1991).

We are aware that students' identities are influenced by a variety of factors; however; primarily, this self-perception as poor readers and writers comes from teachers. It is these teachers' classroom practices that failed to connect to the students' learning strategies and prior knowledge. Teachers should be aware of their students' prior knowledge as this is one of the important keys for learning to take place which some teachers do not consider or ignore. As a result, teachers cannot connect what the students know with what they want to know and then what they learned. "Being aware that the reader brings much to the reading act, we see reading as a transaction between the reader, with his or her prior knowledge, and the writer, as they work together to construct "meaning" (Tiedt, Gibbs, Martha, Timpson, & Williams, 1989, p. 95)

II. Current Relevant and Related Research

A. Reading
Students who cannot read are significantly more likely to enter a cycle of poverty, experience many more hardships both socially and emotionally, and in general, experience a lower quality of life (Beers, 2003). Reading is therefore linked closely not only to academic success, but also to success outside of the academic institution as well. Children begin learning to read informally before the age of 5; however, formally students beginning the reading process in school in kindergarten (Ehri & Wilce, 1985). First, as pre-readers, students begin to learn their letters and sounds and some phonetic awareness (Ehri & Wilce, 1985). Following this, novice readers, those readers who can read some words, begin to recognize few high-frequency words used in everyday life often by rote learning or memorization but at times by their applying their phonetic awareness when appropriate (Ehri & Wilce, 1985). These students mature into veteran readers who begin to read several high-frequency words seen in everyday life and start to use a balance of the two early reading strategies of phonetic awareness and phonetic cue processing and visual cue processing (Ehri & Wilce, 1985). Students continue to build on their knowledge and progress through the reading spectrums or continuums until they eventually become fluent readers (Rees, Shortland-Jones, & Department, 1994).

Once students have mastered both their phonetic and visual cue processing abilities, they can begin to read simple texts or texts that often use a number of high frequency words. These high frequency words are words that appear most often in reading and writing of the English language and, at times, follow no phonetic pattern or reasoning (Dolch, 1936). The list of these words was created in the mid 1930s as a means to teach children necessary words to read (Dolch, 1936). This list has since been
expanded and updated to reflect the changes in our language both in and outside of the classroom. Dolch’s model of creating high-frequency words has been adapted and used to create Dolch Kits which are specific to each grade and also created based on the idea that reading is a continuum.

As students begin to read and master new words, they continue to seek out meaning from the text they are reading (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990) (Kweon & Kim, 2008). Students begin to internalize the words they are reading both as individual words as well as whole idea in order to comprehend the text. Eventually, this becomes habitual and students grow to become healthy, mature and fluent readers.

Various studies compared between traditional directed reading (TDA) to new models that suggested using choice, sharing and cooperation. The later one proved to be effective and have a positive impact on learners. This positive impact exceeded the academic performance to include the self-perception and identity as readers.

Stahl et al. (1997) worked with classroom teachers to revise the traditional basal reading lessons from a more traditional directed reading activity format to a model that combines elements of shared reading, partner reading, and choice. The evaluation of the results of this model suggests that a fluency-oriented model of instruction produces significant positive effects on not only fluency but also word recognition, comprehension, attitude toward reading, and students’ view of themselves as readers (Guthrie & Alvermann, 1999, p. 55).

There is a call for moving from the traditional approaches towards teaching reading to new models in which motivation, engagement, and sharing are essential elements for success. This call is concerned about beginning to apply new models from elementary schools as this is the beginning where students start to build their oracy and literacy skills.

B. Writing
Similarly, writing follows a comparable spectrum. Students begin the writing process long before they attend any formal educational institution simply by holding writing utensils such as pencils and pens. Following this, students begin using utensils to draw shapes and lines which eventually leads to formed shapes and patterns (Christie & Derewianka, 2010). By the time students enter a formal educational institution in Canada, students are expected, and often able, to write their own name. Thus, they are able to write some letters and characters. However, in a formal education setting, writing starts much earlier on the continuum than this (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994). Students are first encouraged to draw pictorial representations of what they want to write about and then the writing is linked to the picture (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994). The rational or theoretical purpose, according to the Writing Development Continuum, behind this is:

- Language learning takes place through interactions in meaningful events, rather than through isolated language activities
- Language learning is seen as holistic, that is, each mode of language supports and enhances overall language development
- Language develops in relation to the context in which it is used; that is, it develops according to the situation, the topic under discussion, and the relationship between the participants
- Language develops through the active engagement of the learners
- Language learning can be enhanced by learners monitoring their own progress
- The way in which children begin to make sense of the world is constructed through the language they use and reflects cultural understandings and values (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994, p. 5-6)

Following pictorial representations, students then mould their work into something more. They begin to write several letters or characters together, recognizing space on a page and between letters and words, and eventually students begin writing several
words connected in a simple sentence often related to their pictorial representations (Christie & Derewianka, 2010), (Rice, 2010), (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994). Over the course of their education, students learn to connect sentences to one another, create and organize ideas in written forms, and to write for various purposes (Christie & Derewianka, 2010) (Rice, 2010).

Throughout their learning process of both reading and writing, students continue to inform both their writing sphere's knowledge and understanding with those understandings created from the reading sphere's knowledge and vice versa (Petrosky, 1982). Furthermore, current research demonstrates that reading and writing should be taught and learned simultaneously simply because reading and writing are not separate activities or events (Petrosky, 1982) (Bloom & Egan-Robertson, 1993). Language, such as reading, cannot be taught in isolation because there is a strong connection between other forms of language, such as writing. "As students read, they think about what they read and respond to the author's ideas orally and in writing" (Tiedt, Gibbs, Martha, Timpson, & Williams, 1989). Learning to read and write cannot take place without teachers' support to the students. "The teacher's role is to motivate, encourage and help children to learn to read. Teachers must make reading meaningful, and this means seeing how it looks from the child's point of view" (Tiedt, Gibbs, Martha, Timpson, & Williams, 1989).

Research indicates that the only way one learns to write is by writing. While other ways of using language, most particularly reading, can contribute to the growth of writing ability, there's no substitute for extensive experience with writing itself. Thus, one sense of "writing to learn" means that through writing one is learning to write; the
second sense of "writing to learn" is that writing can be a means for learning (Mayher, Lester, & Pradl, 1983). Although this belief is still accepted today, it also indicates that writing “takes place through interactions in meaningful events, rather than through isolated language activities” (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994). Thus, it is believed that writing is strongly connected with all other language learning and its learning cannot be segregated from these concepts. In other words, Mayher, Lester and Pradl’s research still has some validity today but it is believed that although learning to write by writing is still valid, learning to write is significantly influenced by other areas of language development. This was not previously believed to be true; “language learning is seen as holistic; that is, each mode of language supports and enhances overall language development” (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994).

C. Reading and Writing as Social Acts

Both reading and writing are social acts which, in order to have students improve upon these skills, we should create spaces where students can share dialogue about their ideas in both areas (Polleck, 2010) (Maurer, 2010) (Ruzich & Canan, 2010). This is important, according to ‘The Writing Continuum’, because learning to write “takes place through interactions in meaningful events, rather than isolated language activities ... [writing] develops through interaction and the joint construction of meaning in a range of contexts” (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994). Sharing ideas in the classroom is “educationally valuable ... [because] meanings are created cumulatively over time through [this] sustained, responsive dialogue ... the dialogues promoted were educationally effective (Mercer, Hennessy, & Warwick, 2010). When students talk and express their ideas, share with others and listen to others, we formulate ideas and new
understandings. What happens when students have time to talk in classrooms is unbelievable. "Teachers can't transmit knowledge to their students in the sense that they can give students an understanding of a particular topic. Teachers can, however, create conditions that encourage students to use language to take control of their learning and make their own sense of what happens in the classroom" (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1991). When students read and then talk about what they read with other students and the teacher in the classroom, students start to construct authentic knowledge and build self-confidence and change their identity. Since "[l]anguage develops through the active engagement of the learners ... [and] language learning takes place through interactions in meaningful events .... [it] develops through interaction and the joint construction of meaning" (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994).

Transformation spaces, such as the one describe above, can be created in a multitude of ways; however, one of the most popular and common ways in which they are being access are through book clubs.

If children are to be able to take part in dialogue, they must see others' needs for information; this is learning they can accomplish only through dialogue, and only with the help of adults who understand their difficulties. Adults can help children turn back to consider what they know that is relevant and make a selection to communicate to the others. Children's skills of communication are developed through talk with others in which they are helped alternatively to project into others' needs for information and to reflect on the relevant knowledge they hold (Parker & Davis, Developing Literacy: Young Children's Use of Language, 1983, p. 62-63)

According to Parker & Davis (1983), there is a demand of making children feel that adults around them need information for them to create the dialogue. If we apply this in the classrooms through implementing a book club, we can establish continuous
dialogue. When adults, the teachers in this case, join the students in the book club and initiate the feeling of equality between them and their students and establish that atmosphere where the students feel that those teachers need information or students' opinion regarding the text they read. The students will feel they are in an inviting environment where their contribution is necessary and significant. This sharing of information will build a community of learning where there be a continuous authentic dialogue.

**D. Reading and Writing as Social Acts Facilitated by Book Clubs**

All over the world, many scholars published different articles discussing the positive effectiveness of using book clubs in learning environments. Some of the book clubs involve teachers while others involve both teachers and students (Kooy, 2006). A book club is a means to creating a community amongst people that otherwise may not have reason to connect or dialogue. It has implications for the classroom as well as educational practices that should not be ignored.

Recent studies demonstrate that book clubs are an excellent way to establish community in classrooms (Polleck, 2010). When students have input into what they will be learning and discussing, their level of engagement and responsibility is greatly increased which, in turn, increases their performance in the final or culminating task (Fall & Webb, 2000). Book clubs allow students to engage in authentic dialogue, share ideas, and create knowledge individually and communally that otherwise would not exist (Kong & Fitch, 2002) (Fall & Webb, 2000).

Several articles emphasize the positive outcomes of establishing a book club in schools. It is usually teachers who start book clubs and when students see their
teachers participating in the book clubs, they start to express their desire to be involved in those book clubs.

When some students suddenly saw their teachers reading the same books that they chose to read in their independent reading, they asked to become involved in the faculty book clubs. Therefore, we expanded our reading community to include three or four students each week. It was amazing to see seventh graders engaged in serious literary discussions with their teachers and administrators alongside a college professor and his students (George, 2000, p. 7).

Several articles focus on the relationship between book clubs in schools and improve student literacy skill. Frequently, teachers question "how can we teach all children to read?" Scholars investigate this issue and have attempted to provide different solutions such as guided reading, literature-based instruction and much more; however, it is not easy to develop students' literacy skills. Reading books is not enough for student to be developed, as they need more than just reading. Students need to discuss and share what they read with each other. Moreover, they need to write and reflect on their readings. From this fact, the idea of establishing book clubs as a way of building communities of learners and enhancing students' performance began to take place in schools as a formal setting. According to Raphael, Florio-Ruane, and George, the dilemma that teachers currently face is how to engage a diverse number of readers in meaningful activities around age-appropriate text, while also providing instruction appropriate to each student's individual need (2001). "Our goal in designing the Book Club Plus framework was to manage this dilemma (Lampert, 1985) so that all youngsters would learn to read with teacher support at their instructional level, and could practice comprehension skills and strategies in conversation and writing in response to age-appropriate literature". It has been proved that the interaction between students and their teachers in book clubs is useful. "By means of students' interactions
with their teachers, their thinking again goes public, and they have the opportunity to hear the language of literacy and learning. In these interactions, learners use language to achieve collective and personal goals” (Raphael T. E., Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty, & Highfield, 2001).

Community building activities, such as a book club, allow its participants to feel included in an entity that is larger from themselves, help them explore their own identity which is constantly fluctuating, and engage in meaningful conversations not simply about the book, but about other matters of importance as well (Broughton, 2002). Book clubs are simply one form of a community of learners which aims at establishing a safe place where students can take risks, grow and mature, and grapple with difficult, frustrating, or at times graphic concepts. In other words, a community of learning is a space in which students can create authentic knowledge and understanding that simply cannot be duplicated (Kaagan & Headley, 2010).

According to Feldman, a community of learning aims:

> to strike a balance between individuality and social connectedness... [it attempts to] see the essential role that relationship, participation, reciprocity, membership, and collaboration must play in... [order] to guide us (Feldman, 2000, p. x)

In other words, it is a group of individuals whom are connected through their participation, reciprocity, membership and collaboration in the group to co-construct and co-create knowledge. It is a place where students can “appreciate accumulated knowing, reflect ... positively on its contribution and ... undo [students’] psyche and [their] identity” (Macdonald, 2002). Essentially, it is a space where students feel connected to one another for various reasons and work collaboratively to learn. Students gain knowledge as the collective gains knowledge and this collective is
improved every time an individual improves; it is a symbiotic relationship. A community of learning can be created through various means; however, the focus in this study lies primarily with book clubs and how they are established and used to create a community of learning and those affects accompanied by it.

Research published in the area of book clubs does not only discuss the positive outcomes of book clubs on students’ literacy; they have been extended to describe how those book clubs help the participants knowing about different cultures and identity. "[N]arrative plays a central role in understanding and in sharing our understandings with others" (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001), "rather than evidencing a lack of rigorous reading or deep comprehension of text, this narrative response to text can be seen as a powerful form of reading, in which difficult ideas like culture are explored by way of literary imagination" (Florio-Ruane, 2001)

Some educators targeting low achieving students try to enhance student performance through engagement in book clubs. "[A]ll the members of the network were interested in re-engaging low achievers through authentic interactions with literature, and most of us particularly intrigued by the idea of having our students participate in book clubs, using and adapting the book club program" (Raphael T. E., Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty, & Highfield, 2001). Some research discusses difficulties that struggling readers endure in current classrooms such as the lack of opportunity for them to talk with peers about each book they read and the ideas the book contains. "It is difficult in that setting, if not impossible, for low-achieving readers to join or for the teacher to create a functioning community of learners" (Raphael T. E., Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty, & Highfield, 2001). However, some studies show that building
communities of learners could enhance the students academic achievement. Moreover, those communities build relationships among students, as they start to speak about the book they read and relate to their experiences as well as speak about their cultures.

Changing in learning and finding alternatives to the traditional ways of teaching literacy lead to change in identity and relationships. Students reidentify themselves and build a community with others. The relationship between them and reading and writing will eventually change. Instead of students identifying themselves as non-readers and non-writers, they will begin to believe in their ability to read and write as well as enjoy practicing those skills.

E. Communities of Learning and Authentic Dialogue

According to Alvermann & Phelps, 2002, "creating a favourable learning environment in which students learn to respect and listen to each other is without doubt much easier to write about than to do (p. 68)." This favourable learning environment wouldn’t be built without that connection between the students and their teachers when they feel that they are all like one family. Moreover, when they feel that they can express their opinions with respect to others.

These communities of learning, as discussed above, allow for authentic and genuine dialogue which results in “statistically significant positive changes in attitudes, feelings and behaviours” (Dessel, 2010). This claim is supported by “[q]ualitative data analysis [which] confirmed positive changes as a result of dialogue participation” (Dessel, 2010). Authentic dialogue and learning not only influence positive changes in regards to attitudes about school, it can specifically and positively influence a students’ attitude towards reading and writing when those discussions are extended to include or focus on
these topics respectively. According to Maurer, when permitted to engage in
corresponding, “children could meet and construct understanding” (Maurer, 2010), of any
topic they chose and encountered in their daily lives. It is the collaborative dialogue that
lead to this authentic learning and conceptual understanding of an idea, not the specific
activity that students are asked to complete (Maurer, 2010).

Recent research shows, as demonstrated above, that authentic dialogue between
and amongst students is imperative to their cognitive abilities, critical thinking, and
sound, conceptual understandings (Polleck, 2010) (Maurer, 2010) (Ruzich & Canan,
2010). As book clubs create a space in which authentic dialogue can take place, they
are a vital resource that can be used in our classrooms and in practice to induce
learning within and around our students. This research then comments on how these
dialogues can impact student performance in and outside of the classroom.

Unfortunately, most of the evidence is anecdotal and inferred; data is not provided to
support these claims or what the researchers used to measure this change was absent.

In reading and writing, there are numerous articles to specifically address concerns of
under-performing students. Most of the research indicates that students have significant
gaps of knowledge and speculate why these gaps exist (e.g., poor attendance, lack of
support at home or at school, disengagement), the research does not investigate the
cause between self-perception and academic performance. Why is it that many
students believe they cannot read or write? Why do they not see themselves as poets
and authors?

**F. Identity**
According to research regarding identity and learning, students are more engaged and prepared to learn when they feel they are represented in what is being studied in school; when their work reflects their lives, interests, and realities (Ligorio, 2010). This research discusses the link between self perception and academic performance on an overall level but does not specifically investigate the influence it has on literacy.

In addition, much research has been conducted on the importance of having a solid understanding and knowledge base in literacy (Raphael T. E., Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty, & Highfield, 2001) (Beers, 2003) (Bloom & Egan-Robertson, 1993) (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990) (Christie & Derewianka, 2010) (Ehri & Wilce, 1985) (Kweon & Kim, 2008) (Petrosky, 1982). In today’s social and economical climate, it is imperative that our students are literate in all forms of text, in all areas such as reading, writing, and oral abilities (Giroux, 1992).

But, what happens when the reading and writing learning continuums are interrupted? What happens to these students? Arguably, they end up being labelled as under-performing students. This label is provided to them by teachers in a myriad of ways such as in their grades and through the way they speak and talk to them. This is what happened to the 4 girls who entered my classroom this summer. Before arriving in my classroom, they had been labelled as under-performing and under-achieving literacy students. This was reflected in the grades that appeared on their report cards as well as in their attitudes and behaviours. Many of the students stated that they did not know how to read or write or that they were unable to do these tasks. This is not an unusual attitude for students who enter summer school as I had experienced similar encounters in my previous year teaching the course. What does a teacher, whose interest and
knowledge area is in a totally different subject, do when presented with such students
and such attitudes?

III. What the Research Tells Us To Do

You begin to unpack and unlearn with the students and experience what it is they are
feeling, how they are feeling, and why they are feeling this way in particular. Most
alarming from this process is that most of these students had similar experiences and
feelings yet all of them attended different schools with different teachers in different
spaces. Thus, it leads me to believe that there is a systemic problem that exists in our
system. I then began to investigate at which stage on the continuum where these
students’ learning interrupted and created plans according to this. Essentially, current
research on reading, writing, dialogue, book clubs, and communities of learning guided
the course of actions taken after the students made the decision to learn.

What is different about this research is that it indicates several problems: systemic
problems that exist in our current educational systems and in our classrooms and
problems where students do not develop identically with the reading, writing, oral
communication, and thinking continuums. This research helps provide some insights on
how to address those students who currently sit outside of recent literature and
knowledge on reading and writing and are not being reflected in these studies. Why do
some students feel disconnected from reading and writing and when does this
disconnect begin? What we can do to help these students learn, as well as the
processes and actions that provided spaces for these students to learn, is the primary
focus of this study, which current research is and has been neglecting. Also, we need to
address how to overturn this perception and discuss strategies that will help teachers move forward with these students in our classrooms immediately.

While current literature is beginning to discuss the effectiveness of communities of learning, it does not provide context for how teachers can establish a community within the context of their classroom, the influence and capacity the community has on student learning, how authentic dialogue and learning affect critical thinking, and the value of co-constructed knowledge and its role and importance in the classroom.
Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework and Methodology - Situating the Study

I. Research

A. Goals and Objectives

The purpose of this ethnomethodology study that combines narrative and phenomenology approaches is to describe the lived experiences of four female Grade 7 students from the Toronto District School Board who volunteered for the study. At this stage of the research, we have identified some important aspects that have implications for teaching literacy in the classroom. These aspects involve rethinking the traditional methods of teaching for reading and writing, encouraging social interactions among students, and using a book club as a tool of learning.

Two goals will be accomplished by the end of this research. Firstly, the lived experiences of students who are under-performing in literacy or who are failing in traditionally taught schools will be critically explored providing a better understanding, from the students' perspective, as to why this phenomenon is occurring. Secondly, some important ideas will be presented to enhance the quality of teaching literacy in classrooms. Intellectually, this study will add knowledge to the current literature of literacy.

B. Key Words
Grade 7, self-identity, reading, writing, literacy as a social act, academic performance, book club, low achievement, summer school, learning community, academic performance, learning
**C. Rationale**

This research was conducted to determine the implications of students’ self-identification upon academic performance and social well-being. We attempted to investigate how students’ negative or low self-perception, that is what they think and believe; namely, that they are unable to read and write fluently, and how this impacts their attitudes towards school, academic grades, and overall performance. The study attempts to take into account the multiple, complex variables and events that assist in the development of these students’ negative perceptions including, but not limited to, the schooling process. We investigated how, through the use of a book club, attitudes and skills can be altered or improved and what the impact of this changed attitude may be.

To answer these research questions, I conducted a small group book study. The participants comprised of 4 female students in Grade 7 who volunteered for the book club. In this qualitative study, we took observational notes as well as student samples in order to measure changes or growth in the students. The participants completed a final survey regarding the structure and format of the book club as well as they were given the opportunity to provide on-going feedback to help direct the study itself to meet their academic and social needs. Data collected through observation was done so electronically and each student was provided a pseudonym as to protect their identity. Each participant willingly volunteered for the study and had signed consent forms from their parents.

**II. Population and Sampling**

**A. Participants**
In order to understand the reason behind students’ poor or low-self perception and how this can be altered to improve student performance, students in a remedial summer school course were asked to participate in this study. Four female students out of twenty Grade 7 students from the Toronto District School Board volunteered to participate. The students who participated in the book club chose to read ‘Three Cups of Tea’ by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. Each student was provided a pseudonym to protect their identity. Although no monetary benefit was provided, students were given a copy of the book they chose for the study regardless of their completion in the study. Informed consent was provided and no harm for the students or we was identified.

**B. Specific Participants’ Pseudonyms**

1. **Rebecca**

   Rebecca is a reserved student. She volunteered for the study as she was interested in finding out more about the context of Dr. Mortenson and how he accomplished so much so easily. She found him to be a fascinating individual. She is willing to speak during small and large group instructions but rarely challenges peers’ ideas or defends her ideas when challenged by others. In writing, she tends to be very brief and has stated that she does not enjoy writing activities. Her writing scores are below the academic standard as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s expectations.

2. **Ashley**

   Ashley is a very quiet student who rarely if ever shares ideas orally during classroom or small group conversations. She has stated that she feels she has very little to contribute to these discussions and that her ideas often are not ready to be shared or
are not worthy of being said. She also does not enjoy writing activities and her reading and oral communication scores are below the academic standard as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s expectations.

3. Leslie

Leslie is an upbeat student who will share her ideas in group discussions. She appears very artistic and prefers to show her understanding in various ways different than that expected of her such as through visual arts instead of writing. She does not mind reading according to her initial response when asked but feels as though she is not a strong reader. Her oral communication grades are approaching the academic standard as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s expectations but her reading and writing scores are at least one full grade below.

4. Samantha

Samantha is a very sensitive individual often seeking out how others are feeling and inquiring the reasons behind their feelings. She is easily affected by the mood of others around. She reads, according to her, because she has to but does not find reading to be an enjoyable activity. Her oral communication grades are approaching the academic standard as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s expectations but her reading and writing scores are at least one full grade below.

III. Research

A. Research Approach

I will use an ethnomethodological approach to collect and analyze data.
B. Research Design

A qualitative approach is appropriate as it helps us collect specific information in multiple modes that is extremely difficult to measure in quantitative approaches; information that is useful and purposeful when closely examined. Its focus is on verbal or holistic information rather than numerical data or value. It is this precise qualitative information that will allow us to better understand how and why students think in a particular way so that they can improve the teacher practices in schools.

Researchers use a combined methodological approach to collect and analyse the data from this study. An ethnomethodological approach, or an approach combining both phenomenological and narrative, were used in order to ensure accuracy and reliability of the data collected. Narrative methodology is defined as:

an interpretive approach in the social sciences and involves using storytelling methodology. The story becomes an object of study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives. Researchers capture the informant’s story through ethnographic techniques such as observation and interviews. This method is said to be well suited to study subjectivity and the influence of culture and identity on the human condition. It allows us to include the students’ lived experiences and histories as evidence for how they have become the person they are at the time of the study as well as some information as to why their perceptions are the way they are (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003, p. 3)

Phenomenology is defined by Babbie as a way of “making sense out of the informants’ perceptions of the world” by studying their stories, statements or writing (Babbie, 2001). It views a variety of different phenomenon that happens or exists simultaneously, how they are explained by the subject experiencing them, and attempts to understand if and how they are related and, if so, in what capacity. By combining these approaches, or using ethnomethodology, we attempted to induce the volunteers’ stories regarding
their education and their current state or place within the formal school setting and how they perceive themselves.

**C. Paradigms and Worldviews**

A paradigm or worldview is “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). Creswell listed four worldviews that inform qualitative research and affect the research practice. We see Social Constructivism as our informing theoretical framework that guides this research. In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2007). Social Constructivism focuses on individuals’ learning that occurs as a result of a group socializing. This is important for our study as we are investigating how reading and writing as social acts can affect individuals’ learning. Creswell observed: “the goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (p. 20). The participants’ vision and analysis of the situation they experience really matters to us. The participants’ beliefs regarding the traditional ways of teaching literacy and how it impacts their performance and eventually their self-identity as non-readers and non-writers highlight the situation they are living in. How each student behaves and performs among the learning group in a school setting is questionable.

As researchers, our inquiry is about the impact of using a book club on students’ literacy learning which gradually develops into a meaningful method to assist teachers in teaching literacy effectively in the classroom. Constructivist researchers “often address the “processes” of interaction among individuals” (Creswell, 2007). As constructivists focus on the context the participants live in, they seek to know the historical and cultural background of the participants. We in this study know a great deal
of the participants’ background, prior knowledge, and level of performance. We, in this worldview, interpret the meaning of the experience according to their personal, historical, and cultural background. They are positioned in a manner to make sense of the others’ opinions and different perspectives that shape their vision to the world they live in and construct their knowledge.

IV. Ethics

A. Scope and Limitations

As this study required the human participants, specifically remedial students, specific ethical issues needed to be addressed. The consideration of these ethical issues was necessary for the purpose of ensuring the privacy as well as the safety of the participants. Significant ethical issues were considered in the research process included consent and confidentiality. In order to secure the consent of the selected students, we relayed all important details of the study, including its aim and purpose to both the participants and their parents. Given the age of the students, none of the participants were 18 and therefore unable to provide informed consent, it was necessary to request their parents’ permission prior to conducting the research. By explaining these important details, the students and their subsequent parents were able to understand the importance of their role in the completion of the research. Prior to beginning the study, the students were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. With this, the students were not forced to participate in the study. They were also informed that if they chose not to continue participation, they would still be able to keep the complimentary copy of the book provided to them at the beginning of the study. The confidentiality of the students was also ensured by not
disclosing their names or personal information in the research. Only relevant details that aided in answering the research questions were included.

V. Analysis Plan

A. Conceptual Framework

“Critical Epistemology” theory depends on five important aspects: first, including knowledge about what it means to students to be labelled ‘low achiever’ or ‘under-performing’ in school. This knowledge and experience helps researchers to understand the meaning that is shared among participants and how this affects their self-identification and academic performance. Second, trustworthiness is one of the main keys in this theory. This trustworthiness is not only between I and the participants, it extends to be among the participants themselves. Third, having strong desire to change the traditional ways of teaching literacy for improved achievement should be one of the characteristics of the participants in this study. Fourth, the main goal of this study should be mainly about providing ways to improve teaching literacy in classroom and rethink the traditional methods of teaching. Finally, telling the stories that the students experienced in their learning is important for assessing the scope and depth of the problem.

B. Phenomenological Approach

“A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007). We describe the lived experience of four female Grade 7 students from the Toronto District School Board. What these participants have in common is the
experience of summer school. The reason for enrolling in the summer school program provides them a shared phenomenon: “under-performing” in schools. We use hermeneutical phenomenology as they highlight the phenomenon at the beginning, then reflect on main themes that compose the nature of the highlighted lived experience. After that, we create a clear description of the phenomenon and focus not only on describing the essence of the lived experience, but the interpretive the meaning of this experience as well. In interviewing the participants, we will ask open-ended questions that will help gather data that leads to a rich, textual description (what participants experienced) as well as structural description (how they experienced it). This combination of two descriptions will represent the essence of the experience.

C. Concept Map

The following concept map identifies the relationships between the proposed research variables from using a book club as a learning tool, building a learning community, positive outcomes, enhancing the students’ academic performance, and the importance of self-identification in identifying the effectiveness and benefits of thinking of literacy as social acts.

There is a positive, causal relationship between using a book club as a learning tool and building a learning community. If teachers use a book club as a tool of learning, their chances of building a learning community will be increased.
Also, there is a positive, causal relationship between building a learning community and improving literacy. If the students have a learning community in the classrooms, the positive outcomes in the classroom and the ability for the students to learn, increases.

Another variable that has a positive, casual relationship with positive outcomes and enhances students’ ability to learn is self-identification. If there are positive outcomes in the classes and if the ability of students to learn is increasing, the students will not be labelled as under-performing which, in turn, affects their self-identification.

VI. Data
A. Data Collection
Observation and interviews will be the main methods in collecting data. From these data collecting methods, we will also take extensive field notes upon which we will refer to later in our data analysis. We will interview four grade 7 girls who went to summer school. The data we are planning to collect focus primarily on the experience of under-performing or low achieving students. It will address our research questions regarding
the traditional ways of teaching literacy in classrooms, the way the students learn, the
obstacles they face, and the alternative that could help improve literacy, like the book
club as a tool of learning. Through obtaining different responses from those students,
we will be able to divide the data into themes and eventually into categories. The data
will include stories that students will share about their experiences as well as knowledge
regarding their enrolment in the summer school course. We are anticipating that some
sub questions will be asked according to the different responses provided from
students; however, they will be certain that even these sub questions will be related to
their research questions and will assist them in their collection of rich data.

The second method for collecting data will be through observation. We believe that
observation and taking notes about the students’ actions while they are in the book club
socializing and learning cooperatively is necessary and will assist them in their
understanding of the students’ perceptions, attitudes, and feelings about themselves,
their work, and their environment. The aim in observing the participants during the book
club is to notice any differences or changes in their performance and self-confidence
between the first last meetings. We will start by reading the written survey responses
that the students completed at the beginning and end of the book club several times to
get an overall impression of them. Then we will analyze the data for significant
statements and meanings. After that, the most important related phrases will be
highlighted prior to reviewing the interviews. The data will then be arranged into different
themes or categories. Following this, we will write a report to describe the ‘essence’ of
the experience since the description, either textural or structural, is necessary in the
phenomenology approach which is one of the approaches we are using in this study.
The report will describe the essence of the lived experience in details; for example, the obstacles those students faced and the way they affected their self-identification and gradually their academic performance. In other words, what did those students experience in the formal academic or learning setting? How did the ‘under-performing student’ label affect their identity? We will raise open-ended questions at the end of the research to open new horizons for people who are in authority in education system to re-think and critically reflect on the importance of changing the current traditional teaching practices regarding literacy to improve students’ academic performance. As modelled in the study, we strongly believe that the first, essential step is to build a community of learning. We want the students to find an adequate, supportive, and helpful learning environment. Thus, their aim is to conduct research to encourage change that will improve the lives of these students. They believe that this research will be an essential component of literacy teaching and learning for current practice and that it will encourage others to reform school policies to reflect this new knowledge and create change in current language practices in classrooms.

B. Data Analysis

For confidentiality purposes and for benefits, we will transcribe the interviews. During the transcribing, we will be focusing on the meaning and the verbal ticks that participants used in the interviews. Reflexivity will be an important aspect considered by us as we will be required to be reflexive throughout the study. As researchers, it will be important to state clearly what is thought about the participants’ responses and what is understood from their experiences. The participants’ voices should be considered and
their different perspectives should be delivered clearly to the readers. As researchers, we will be careful in analyzing the data and state any biases wherever this occurs.

The study will commence by us describing our own experiences as students learning literacy, why we want to explore this topic and how we became interested to study this experience. Then, we will review the section in the field notes where we have previously documented our own beliefs and ideas during the interview time. This will serve two purposes; it will assist us in keeping our personal experiences aside and focus more on the participants’ experiences in the study. It will also help to avoid our bias as researchers. Following this, a list of significant statements we will need to be developed to determine in the interview how the participants feel regarding being labelled as under-performing students who need to go to summer school. This will allow us to develop a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. Participants’ significant statements will then be categorized into meaningful themes so that we can develop the textural description of what participants in the study experienced as students by using verbatim quotations. Next, we will begin writing the structural description; in this section, how those students were learning literacy in classes and how this affected their academic performance, will be detailed and explained. We will write verbatim if and how those students’ self-identification was affected by labelling them as under-performing. Then we will describe the book club experience and what those students think about it. Finally, a composite description of the students’ experience will be written which will present the essence of being an under-performing student. In addition, the common meaning of labelling students as defined by them will be provided. Within the data analysis, we will attempt to broaden the depth of our understanding by using the thick
description in the analysis. Any charts, tables, sketches, or visual presentation methods that will assist in presenting our findings will be included.

C. Validity and Reliability

One of the methods that we will use for validity is member checking. After the verbatim transcribing, each participant will be given a copy of the interview to verify it. The participant will be able to review the transcription for any errors or omissions or to remove any statement that she does not want to be included in the interview. Thick description will be one of the ways that we will use for validity. We will describe in detail what was observed in the book club meetings because thick description will help the readers imagine the scenario and the way the book club was running by the students and researchers.

In qualitative research, it is very important to make sure of the validity of the research. For the qualitative research especially the phenomenological approach, it is hard to bias the findings because of the way of using the sample. In a phenomenology study, the sample has to be chosen purposely because we want to explore the common lived experience. This means, as researchers, it is necessary to select the population that has already experienced this phenomenon. Otherwise, it will be impossible to find what the research is attempting to explore and understand. To demonstrate the integrity and competence of this study, there are steps that we will follow in to make the findings valid and reliable. We will avoid the rigor by assessing the truth and consistency of the findings. To first reach the trustworthiness in this study, we will assess the credibility, which is the validation of issues between the participants and us throughout the observation and engagements. To ensure credibility, the findings will be submitted to
the participants and their parents upon completion of the research to confirm that the message they would like to deliver is clearly stated. In addition, all steps will be taken to make certain that the participants thoroughly understood all questions. The second process to achieve trustworthiness throughout is dependability. In this step, we will make sure that the research process is logical and clearly documented. People will be assigned to audit and examine the data by reviewing the documentation to see if it matches with the tape recording. The final process is to assess the authenticity. As researchers, it is important to reflect the different and various realities and discuss the participants’ experience. The following steps will help achieve authenticity:

- Create clear vision and thinking from assumptions, prior knowledge, and beliefs system
- Adopt a perspective of unknowing by listening with a third ear
- Write any beliefs, assumptions, preconceptions, expectations and other information that may impair hearing ability
- Practice listening and document the participant’s findings without interruption

As researchers, we believe that to reach the authenticity we have to interact unknowingly about others’ lives.

**D. Confidentiality**

In the consent form, we will mention that the information we collect is confidential including names, identifying information, or any other piece of information that may refer to the participant’s identity. Moreover, participants will be informed that, for these confidential purposes, transcriptions will be done by the researchers. No other person besides the researchers and our supervisor(s) will hear the tape. Moreover, the participants will be informed that their real names, names of schools, or where their meetings took place, will not be disclosed. We believe that part of the confidentiality is
to inform the participants that after conducting the research, the data will be stored in a secure place for three years and then destroyed. To maintain the human subject in our study, we will explain that the participants have the right to: withdraw from the study at any time, the purpose of the study, how it will be conducted, any risks (no risks have been identified in this study), how consent will be obtained (prior to the first interview their parents must sign a consent form following this, if an interview is needed, consent will obtained verbally), and reassure the participants that their information will be confidential and their personal data will not be accessed. We will clarify with the participants that their focus is to define the meaning of being labelled as students who are under-performing or under-achieving in schools and how this will add to the knowledge and understanding of teaching literacy.
Chapter Four: Interpreting the Results

This chapter presents the findings of the data gathered from the study examining the literacy experiences of four Grade 8, under-performing students in a summer school course.

I. Context of the Study

A. In the Beginning

This study developed organically. As a teacher, I felt uncertain, even lost, in looking for a way to help the grade 7 and 8 students succeed in literacy. While this was my second year teaching the summer school literacy program, and I had some ideas on what needed to be accomplished and how to approach this but, being a new teacher in general, I still felt I was lacking a great deal of knowledge and theoretical framework to guide my instruction. I knew I needed support as the program only provided time for four weeks of intense and explicit instruction; instruction that I believe was not being provided to these students during their regular school days.

B. Starting the Book Club

After the first day of class, I spoke with Dalia regarding my concerns about the students and my approach to teaching and learning for the class. At the time, both Dalia and I were participating in a book club for a University course. We spoke to great ends about different activities I could attempt in the classroom in order to improve these students literacy abilities. Eventually, we decided to initiate a book club, provided there was sufficient interest from the students in the class.

Over the next few following days, I sought out an opportunity to introduce the idea of a book club. I wanted it to seem natural in conversation and not forced but I also wanted
it to seem exciting. The class had already dove head first into the multitude of literacy activities based on our anchor text selected, ‘Listen to the Wind‘ a picture book about one man’s journey and discovery of Pakistan by Greg Mortenson and Susan Roth. The students seemed interested in the book and asked questions that went beyond the parameters of the book. Their questions often began with why and how, which, to me, implied that these students were not only engaged, but obviously capable of ‘higher level thinking’. So why is it that they are in this remedial literacy class if they are able to question texts with such insight and knowledge? This seemed an appropriate time to introduce a book club, its purpose and the format I hypothesized, would work best for this class.

I explained to the students that I was participating in a book club in my university class. One of its purposes was to use the book club format as a place to dialogue with people regarding the text and to share ideas, hear ideas from other people, and, most importantly, to collaboratively create new knowledge.

I shared information I learned about the book I was reading at the time as well as my personal fears about the book club. I spoke honestly and bluntly about aspects of participation and then posed the question: ‘If we had a book club in this class, who would like to participate? Why? And what would your book club look like?’ Students overwhelmingly supported the idea of the book club and shared ideas on how they thought the book club would best operate. The students identified some qualities they believed were important to establishing a book club in a classroom; however, some of the qualities necessary to achieve a successful book club were discovered along the way and after the fact. Prior to starting the book club, students believed, in order from
most to least popular, that choice, open-ended structure, and collectively established rules and routines were necessary to form a book club that would be effective and help them improve their literacy skills.

Thus, a book club consisting of four Grade 8, female volunteers emerged. Three additional volunteers withdrew as they felt unable to commit to the study. Sharwinder stated she feared participating as she did not know anyone in the group outside of school. All participants were unfamiliar with each other, except for being in a class that had begun meeting four days earlier.

The book club lasted for 4 weeks and met approximately every week, 1 hour or 30 minutes prior to the beginning of class. This schedule was discussed and created by the members of the book club exclusively with Dalia and me acting as facilitators of the discussion. We provided light refreshments for the participants.

At the first meeting, a few guidelines were discussed and more were created by the group to ensure everyone felt safe in the book club. Namely, everyone needed to be respectful of other members and that all responses from all participants should be listened to and that ‘put-downs’ would not be tolerated. All participants agreed. In addition, everyone was reminded that they had the right to pass on a question or not participate in the discussion if they chose not to. They could withdraw from the study at any point entirely and their ideas, responses, or decisions would have no impact on their summer school course grade. The girls decided that they would prefer no set timeline in which they could read the chapters of the book but instead, agreed to have the book read in totality by the third meeting or approximately for the third week of the book club. Questions for the book as a whole were provided based on the participants
request; however, these were by no means mandatory. The girls had the choice whether or not they wanted to respond to those questions or not individually. The questions were simply a guideline or framework which could promote thinking and the participants were encouraged to think and share their own ideas and perspectives freely. Given the fact that these students struggle with literacy, consideration was given to these students to reduce the amount of reading and writing they were asked to do. Thus, it was conveyed several times over the course of the book club that there was no pressure to write down responses. Instead, the book club was a means to achieve higher level thinking in a literacy context through conversation. The final conversation that needed to take place prior to beginning the book club was regarding the text; which text should be used and how would it be selected?

Since all participants believed that choice was extremely important, they wanted to choose a book collectively. As a result, the girls collectively selected the extension of the picture book ‘Listen to the Wind’ studied in their summer literacy course, ‘Three Cups of Tea’ by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. Given the length and vocabulary of the text, as well as the instructional reading level generally suggested to read such a text, it was a big concern for both Dalia and I for the girls to choose this book. Nonetheless, the girls were adamant about reading this book insisting that they could and would read this book.

I purchased a copy of ‘Three Cups of Tea’ for all the participants and distributed them the following day of school so that the girls could begin their reading. The data collected includes voluntary samples of writing the girls completed during and outside the club.
meetings, tape-recorded interviews, and anecdotal notes from their class and book club participation.

**C. Dalia Alghamdi**

Dalia plays a significant role in this research. Originally from Saudi Arabia, Dalia is currently, like me, completing an M.A. in Education. We met several months earlier in a graduate course on curriculum and again, later, in a course on communities of learning. During the first course, Dalia observed in my Grade 2 class as an introduction to Canadian schooling and to begin to familiarize herself with the educational processes. While there, she began participating in the class, conducting a small research project with the children reading and responding to the book, *Why?*, a wordless picture book that led to rich discourse – both written and oral.

Later, we coincidentally registered in another class in the summer. Simultaneously, I was teaching summer school for underperforming Grade 8 students in literacy. Realizing that I encountered the dilemma of conflicting approaches to learning, literacy and curriculum, I approached Dalia about what to do with my summer school students. She immediately offered support and suggestions and took it upon herself to volunteer in my class in order to meet and get to know the students and collaboratively begin to imagine what could be done in such a short period of time to improve their literacy skills. Together, we worked co-constructed new pedagogical knowledge on how to establish a learning community, a social context (book club) that would build the skills and knowledge (improve the literacy skills) of the girls in the course.

We prepared to introduce the book. Jointly, she facilitated discussions and helped the group probe deeper into the text. As will be discussed later, this book club eventually
develops into a much larger project that both Dalia and I create collectively. The book club, as it turns out, proves to be a learning experience for both the students who participated in it as well as for Dalia and I. Following the book club, both Dalia and I transferred from the Master’s of Education program to the Master’s of Arts program to develop the research and probe more deeply into the transformational experiences with the book club experience and members.

Our particular and unique histories and cultures provided opportunities to stage the transformational experiences both for the girls in the book club and for ourselves. Unexpectedly, through working together, Dalia and I acted as a model for the girls in the book club of how to work collaboratively and how to co-construct knowledge. In addition, in our personal shifts in knowledge, teaching, and self-perceptions, we began to use our own cultural positions and knowledge to understand both the ways the students engaged in the process of change and examine our changes in identity.

**D. Data Collection**

The book club study was framed narratively using semi-structured interviews to create dialogue and new narratives. Group interviews, completed as a book club, were initially conducted where students were able to share and discuss their ideas of the book. During these meetings, field notes were recorded to observe participant responses and behaviours. Following the book club meetings and the students’ adjustment and integration back into their regular classrooms, additional semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews were conducted to see if any academic or social improvements that happened from the book club transferred to their regular day schooling. Participants were solicited on a volunteer basis. Following the collection of
data, students were immediately prescribed pseudonyms to protect their identities and to keep information confidential. After notes have been created and discussions transcribed, students were provided copies of them to review to ensure statements made accurately reflected their ideas and thoughts. At this point, they will have the option of removing any statements they do not wish to share. Following the interviews, collected data was categorized by themes (choice, structure, small community, large community, academic performance, social interaction and social performance, format, collective establishment, collective and collaborative learning, identity, and trust and comfort level) and sorted for any commonalities that help address the research questions. The remaining portion of this chapter will be dedicated to using the findings to address how the researchers attempted to answer the following questions:

1) How does a community of learning, in the form of a book club, impact the small and large community of individual learning development?

2) What impact does a book club have on individual academic performance and social interactions?

3) What impact does a book club have on individual identity as readers, writers, and learners?

During the study, students were aware that they were being observed; however, they were not informed of the specific research questions. They were informed that the researchers were observing them and their interactions in order to see how they could improve literacy instruction in the classroom.

II. General Observations from the Book Club

A. Observations in the Book Club

Throughout the four weeks of the book club and some observations made in the remedial literacy class, students' behaviours and attitudes, specifically towards literacy,
changed considerably. At the beginning of the study, all of the participants replied to an oral survey that they were not strong readers or writers and that they had difficulty in both areas.

Rebecca: I don’t like writing because I don’t get good marks. My teachers always gives me a mark like a C’s and point out everything I did wrong. Then, the next time I fix those mistakes, they just point out other mistakes so like, what’s the point?

Leslie: I don’t like writing but I don’t mind reading. I just hate reading the stuff at school because it’s boring and stupid. It’s never about the stuff I wanna read and learn about.

Ashley: I read and write at school because I have to but I ain’t very good at it sometimes but sometimes I can be O.K.

Samantha: I would rather do something else [instead of reading or writing] cause it’s more fun. When I do [writing], I usually don’t get good marks. And I try to talk to my teacher cause I guess it’s important but they don’t really listen or care I guess.

Rebecca, Ashley, and Samantha stated that they do not enjoy reading and avoid it when possible. Leslie notes that she likes reading but only the books she selects. She also states that she reads books from similar genres that are often easy for her to read, implying that prior knowledge plays a significant role to reading this series of text.

By the end of the book club these attitudes change drastically. All the girls state they can see themselves as readers and that reading that their reading and writing improved.

Rebecca: To me, my overall impression of the book club was awesome. While we reading “Three Cups of Tea” we also did activities that I didn’t know what to do...but then I learnt it! Reading can kinda be interesting and fun!

Ashley: [The book club] is very fun and exciting! [It] gets everyone to share feelings about one book. You hear things (facts) from other, different lenses [so] you can change your thoughts about a topic if someone has very much impact on their point...It helps you participate [and read] more.
Samantha: I did enjoy this book club because [I] thought book clubs were boring at first because they always limit us from enjoying the book. It was never like this ... I enjoy reading.

The girls believe that the book club was successful and could be implemented in various academic and non-academic settings and specifically, that this would be a good medium for their teachers to use in the regular classroom as it promoted authentic thinking and dialogue about the text.

Rebecca: I would love to participate if this was in a regular classroom. A book club gives you more to learn. You learn more about the book and your classmates. You get to see many different perspectives about one think/piece of information.

Samantha: I would do this [in my regular classroom] because I learned I enjoy reading.

B. Observations Following the Book Club

The experience in the book club appears to have followed the students into their regular class as well.

Rebecca: I got a better understanding like what to do now but before I was kind of lost.

1. Community of Learning

How does a community of learning impact the small community of individual learning development? It appears that book clubs are an ideal tool for establishing a sense of belonging within a small group of people. It allows its participants to interact with each other on a regular basis while providing them a safe topic, the book, to discuss. In this study specifically, students began to develop personal relationships that can be witnessed in the small community of the book club, in the larger context of the class, and outside of the class. During a follow-up interview, both Rebecca and Ashley arrived together demonstrating their continued friendship that was formed during this book club.
Both girls were completing their grade 9 course selection for high school together. They also admitted that, although it was not a popular choice amongst their peers, they would be attending the same high school in the fall.

2. Increased Dialogue

Initially in the book club, very limited dialogue takes place. Students demonstrate passive qualities such as being shy and timid and appear apprehensive to comment on any topic or to offer ideas or answers to questions. Unless prompted, all of the girls speak very little during the first discussion. In addition, it is also observed that the girls are reluctant to disagree with a peer’s opinion, suggestion or idea. During our time in the book club; however, both Dalia and I noticed a change in climate amongst and between the students as well as ourselves.

During our first meeting, most of the talking taking place is by me, the facilitator. Eventually, I thought it would ask the girls if they would feel more comfortable to write down their ideas first in point form to see if that would help encourage them to speak and then regroup after a few minutes. In time, however, the girls were willing to talk and discuss possible guidelines for the book club.

Rebecca: [At first] I was really shy about expressing my ideas and disagreeing with others.

Ashley: [Regarding her initial experience in the group] I felt invisible in the group. At first, we didn’t really know anyone, it is just like we knew about five students and then when you like get to know them from the book club you like know who they are and their personality ... in recess we didn’t usually talk but when we started the book club, then we kind of knew each other and we started to talk about the book and then in recess time, we started like to talk to each other when we have free time.
3. Bonding and Interdependency

The girls, as well as Dalia and I, believe the book club greatly contributed to this bonding and forming of community and thus, it appears that it is an effective strategy for creating community amongst a small group of students.

By the end of the book club, the girls feel more comfortable participating in the discussions. Over the course of the book club, the girls begin to demonstrate higher levels of comfort with their group members as well as the researchers. This is noted in the way the girls sat, the frequency and duration in which they speak, the number of prompts required to initiate conversations, and through specific actions displayed. For example, in the beginning of the book club, all of the girls sat rigidly in the chairs. Both legs were on the floor and they appeared to be tense. All of the girls sat in an individual chair without any part of their body or clothing touching. By the end of the book club, the girls sit in very different positions. Often they can been seen sitting on desks or shelving units and are most often be found sitting in positions where they were touching each other either shoulders overlapping, playing with each others’ hair, or leaning on one another. During one discussion session in particular, Leslie continuously braided Samantha’s hair.

In addition, some of the girls mentioned that they now telephone each other outside of school and communicate regularly about the book as well as other areas of interest unrelated to the book club or school. At the end of one of class, Leslie approached me to ask permission to lend her book to another student in the class who did not participate in the book club. I reminded her that it was her book and she did not need permission for that. I also asked her how she intended to get the book back from her
since we only had a few days of school left. Leslie laughed and said that was not important; that even though they went to different schools during the year, they only lived a few blocks away from each other and they had plans to hang out during the remainder of their summer break. Ashley and Rebecca started sharing transportation to and from the book club together as they lived really close to each other. During our follow-up interview, these two arrived together and shared many examples in which they referred to one another. In other words, most of the girls developed meaningful relationships with one another the existed outside of the context of the book club but helped to create a sense of community within the book club. The relationship that the book club had on the girls was mutually symbiotic. It served as a means to establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships and these relationships assisted with the development and maintenance of the book club.

4. Impact on Members

Since it is apparent that book clubs are a way to establish community amongst a small group of people, the question still remains: how does it impact individual learning development? It is evident that book clubs can form relationships amongst its members. When relationships are formed, students feel there is less personal risk to themselves in sharing their ideas or opinions leading to authentic dialogue during the discussions. When a club’s members have reached the stage of authentic dialogue, student learning, measured by both the students’ perceptions and their academic performance (discussed later) improves. A book club has a positive impact on the small community and the individual learning development of its participants.
Rebecca: I got to see different points of views that I may not have thought about. The conversations were just great! I really learned a lot...Others [girls in the book club] have very brilliant ideas [to share and learn from].

Samantha: I enjoy reading [which was not her attitude prior to participating in the book club]... [It] made me think more and expand my knowledge. I learned [from the book club] that I love to be pushed out of my own limit and think until I faint.

Ashley: I got a better understanding of what to do now [in writing] but before I was kinda lost. Sometimes someone’s point that you disagree on can change your point as well...you hear things (facts) from other, different lenses.

5. Large Community

How does a community of learning impact the large community of individual learning development? A book club positively impacts the larger community of individual learning development as well.

a. Increased Dialogue

Through observations, it was also noticed that the book club members participate in class discussions more frequently after having joined the book club. It is not possible to attribute this solely to the book club itself; however, many of the girls state that by participating in this club, they feel more comfortable speaking about the book as they understood it more clearly.

Leslie: I got comfortable [speaking and interacting] around my classmates

b. Increased Level of Student Engagement in the Large Community

The remainder of the class community also showed interest in the club and the book. Often they would ask the researchers questions about the book and expected answers. Instead, the researchers referred all questions pertaining to the book to the book club members referring to them as the book experts. It was documented that this often led to rich, whole-class discussions not only about the book but about larger issues that all
students would then write about in a journal format. For example, Rebecca shared her ideas with the whole class regarding the point of view within the text “*Three Cups of Tea*”. She believed that it offered a unique and different perspective on the September 9/11 attacks. As a result, the class completed a journal topic on this subject at their request. Their responses were rich, mature and well-thought out. Thus, the book club indirectly has a positive influence on the larger classes’ discussions and activities and promotes thought and provokes authentic dialogue. The students engage in prolonged conversations about a book that they have never read and, based on this discussion, opt to write in their journals about it. It is important to note that the writing was a decision made by the class and facilitated by the teacher. I infer that the conversations and writing responses were drastically improved since the students were engaged with the topic. The students’ engagement level was increased as they had a choice in the conversation topic and they led the conversation themselves. According to Ashley, she believes that the book club provided her with the opportunity to find her voice.

Ashley: I got comfortable around my classmates. It helped me participate more in class.

c. Bonding and Interdependency

Towards the end of the course, two interesting events took place that support the idea that this book club also had a positive effect on the larger class community: 1) non-members stopped asking the teacher questions about the book and would direct their questions directly at the book club members, and 2) many of these students also became friends outside of the class. In one specific instance, a non-member asked a question about the book to another member and then said she wanted to read the book
herself and asked her if she could borrow it afterwards. They exchanged numbers and, according to the member, the student borrowed the book and is reading through it.

6. Academic Performance

What impact does a book club have on individual academic performance? Book clubs have a positive impact its participants’ academic performance.

a. Improved Grades

Prior to the book club beginning, all of the participants received a grade of C- (63% or less) or less in one or more literacy strands according to the Ontario Ministry of Education’s standards. In regards to these students, 3 out of the 4 (Ashley, Leslie, and Samantha) received a D or less in two out of the four literacy strands. All of the girls received one of their lowest qualifying grades in reading.

By the end of the book club, which coincided with the ending of the summer school course, all of the girls had approached or met the expectations in literacy for all strands. As the report cards for the literacy program vary from the standardized report card as no formal grades are provided, the results have been interpreted for comparison purposes. On the standard report card, students receive a letter grade of “R (less the 50% out of 100 possible percentage points), D (50-59%), C (60-69%), B (70-79%), or A (80% and above)”. The report card options for the remedial course are Below Expectations (interpreted to be 59% and under), Approaching Expectations (interpreted to be 60-69%) or Met Expectations (interpreted to be 70% or above). No participant received a grade of Below Expectations. Ashley, Leslie and Samantha received a mixed report card in the various literacy strands of Approaching Expectations and Met Expectations.
with several more of the latter appearing on their report. Rebecca received a report consisting entirely of Met Expectations.

Overall, all participants demonstrated an improvement in their academic grades. In comparison with their previous Term 2 report card evaluations, the most recently available information, this is a significant improvement as the average mark students received was approximately 60%. When compared to the summer school grade, which based on the interpretations of this study average to be 65%, this is a 5% overall increase in the participants grades. Although there are many reasons as to why this improvement may exist, anecdotal evidence supports the claim that the book club contributed to the increase in overall academic performance.

Following the book club, all of the girls returned to their regular schools for a new semester. According to the girls, their academic performance, as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s curriculum expectations, they were performing better than they had the year previous, before participating in the book club. Ashley stated that her grades had improved one entire grade level from scoring, on average, in the C range (60-69%) to scoring in the high B range (76-79%). All of the girls attribute this improvement to the strategies learned during their time in the book club. They were able to state several different strategies and techniques explicitly, such as organizing thoughts sequentially, using textual and schematic support for answers, and understanding and identifying the precise purpose and audience for the assignment prior to starting it, that assisted them in improving their grades. When asked to how they were able to improve their grades, some of the girls referred back to strategies learned in the book club.
Ashley: Organizing your stuff like if we’re doing an essay like have take like five minutes out and just like kind of writing everything down, like what you think would be on and then have it all organized before you start and then for I think just like if we are writing we use charts and the charts will give you a better understanding of what you are doing.

b. Improved Application and Consolidation of Learned Skills and Techniques

In addition to improved grades, the students also cited improved techniques and strategies for approaching academic literacy tasks or tasks that they were asked to regularly complete for school. For example, during one book club meeting, a disagreement arose between Rebecca and Ashley. Both participants had valid arguments and used textual and schematic information to support their details. They recognized and identified with the concept of selecting an argument and using factual evidence to support it in order to bolster its validity and ability to convince others of their point. This was a strategy taught explicitly to them through the text and in the discussions that they implemented with great success.

c. Improved Responses

In anecdotal observations made in the classroom, participants from the book club demonstrated a higher quality in their responses which reflect a high level of maturity and thinking as their responses are well formulated and thoughtful and add a mature layer to the whole-class conversation. During the later period of the book club, the girls participate more frequently in class conversations and demonstrate an improvement in their written responses submitted in class. All four of the girls credited this improvement directly to the book club and its format and structure. On discussing form and structure of the book club the girls had the following to say:

Rebecca: I’ve been in a book related activity but the teacher just mainly gave us questions to do and what to read up and fill. But, in this book club it was
different...my impression in awesome... In this book club, you got to read like you don’t have a limit but in other book clubs you have to read like specific chapters for each week. For this book club, you can read how much you want, everyone got a say in everything like some book clubs, they skip one or two people for a question but this book club everyone got a turn to speak.

Ashley: It was different and unique; like in a regular book club you have pretty much formal questions. Like you hear almost every time what is happening in chapter one it is like you don’t like to read ahead in chapters like until we’re done chapter two. And this [book club] like we had different types of questions, it makes us like wanna learn more about the book

Samantha: [I worked] to my own limit. My overall impression of the book club was very good.

Unfortunately, due to limited time and information of the study, it is impossible to accurately measure if, and specifically how effective, the book club was in assisting their academic performances. Nonetheless, it appears to have a positive impact on all participants.

7. Social Interactions

What impact does a book club have on social interactions? Although the research reveals many examples of positive impacts on the students’ social interactions and performance, it is critical to discuss this as a separately. It is also important to note that at no point during any of the discussions was social interactions mentioned to the girls or by the girls. It is simply something I observed.

a. Positive and More Frequent Social Interactions in the Small Community

Within the group, the social interactions became more positive after the initiation of the book club. Frequently, the students talked together, laughed, disagreed, discussed schoolwork, and their lives outside of class or the book club. These types of events rarely took place prior to the beginning of the book club and with regards to academic disagreements, these almost always went unspoken or unheard and, on the few
isolated instances where they did occur, they were not met with any resistance despite the fact that the participants, following participation in the book club, stated that the strongly disagreed with the critics. For example, following the book club, the participants more frequently participated in whole-class discussions outside of the book club and would more frequently speak up when they disagreed with a peer while supporting their argument.

Rebecca: I learned new things about myself and others ... [i]f I think I have a good point I share it ... [book clubs] help you participate more in class discussions

b. Positive and More Frequent Social Interactions in the Large Community

Despite not being explicitly discussed, the participants demonstrate a belief that the book club has a significant role with regards to the social interactions and performance within the group as well as within the large community. From their initial limited conversations with members of both the small and large community, to the end result where students freely spoke to one another about a variety of academic and non-academic topics, the girls clearly felt safe with their peers. Following the introduction and commencement of the book club, students felt they had a purpose or a reason upon which they could strike up a conversation with another member. This led to an increased comfort level with that member which in turn led to more social interactions. All of the girls, including Rebecca and Ashley who self-identified as being shy and did not frequently participate in whole-class discussions, shared ideas more frequently following the book club.

8. Individual Identity

What impact does a book club have on individual identity as readers, writers, and
It appears that book clubs can be used to improve students’ self identity as readers, writers, and learners. All of the girls had a negative self-perception of themselves as readers and writers prior to attending the book club. This appears to be true for most of the students from the class in which they were asked to volunteer. It is possible that this is not a random effect but a result of their poor academic performance in reading and writing in the regular classroom as every student recommended for this program must have at least one low grade in any of the literacy strands.

### a. Transformed Self-Identity as Readers

Throughout the book club, the girls began to see themselves as readers and writers. They participated in reading the book and discussing a variety of different portions and aspects of it. In fact, their choice to participate in the book club as well as their choice in which book they read indicates that their identities had been positively influenced. Prior to entering the book club, the majority of students would not choose to read in their spare time. In other words, they read only when necessary for assignments. Following their participation in the book club, the girls indicated that they enjoyed reading; indicating that their self-perception of themselves as readers had been greatly influenced for the better.

Samantha: I enjoy reading to my own limit.

Ashley: I did enjoy the book club. It was an amazing experience. I would organize a book club [in my own school].

Rebecca: I would love to participate in this [the book club] again if it was in a regular classroom.

It is evident from the girls’ responses that the book club positively influenced their identity of self and how they perceive themselves as readers. It is not as evident,
however, how it influences their perceptions on writing. However, the girls did display a more positive attitude towards writing following the book club.

**b. Transformed Self-Identity as Writers**

On her own volition, Rebecca created a notebook of her own written anecdotal notes that she kept while reading “Three Cups of Tea”. She said that “they help me remember what happened so I can talk about it at the book club”. This note book is highly organized with pink post-it notes and includes favourite or important quotes, questions or portions that she does not understand, as well as thoughts about the text itself. Along with her statements regarding the book club and its usefulness, this 40-page lined notebook complete with highly organized post-it notes is indicative of Rebecca’s transformation of identity and knowledge. From her beginning self, reserved, shy, and a non-reader/writer, Rebecca, over the course of four weeks, willingly opted to write about the book from the book club. In addition to her extensive notes, she began to share more of her written work with her peers both in and outside of the book club.

**c. Transformed Self-Identity as Oral Communicators**

Additionally, Ashley’s behaviour and actions also indicate that a transformation of identity took place as well. However, Ashley’s transformation is quite different from that of Rebecca’s despite being in the same group, reading the same text, and participating in the same discussions. Ashley entered the book club as an extremely shy individual who felt as if she had very few, if any, intelligent ideas that were sharing with the small or the large group. She resisted answering questions unless in a one-on-one situation with the teacher and even during those periods, felt as if her answers were insufficient. This was evident as she typically apologized both before and after sharing an idea.
By the end of the book club experience, Ashley willingly openly and willingly participated in lively discussions and debates, challenging her peers both in the book club and in the larger class community. She volunteered to share ideas and welcomed when people challenged her opinions. In fact, Ashley shared part of her identity transformation when she wrote:

Ashley: [Now when] someone disagrees with me, I try to convince them or give a very convincing point to change their mind...[it] helped me participate more in class [large community]...I actually have good ideas/points...[now] if I think I have a good point I share it.

This demonstrates her shift in identity from a reluctant, shy adolescent who felt she had little to offer her peers, to a student who openly shared thoughts and ideas with her peers. Even if she thinks it is a good point, she is now willing to share it despite the fact that this will allow other students to pass judgement on her statement. This is a significant change in Ashley’s perception and identity in the group and among her peers.

Another example happened during a discussion outside of the book club. The large class community began discussing the book and asking me questions about it. Instead of answering the questions, I encouraged these students to speak to the experts of the book referring the girls in the book club. At first, students would raise their hands and ask permission to ask the experts a question. Over a short period of time, students stopped asking me permission and took it upon themselves to ask the experts directly. More fascinating was that after the class, Samantha, Rebecca, and Ashley approached several of their peers and initiated a conversation about the book to provide further clarification. It is evident that these girls now saw themselves as experts: experts on a
book and experts in reading, as they voluntarily provided assistance to peers outside of school time.

**d. Transformed Self-Identity as Learners**

Following the book club, Rebecca left me a note saying “Thank you for an awesome, incredible, educational, and fun experience! I really enjoyed it!” Although this does not explicitly state that her perception of herself has changed, it appears that she has a more positive perspective of self identity as she was thankful for the opportunity to read and write with a small group of girls. At this point, all of the girls returned to their regular classrooms in their regular daytime school. Interestingly, during my follow-up interview, much of their new identities were apparent. Thus, not only did these girls demonstrate a transformation in identity within the book club, but most importantly, it appears that this transformation has carried forward with them in a more permanent manner.

**e. Transformed Self-Identity Carried Forward Following the Study**

During the follow-up interview, Ashley stated that she chooses to pre-write, a strategy learned in the book club, before completing any written assignments in school.

Ashley: if we’re doing an essay like have take like five minutes out and just like kind of writing everything down, like what you think would be on and then have it all organized before you start and then for I think just like if we are writing we use charts and the charts will give you a better understanding of what you are doing.

Both Ashley and Rebecca continue to use many of the literacy strategies learned during their time in the book club. More importantly, during the interview, Ashley continued to share her ideas willingly and without any hesitation demonstrating her continued success and improvement in her confidence and oral communication skills which she felt was inadequate prior to attending the book club. Rebecca made reference to writing both in and outside of school. Most interestingly, when I met Rebecca for the interview,
she was taking personal rough notes on which courses to choose in high school. When asked, she noted that they were not mandatory but she just liked to do it because it helped her with her course selection. She willingly used writing as a means to help solve a real-life problem! This demonstrates a significant change in identity from a girl who did not believe she was a good writer to an independent writer who approached writing with ease and comfort.

Overall, the book club appears to have been a positive experience for all members involved impacting their overall general identity of self as well.

Ashley: I learned that I actually have good ideas and points to make.

Rebecca: I learnt that I am not really shy about expressing my ideas and about disagreeing with others.

Upon reflection of the book club, it occurred to me that the girls’ identities were not the only identities that were impacted. My identity was also influenced significantly from my participation in the book club as well.

f. Transformed Self-Identity as a Teacher

Despite having no control over the book selected as our text for the book club, and having very limited control over the structure and format of the book club itself, my identity as a teacher had a significant change. Initially, I was not certain that this was the right action to take with these students. They had selected a very difficult (and boring) text in my opinion and, if they were already struggling in both reading and writing, was I setting them up to fail? Nonetheless, I trusted the research that existed and allowed the club to unfold in the most natural sense possible.

Within a week or so of the book club, I began to realize that these students were capable of much more than what I originally thought or what they originally stated.
When thoroughly engaged, they could read and write quite impressively. In fact, the ideas that these girls shared in the book club about ‘Three Cups of Tea’, were ideas that had not crossed my mind while reading the text. They shared different ideas and perspectives that they could substantiate using textual evidence to support their claims. They were able to cite passages from the story and rationale as to why they thought in a particular way and some of the girls, such as Rebecca, even went to great lengths to write down their ideas to ensure they did not forget the slightest detail. It is apparent that these girls could read, write, and think very well. So why did I question them when they selected this text? What am I doing to my students everyday when I pass judgements on their abilities or, more importantly, inabilities? It is apparent that I need to be more cognizant of my judgements of students and allow them more opportunities, in a variety of ways, to demonstrate understanding.

Another observable change I found from participating in this study are the variety of ways teachers can interact with one another professionally. I had never thought of a book club as a means to enter or have a professional dialogue with other colleagues. However, recognizing that throughout the book club, this is precisely what happened. And, most importantly, it happened organically and naturally. Dalia and I spoke regularly and I shared my excitement about the book club with other colleagues at the school. They then provided input and ideas of what activities we could suggest and try and some colleagues actually implemented some of these ideas that were created collaboratively and collectively in their own classrooms immediately. The way I see myself as a participant in professional dialogue as well as my perception on creating authentic, professional teacher dialogue has been completely transformed.
9. What Impacts the Book Club?

Although the research questions have been answered using the data collected in the book club study, several key components of its success have not been discussed. Thus, an additional question arose towards the ends of our research that needs to be discussed in these findings: What factors positively influence a book club and its outcomes? It is imperative to understand the factors that impact the book club in order to understand how the book club influenced these students’ lives so significantly. Below, organized by most to least important, are the themes that contributed to the successful book club.

a. Choice

Choice is a dominant theme mentioned and discussed by the girls throughout the book club and in the follow-up interview. The word itself is used 6 times explicitly during the interview by the Ashley and Rebecca and, as a concept, is discussed by both of them to some length twice. Both participants agree that choice was and continues to be an important factor in their education. They believe that choice leads to interesting education which in turn, encourages them to learn more and think differently or more critically.

Ashley: In this book club, you got to read like you don’t have a limit but in other book clubs you have to read like specific chapters for each week. For this book club, you can read how much you want, everyone got a say in everything...Everyone gets a chance to share their feelings ... so you hear things (facts) from other, different lenses ... [which] helped me see things from a different perspective.

Rebecca: I would do many of the same [open-ended, choice] activities because they really get you thinking. What I would do differently is I would add a few more types of books with different themes [to choose from]. Not everyone would be interested in the same genre.
From the beginning of the book club, all of the participants appeared to be drawn into the study based on the fact that they were offered a lot of choice. When asked, all of the girls agreed that choice is a significant reason they agreed to participate in the book club. They also believe that choice leads to a higher level of engagement which, in turn, leads to an increase in their academic achievement in some or areas of literacy.

Throughout the book club, the girls were offered choices in various ways at different times. They were asked which book they would like to read in the book club, how they believed the book club should operate, the frequency of the meetings, timelines to follow with regards to reading the book, deadlines to follow with regards to assignments which they chose to do for the book club as well as format as how they should complete these tasks (written, shared orally, presentations, book reports, etc.). Students were offered as much choice as possible as frequently as possible. When the participants were asked how it was possible for them to focus so intently for long durations since they had previously struggled and approached reading with great dejection, they all laughed.

Leslie: this was worth reading and I want to read it and that makes a big difference [because she chose the text herself].

Samantha: I liked that we chose the book and it was really up to us [to be in charge of their learning] and not the teacher.

The participants also expressed appreciation for choice in how they would approach or achieve goals established in the class and the book club.

Samantha: we didn’t have to answer every question ... there is a variety of different ways to answer them.
All of the girls indicate that choice is imperative and it is through this choice that they felt they could engage with the text and push themselves to do things they thought they couldn’t do.

Leslie: I could do so much more than what she thought I was capable of just because of the types of questions [and how they were phrased]. They made me think and use different parts of my brain but I also felt it was ok whereas in other classes I was worried about getting it [the question] wrong.

By providing the girls with an opportunity of choice, their interest and engagement level increased significantly. They transformed from students who did not like to read to students who enjoyed reading and challenging their reading abilities by exploring high level texts. Choice allowed these students to participate in the book club as well as read books considered to be well above their academic level; the girls felt in charge of, and responsible for their learning.

Choice is also requires an important consideration as it influences the small and large community in which you are working with, as well as academic and social performance, and identity. Students with choice are students with voice. They are able and willing to speak out and discuss their concerns as they feel they will actually be heard. Thus, the amount of and type of choices students are provided impacts how the small and large communities are formed, interact, identify as individuals and as groups, and how they perform academically.

b. Structure and Format

Since the beginning of the study, the girls were involved in the creation and establishment of the structure and format of the book club. Collectively, they selected the text, timeline, deadlines, tasks, meeting dates and times, and expectations.
Although greatly influenced by choice, the structure and format of the book club is believed to be a significant factor that contributed to its success.

Initially, the conversations in the book club required a lot of prompting; however, towards the end of the book club, the participation in discussion increased and very little prompting was required. In fact, several instances occurred where it was necessary to interject and halt the dialogue as we had run out of time and class was about to begin.

By the end of the book club, all of the participants expressed their appreciation for the structure of the book club. Samantha stated that she “liked that she didn’t have to answer every question and that there was a variety of different ways to answer questions”. As a result of this structure, Rebecca, who self-identified as a poor writer who did not enjoy reading, chose to keep a log, organized chapter by chapter, of her thoughts and ideas as well as favourite or interesting quotes. By the end of the book club, this said journal almost completely filled up a 40-page lined notebook.

Since the students were allowed to read the book at their own pace but agreed to have the book completely read by a collectively agreed upon date, they were free to read as much or as little as they wanted. Leslie stated that this format was most appropriate for a book club as she was able to continue reading and pause at what she decided was an appropriate place which was not always the following chapter. As a result, for our first book club meeting where the students agreed to have at least one chapter read, Leslie, who self identified as a non-reader who did not enjoy reading in or outside of the classroom, had read the majority of the book with only seven chapters remaining. The book itself contains 23 chapters and 349 pages with little to no illustrations throughout the text.
Thus, structure and format are important considerations that can influence authentic learning and dialogue within a book club as well as within a classroom. Along with choice, they are important factors to be considered in order to establish a successful book club. By allowing students to create a structure and format that they feel they can achieve and be successful with, students appear to be focused and engaged in the task. Additionally, since they are able to choose appropriate tasks to demonstrate their knowledge, for example and as stated by one participant, they can select various different ways to complete something and feel more at ease about working on that specific task.

c. Collective Establishment

This theme did not seem important during the study or the follow-up interviews and is not discussed explicitly at any point. With regards to collective establishment of the book club and its routines, Ashley stated:

I guess you offered the idea to start [a book club] and then most of the class agreed with you and then all started from us reading the children version of it.

Although not explicitly stated or discussed, collectively establishing the book club routines and expectations appears to have some level of importance with the participants. Again, this theme is directly related and connected with the idea of choice mentioned earlier. Although no particular student refers to collectively establishing the book club specifically, it is demonstrated numerous times and in a variety of ways such as how guidelines, rules and deadlines are created to the questions o be considered for a chapter, if any. The collective establishment directly contributes to the success of the book club. It permits students an opportunity to take control and accountability for their learning which is the beginning and foundation of the project entirely.
d. Collective and Collaborative Learning

All participants work collaboratively to establish the book club including, but not limited to, its routines, dates, and questioning format. Collectively, they worked, read, and shared thoughts and ideas regarding the text and real-life events that affected their lives directly and indirectly. Through this collective and collaborative practice, students begin to reflect on their thinking or metacognition.

In the beginning of the book club, students came together and shared one idea or thought they initially had about the book club and the book itself. By the end of the book club, they shared well-developed ideas and thoughts freely. From this dialogue, new ideas emerged that did not appear to be credited to any particular individual. As a group, they began to create new thoughts, new ideas, new concepts, and new understandings of the book and events around them simply as a result of having this book club. The girls became interdependent on one another.

Ashley: I learned from others [during the discussions], not only myself.

Samantha: [the book club] made me think more and expand my knowledge. I learned [from the book club] that I love to be pushed out of my own limit.

Rebecca: working together with others in the book club gives me an opportunity to see things from another view ... I learn more from others too.

Leslie: [creating an idea during a discussion in the book club] The book is about like a guy who is lost. Like, not lost lost, but like lost in his mind. And then he spends the whole time trying to figure himself out and he eventually finds himself.

This collaboration, of coming together and sharing ideas, leads to collaborative, collective construction of knowledge. As Leslie demonstrated in the example above, the girls would frequently share their ideas and then create new ideas collectively. They co-constructed knowledge as a group.
Rebecca: An example would be our first book club meeting: when we talked about the first chapter we were wondering why it was started that way. We thought that it may be because the climb was important, or we also thought it was because if he didn’t fall then he would be in CAI. As we talked more, we learned from each other that the first chapter was about so much more than we originally thought.

Thus, collective and collaborative learning appears to be an essential component to learning as it allows students to challenge ideas and thoughts, share individually learned ideas which then became part of the group’s collective knowledge while simultaneously allowing students to wrestle with these thoughts internally. Most importantly, it allowed the group as a collective, to collaboratively create new, thoughtful ideas to leave the group with and ponder. Collective and collaborative learning thus appears to be a result of the book club and not simply a task that is completed at whim.

Rebecca: [Collaborative learning] gave us more perspective like your opinion changes and you hear other perspectives and we got some strategies on how to summarize a book, you always have your own opinion but you never know what other people might think about the book even if you have this one idea I think in one of the chapters we were talking about 9/11 we only saw U.S perspective on it, then we also saw in the ending how the people in Pakistan thought about it ... it’s like you may not know as much as other people do and then like based on their knowledge like bringing their perspective and then when you get all these perspectives and comments you like think, I didn’t know that about this, like this could be a possibility.

This quote highlights some of the feelings and attitudes towards collective and collaborative learning. It is apparent that students learn through the collective group (opinions change) and that collaborative learning was inevitable, necessary, and it improves overall critical thinking. Thus, this theme continues to be an important aspect of a successful book club.


e. Trust and Comfort Level

While not explicitly discussed in the book club or the follow-up interviews, it is evident that trust and comfort are essential components of a successful community of learning. Prior to conducting the interview, the participants were reminded of their rights and thanked profusely for their volunteering to participate in this study. At this time, both Rebecca and Ashley laughed and responded “we know” demonstrating a high level of trust and comfort with the researcher. Also, during the book club itself, when the trust and comfort levels became stronger amongst the participants, both amount and quality of conversation increased. Although it can only be speculated, I believe that the trust between the participants as well as with the researchers allows an authentic dialogue to exist which creates the ambiance for all other themes to emerge.

In her exit, voluntary survey, on participant eludes that comfort and safety were big concerns for her during the book club.

Ashley: At first I was really quiet and nervous...I got comfortable around my classmates [who] helped me participate more in class [referring to not just the book club, but the larger class community].

This clearly testifies to the imperative of students having a safe and comfortable space for learning reiterated several times throughout the research). Students had trouble identifying specifically what happened to make the space safe and comfortable; thus, we believe more research should be done in this area. Collectively, Ashley and Rebecca shared that ‘they didn’t care or fear anymore about sharing ideas. They had become friends in and outside of the classroom and it was fine and it didn’t matter. They felt very comfortable talking now so it was fine’.
10. Overall Findings of the Book Club

Overall, research on the book club indicates that there is a positive improvement in its participants both academically and socially. Students are offered an opportunity to make decisions about their education which in turn results in a higher level of engagement. When this higher level of engagement existed, the girls became more accountable for their learning and thus became more interested in their interactions with other in the small group and the large group as well as their teacher. These circumstances allow for authentic learning and authentic dialogue which requires a reflective practice. Through this reflection, student identity is brought forward and becomes apparent to that student and positive transformations took place. During this transformation, students’ actions changed significantly as well. Most notably, students began to view learning as a social act. Reading, writing, and communicating started to be viewed as activities that these girls could do collaboratively. This collaboration led to additional and new knowledges or co-construction of the collective knowledge which resulted in more changes both academically and socially. Students’ attitudes became more positive and so did their interactions both in the small and large communities as well as outside of the school setting. Most importantly, all of these changes took place in a four week period of time.

Student driven opportunities to explore knowledge, such as a book club format, are the paradigm of learning and problem solving for our students. It is this student ambition, or choice as discussed in this paper, which creates a setting in which all of these transformations can take place. In the final chapter, these changes will be further explored in order to understand their significance and importance in comparison to
current literature published today, what implications they have for educators and classrooms today, as well as to understand what gaps in research still remain.
Chapter 5 – Interpretations, Implications, Limitations, and Questions and Future Research

This chapter will reflect on the data and determine the differences arising from and through the research. Implications arising from this research for both teaching and learning in classrooms will be discussed. It must be noted that given the small scope of this study based solely on the four girls’ perceptions and grades, this study’s result are limited. Nonetheless, the results suggest that if a similar study was conducted using a larger group, it is likely that similar outcomes would be obtained.

This chapter will be divided into five main sections; 1) interpretation of the research questions, 2) implications of the research, 3) limitations of the study, 4) outstanding questions to consider with recommendations for future research, and 3) the final reflection of the study.

Overall, this study demonstrates that a book club is an effective tool that can be easily implemented in a classroom to address concerns in various academic areas including but not limited to literacy. Despite the limitations, which will be discussed later in the chapter, a book club is a tool that can be used to create social interdependency amongst its members, improve academic grades, perception and identity, improve teacher practice and reflection, and create an ideal environment for effective learning and instruction for all students.

I. Interpretation

A. How does a community of learning, in the form of a book club, impact the small and large community of individual learning development?

At the beginning of the study, both the small and large communities were very quiet and restrained. In both settings, students appeared intimidated and were reticent to share ideas, answers, or responses. This appears normal as very few of the students
knew one another or had previously met and were adjusting to being in a new classroom setting. Over the course of the book club, the girls begin to share ideas more freely and, overtime, actually challenge one another’s ideas. They take a variety of different points of views and actually debate, using textual and schematic evidence as support. Eventually, these girls naturally start to contribute their ideas in the larger classroom community discussions as well sparkly lively and authentic dialogue between the students there too. As a result, individuals, not just the girls in the book club, were able to absorb new ideas that had been created collectively through this authentic dialogue. Authentic dialogue, according to Raphael, Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty, and Highfield, is a dialogue that allows students to talk about concepts that interest them in a manner in which they wish to speak about them (2001). Thus, this authentic conversation allowed students to share ideas, wrestle and grapple with them in a safe, organic environment, and then alter them based on the collective’s contributions and ideas. According to Bloom and Egan-Robertson, this is what is known as the co-construction of knowledge (2003). All students appear to benefit from this model of discussion. Although this transition from quiet to respectful sharing seems natural, in my experience, it does not seem to exist in many classrooms today in our schools. Research that exists studies authentic dialogue therefore it is not naturally or frequently occurring in our classrooms (Kong & Fitch, 2002) (Fall & Webb, 2000).

Many students feel left out or unable to express their ideas for a variety of reasons. Primarily, these students do not feel that the environment is safe or that they have very little to contribute, as demonstrated and commented on by Ashley in this study.

Ashley: [Regarding her initial experience in the group] I felt invisible in the group.
All too often, classrooms transition throughout the year from this quiet adjustment period to a period in which a few outspoken students dominate the conversation. This is likely a result of the teacher valuing correct responses, end results, or quick thinking. Not all students will have the correct response every time they raise their hand and not all students can quickly respond to oral questions. Students require a diverse setting in which they can use their strengths, whatever they may be, to share their ideas and improve upon areas of need.

Ashley: I got comfortable around my classmates. It helped me participate more in class [large community]...I actually have good ideas/points...[now] if I think I have a good point I share it.

This book club allowed all students to have a voice as it gave a variety of opportunities to share their ideas not just orally, but in a way that the students felt they could best contribute their ideas. Although it has been measured in their discussions and oral communication, this tool can be used to improve a variety of other skills as well and is not simply limited to oral communication or literacy for that matter. Regardless, book clubs are an excellent tool that can create a sense of community of belonging for all of its members (Kooy, 2006). They begin to form both academic and social relationships with each other that continue outside of the book club. It is these relationships that actually perpetuate the club itself and help it thrive and progress. These relationships cannot be ascribed by a teacher simply by asking students to work together in a small classroom project or via reading together occasionally during reading time as is commonly seen during reading buddies. These relationships are authentic and genuine and create an environment where students encourage one another to move forward and think differently. As noted in the findings, many of the girls actually enjoyed being challenged and challenging other peoples’ ideas as they felt it help that
person as well as themselves to achieve a better understanding. Overall, the book club creates a community which cannot be replicated through many other activities.

Prior to establishing the book club, I believed that it would have a positive impact on the people which whom participated within it. Although this appears to be true, what I did not consider is the impact it would have on the larger community in which the book club participants were part of. Students from the larger community came to view these students as experts in one or more areas of literacy. Instead of asking the teacher for support, they began to turn to the girls from the book club to answer questions and ask advice. This had an effect on both the girls as well as the whole class. The girls’ identities transformations were significantly impacted by this shift in perception. Since other students now viewed them as knowledge holders or experts, they began to see themselves as experts as well. They began to take on the traditional role of the teacher and assist students through questioning models and by sharing ideas and challenging opinions. They asked others to find support for their arguments and they even went as far as to offer this assistance outside of the classroom time and space.

In turn, the students in the larger community began to see that students can be experts of knowledge as well, and that it is not always necessary to seek teacher assistance or opinions for their work. Instead, their identities were altered in a sense to see the classroom as a space for collaborative learning; where they could teach and learn from one another. In this space, I, as their teacher, simply had to act as a facilitator occasionally providing prompting questions and reminding them of their academic goal set by the Ontario Ministry of Education in their curriculum documents.
The girls in the book club formed an inclusive clique. By this, I mean that they actually became friends both in and outside of the book club itself. Although this is to be expected amongst any group of student who work together for a period of time, the relationship that they formed continued after the book club commenced. Furthermore, it continued despite their geographical difficulties of not being in the same schools or the same neighbourhoods. In addition to becoming friends with one another, they also created friendships with the students outside of the book club, in the larger community as well. Again, this is not something unnatural. What is unique about these relationships is that they too continued commencing the end of the course despite their geographic difficulties and not being in the same schools and neighbourhoods. Most interestingly, many of these relationships formed as a result of the book club itself. The students were provided a text in which they selected to read but this gave them an opportunity to dialogue with one another. In other words, it gave them a reason to start a conversation. From this exploration of the book, students began to share personal insights about themselves and their lives which directly contributed to the initiation of this friendship. Students became interconnected and interdependent with one another in an extremely short period of time and, as a result, they were more willing to share ideas and talk about classroom assignments. Their social and academic advancement took place in an accelerated manner.

B. What impact does a book club have on individual academic performance and social interactions?

Overall, the book club had a positive influence on both academic and social performance of all its members. Initiating a book club for students in your classroom provides students with an explicit opportunity for them to have a choice in their learning.
If students are able to select the text in which they wish to study, teachers may find that a higher level of engagement will be noticed. This is simply because students who have a choice in their schooling are more likely to engage in their education. When engagement levels rise, student output in the form of both social and academic performance, positively improves. Thus, a book club is a useful tool for classroom teachers to implement to increase the level of engagement amongst their students.

Prior to the beginning of the book club, all girls had been assessed as underachieving in some area of literacy as measure by their teachers using the Ministry of Education’s standards. By the end of the book club, all girls in the book club had improved their reading, writing, and oral communication skills as measured by the standards set out by the Toronto District School Board’s standards. For example, the TDSB report card for this course allows three options: Student was Below Expectations, Approaching Expectations, or Met Expectations. None of the girls received a grade of Below Expectations. Ashley, Leslie and Samantha received a mixed report card in the various literacy strands of Approaching Expectations and Met Expectations with several more of the latter appearing on their report. Rebecca received a report consisting entirely of Met Expectations. This is important as it is an indicator that the girls are ready and prepared for the next grade in the following year. They have met a standard, the same standard that was met by their peers, stating that they are ready to further develop the concepts, prescribed by the Ontario curriculum, in literacy.

Following the book club, the girls re-entered their regular classrooms and stated that there was an improved difference in their academic performance. In comparison to their academic performance prior to the book club and their performance following the book
club, all of the girls showed an improvement in literacy. Noticeably, the girls seemed to improve in their weakest areas. For example, Ashley struggled in her oral communication prior to the study; however, following the study, she increased her academic grade, as measured by her homeroom teacher with the Ontario curriculum, from a low C level grade to a B level grade. It is important to note that their academic evaluations both prior and following the book club were conducted by their homeroom teachers and not by the researchers of this study.

These improvements are important feats as they demonstrate the power the book club has as a tool for the classroom. All of the girls were struggling in some or many areas of literacy and through the book club, they were able to find ways to identify and improve upon these areas. Furthermore, they not only improved for the book club or the summer course they were attending, but these academic gains and knowledge remained with them as they transitioned back into their regular classrooms. Most critical is that all of these accomplishments were done in such a short period of time, four weeks. These academic accomplishments are in line with current research on the topic of engagement as student engagement is crucial in student progress. Thus, for our classrooms, it is important that we consider using tools such as book clubs, to create opportunities for students to learn and work together collectively. It is crucial that students have the opportunity to share their ideas with other students and to wrestle with these ideas through debates and other students’ challenges so that collectively, they can progress towards new understandings. It is in this dialogue that students, even when they are not sharing, acquire knowledge and new knowledges are formed.
Although the academic gains are significant, the social gains are apparent, and perhaps linked, as well. Many girls created relationships with other members of the book club as well as members of the larger class. A sense of interdependency was created through the book club where each member contributed to and learned from the other members’ questions, ideas, and thoughts. Since this was not a mandatory assignment, the girls could have opted to not read the book or not complete reading the book, but none did that. All of the girls read the text in its entirety and contributed to the discussion and thus, the collective knowledge and understanding of the text. Because of their interconnectedness, the girls felt an obligation to one another and to the group as well as their own learning and thus, completed the reading and carried on the discussion.

This is also important as it helps us understand why students want to learn and what helps them continue and persevere despite the many challenges they may face. All of the girls continued reading the text despite its difficulty since they felt an obligation to do so for the book club. Thus, we learned that when students are engaged, genuine social relationships are formed, and these relationships are linked to the learning, groups tend to work together and persevere through troubling tasks. Thus, in our own classrooms, it can be said that it is vital we create opportunities for students to develop genuine social relationships so that students can work together in bona fide unions and groups to acquire new knowledge as students more in group settings with authentic dialogue.

C. What impact does a book club have on individual identity as readers, writers, and learners?

In four weeks, the girls are able to demonstrate a significant change and transformation in a variety of different areas including but not limited to literacy.
Although the girls did show improvement in literacy as intended by the book club, they also show a positive change in their overall self-perception and self-identification as readers, writers, communicators, and learners. This transformation not only affects them in the book club as well as the summer school course in which they were attending, but it carries forward with them as they re-immerses into their regular classrooms.

Book clubs offer an environment where students as well as teachers, can begin to reflect upon not only the text they are reading, but upon themselves as learners. By creating an environment in which both students and teachers can critically, yet safely analyze their identity, collectively they can take action to reduce their negative influences and work together to improve upon the positive ones. It is a place where students can see their teacher as students and teachers are given the opportunity to see students as teachers. This creates an open-minded culture between student and teacher which, if fostered over time, can produce significant improvements in all academic and social areas for all parties. Furthermore, it creates a space upon which authentic dialogue can exist.

Currently, research discusses the importance of authentic dialogue and how crucial it is for student learning. What it neglects to include are ways in which teachers can establish a space for authentic dialogue to take place. Book clubs provide the perfect opportunity for these conversations to exist naturally, organically, and student driven, which are three necessary components of authentic dialogue. In addition to improve self-perception, the book club is a tool that can change students’ opinions of themselves. In the book club in this study, almost all of the girls felt they could not read. By providing them the space and time as well as choice and structure, the girls were
slowly able to see themselves as readers. They were all able to contribute their ideas regardless of how big or small they may have been and every idea was validated. The girls welcomed ideas they disagreed with as it provided them an opportunity to share with someone else their own ideas as to why they believed they were correct. The book club is simply a small group format that allows students to have conversations with and about each other in a non-threatening way and through these discussions, changes in identity takes place as all students are able to work at their own level.

II. Implications

A. How does a community of learning, in the form of a book club, impact the small and large community of individual learning development?

Since we know that a book club positively impacts the individuals in both the small and large community in which it is situated, it leaves the following two questions for educational practitioners: Why should I do this in my class? How do I do this in my class?

It is evident that books clubs offer an opportunity to provide differentiated and explicit instruction to our students. They can help establish an environment or community within the classroom that allows for authentic dialogue, authentic learning, and an overall positive atmosphere. Many times in my experience, teachers constantly complain that they cannot get their students to engage in the material at hand. Time and time again we are reminded that both research and students need material that is engaging and relates to their lives but sometimes this is difficult and contradictory with Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s curriculum expectations. How is it possible to talk about students lives when the curriculum prescribes and dictates our goals? Simply put, start a book club. A book club is a place where students can bring their own experiences to the
discussion. Their learning, progression, understandings, and questions can all be part of
the collective learning process. In turn, these students will begin to form natural and
personal relationships that will exist both in and outside of the classroom. When these
relationships do exist outside of the classroom, these discussions will be carried with
them and the learning will start to continue outside of the classroom as well.

Initiating a book club appears to be a daunting task; however, it need not be.
Introduce the idea with your students and ask them for their opinions. Once you have
done this and created a space in which you can discuss the book club itself, essentially,
a book club is established. Then, ask them they types of books they would be interested
in reading, what times they would like to read, and their expectations of the book club
itself. Include the students in establishing the overall goal(s) for the book club and the
assessment of it so that the students can truly take ownership of their academic
choices.

Book clubs are a way to increase student engagement, create a space for authentic
dialogue, and differentiate instruction so that all members can participate, which in turn,
leads to improve academic and social performance. In other words, book clubs help
facilitate student success.

**B. What impact does a book club have on individual academic performance and
social interactions?**

Book clubs improve both academic and social performance of students. Because of
the increase in choice, an increase in student engagement takes place. Students take
responsibility of, and eventually for, their learning goals and needs. From this, students
begin to initiate authentic dialogue of concepts and ideas. They question, share ideas
and thoughts, and collectively and collaboratively formulated new understandings. As a
result of this process, students collectively begin to see improved academic and social performances. This is partially contributed to the fact that students learn and construct knowledge collectively but also because of the fact that they are more engaged and involved in the process. Overall student performance is improved and less teacher-directed classroom management is necessary as students self-regulate their own behaviour and performance. Teachers can begin to focus on higher level thinking questions and ideas for their students and less time is spent focusing on frivolous activities.

C. What impact does a book club have on individual identity as readers, writers, and learners?

Book clubs establish and maintain effective learning environments in which students view themselves as knowledge keepers instead empty vessels, as is seen in the traditional teacher-student hierarchal structure. Students’ identities shift from adamantly disbelieving they can read and write to self-advocates who believe they can read and write well. They believe that they are an integral part of, and responsible for, their own learning. As a result, daily classroom activities begin to flow with ease, stress for both students and teachers are minimized, and an enjoyable, positive atmosphere is created. Learning appears once again to be fun! An increase in the amount and quality of reading, writing, and oral responses are evident and students perceive themselves as intelligent beings with ideas and questions to share and ask respectively.

III. Limitations

Due to the small number of participants, the limited time frame in which the study was conducted, the context of the class in which the students were asked to volunteer from,
and the fact that all of the participants are female, the study is not able to generalize its results to a larger population of students.

IV. Outstanding Questions and Future Research Considerations

Although we were able to address all of the research questions as laid out in the findings section, several questions arose that we were not able to address so easily.

A. What effect will holding a book club have on the classroom teachers who implement them?

Although we can speculate from our experiences how facilitating a book club may impact on a teacher’s identity as a teacher, it is impossible to generalize this understanding to all teachers. From our experience, facilitating a book club has a positive effect on teachers and teacher practice. It links them to current research, provides them with an accessible tool that requires very few resources aside from the books, and it does not require a significant time commitment in order to implement. None the less, future research should be conducted to better understand the impact this may have on teachers’ identities.

B. If more time were available, what effect would this have on the students? On the book club?

Again, it is only possible to speculate, but it is reasonable to expect that if a longer time had been permitted, more discussions would have taken place. It may also have led to a higher number of students willing to participate. Either way, more time would directly and positively impact all student outcomes discussed in this paper. Since a positive environment has previously been established from the book club, moving forward to learn new ideas and concepts as expected from the curriculum, it is reasonable to assume that students would continue to use their new identities and
approaches towards these concepts. Thus, they would engage in them authentically and collectively co-construct knowledge in an inclusive manner.

If more time were permitted for the book club, it is likely that more discussion would have taken place there as well. It is in these discussions that the authentic dialogue took place and therefore, an increase in authentic dialogue may exist. Nonetheless, more time creates more opportunities for this authentic dialogue which is the crux for student engagement and student learning.

However, if too much time is permitted, the book club may begin to appear as a daunting task. Students may begin to feel frustrated or overwhelmed and not participate or follow through with their responsibilities. Although timelines in this study were mutually established between the researchers and the participants, further research should be done to explore an ideal time length in which to hold a book club.

C. What impact might a book club have on a school community?

Namely, if I were to complete the study again, it would be interesting to see if a book club could be used to create a sense of school-wide community. Future research could investigate this by creating a study in which participants were all from one school but perhaps from various different classrooms tracking both their academic performance as well as their social performance.

D. How could the evaluation tools used to measure student achievement be changed to better reflect student knowledge and growth? In other words, what would happen if a quantifiable scale to measure and track students attitudinal changes were established and used? What results would be found?

It would be useful if future research were conducted to determine if a change in evaluation tools are reasonable and their effect on student performance.
E. How would the results be changed if students from different age groups been used or included in the study? How might the study be altered if there were male participants?

Research needs to be conducted to see how male participants respond and interact within the group. Although there were no males in the actual book club, the majority of the larger community in which the book club existed, were male. Since they benefited and did not interrupt the learning process, it is reasonable to predict that similar outcomes will take place in future research; however, it is also possible that the boys’ interests may vary from the girls’ interests. This will impact choices such as book selection and structure of the book club. Thus, it is imperative that future research consider and keep record of how boys influence the dynamics of the discussions and choices. Thus, future research might consider creating both single-gender and mixed-gender groupings to compare results.

F. What effect can a book club have on student attendance?

Although not discussed in this research, something noticeable following the book club was the girls’ attendance habits. Although there is no comparative data to see what their attendance habits were before or after the study, all of the girls attended class regularly. Samantha had one absence from both class and the book club which was explain by an illness and Leslie missed two book club sessions as a result of personal issues. Leslie, Ashley, and Rebecca attended all scheduled classes. It is impossible to say if the book club had an effect on their attendance but future research should be conducted that tracks student attendance habit and participation in the book club to see if any correlations exist.
G. If we were able to drastically improve literacy performance in such a short period, what effect may this tool have on struggling learners in a regular classroom over the course of a regular school year?

In this study, students are able to significantly improve their academic performance in a very short period of time. Struggling or underachieving students are able to reconsider their self perception and identity and adjust it in a positive way. If these students were able to continue on in the study and summer school classroom as if it were a normal classroom, it can be inferred that they would continue to demonstrate progress. Daily routines have been established and expectations are understood. Students would continue to work collaboratively to achieve these expectations demonstrating their knowledge in a variety of different ways. Thus, in a regular classroom, if facilitated in a similar manner, teachers can anticipate that students, once they have adjusted to the structure and format of the book club, will begin to grow, mature and progress collectively. Over the course of the year, students will naturally work together on projects and assignments outside of school thus increasing their academic performance on these tasks as well. Overall, students will have a better understanding of what they read, what they are expected to do, and work towards their goals with their new understandings.

H. What if this tool, the book club, was used in the ordinary classroom? How would it affect learners there?

Book clubs are a means or a tool that demonstrate both noticeable and positive improvements in student learning. In this study, we were able to make significant gains and changes in four short weeks. Although this cannot clearly be answered, it can be inferred, based on the findings that a book club would serve as a useful tool to prevent students from becoming labelled as underachieving. With more students which whom
can participate, a variety of different book levels can be selected or used in the classroom to achieve an infinite amount of learning goals.

I. What happens when a book club is created where the members do no form social relationships? More importantly, what if the members dislike one another? What effect does this have on the group?

It is important to recognize that this book club was formed based on a volunteer option. It is the foundation of the book club that was created and thus, creating a book club in your classroom may look differently. If this is the case, it is entirely possible that you may have students in a book club who do not enjoy each other’s company. In this case, it may be necessary to find alternative groups for these students or to find ways in which they can be in the same group but not negatively impact each other or the group. Based on this study, I believe that if students are forced to work with students with whom they have no interest working with, no authentic dialogue will take place and it may restrict the overall conversations that take place within the group itself. Additional research in the area of book clubs with members who socially do not get along is needed to take place in order to better understand this possible dilemma.

V. Final Reflection of the Study

In today’s classroom, many under-achieving students are unwilling to share answers or contribute their ideas during small and large classroom discussions. By creating a community of learning that involves, respects, and values student choice, book clubs are ideal tools to be implemented in today’s classroom. With such high competition for student attention and focus from outside distractions such as video games, electronics, television, and etc., book clubs are a means where students can work at their own pace. In a world that offers everything needed at the touch of a button, where everything is so
immediate, book clubs compete with this urgency by allowing all students to work at their level, speed, and time. Students learn authentic, real-world skills such as negotiation and meeting deadlines, through the mutual and collective creation and establishment of the book club. More importantly, students can begin to learn collectively through a problem-based learning initiative; an approach necessary to compete in today’s society in all realms of life. From this, students develop their ability to read, write, and orally communicate in an effective manner.

From struggling learners to overachieving students, book clubs can meet all the learning needs simultaneously. It is the exact type of differentiated instruction that is being demanded from today’s teacher. It creates an inclusive environment as it allows students who may not have anything in common, to talk and learn from and with one another. It creates a sense of belonging to all members and provides students, especially those who are shy and uncomfortable, with the opportunity to speak. For students, choice is voice. When students truly feel that they can provide input that will directly affect the result of the outcome, they feel they have been heard. When students feel that they are being listened to, they feel that they have a choice which results in higher engagement levels.

Book clubs have the ability to improve targeted learning needs, skills, and goals of its group members as well as improve the social well-being of the group. Although this book club specifically addresses reading, writing, and oral communication, it can be demonstrated from many of the comments and changes observed that this type of communal learning can be used to address other areas of need both in and outside of
the curriculum. Since it is the knowledge that is the focus of this study, and how it is created, comprehended, decoded, and made sense of, the content is irrelevant.

Book clubs also demand a change in our teaching practices. In order to be effective, they require its members to be reflective. Through this reflection, students begin to understand their identities, analyse these identities, and set goals which leads to a change and more positive self-identification. In a similar manner, book clubs also ask its facilitators to be reflective as well. In doing this, I discovered many things about myself both as a person and as an educator. My identity was strongly influenced by this book club in a positive way. I no longer viewed texts in terms of levels as was traditionally taught to me, but instead, I learned to view them as literature. Students are going to learn regardless of the book we place in front of them so why do we continue to interrupt this process? Instead, allow them to select whichever book they desire and help facilitate the learning process from that. If I had not been willing to be open to this idea, I never would have allowed the girls in this book club to select the book they did because it was deemed way too difficult for their reading levels with regards to both decoding and comprehension. However, instead, I allowed the book and worked with the girls to learn what they wanted to learn and, as a result, they read the book. The understood the book. Most importantly, they taught me, an educated man for whom this book was designed, many things about this book that I overlooked or missed entirely.

Book clubs question and blur the traditional roles of students and teachers. Upon reflection, at many points during the book club discussions, it is uncertain who is playing which role and at which point in time. However, the learning did not stop. Instead it continued at such a pace that it was impossible for everyone not to learn something
new on almost a daily basis. When all teachers begin to establish an environment which is open to its community of learners, the group will begin to take on the role of community members of learning. It is in this space that authentic dialogue can take place and students can engage or re-engage in our classrooms. Students will begin to work collectively, as demanded both by the book club as well as general society, and co-construct knowledge and understanding. They will begin to learning problem-solving strategies that will meet not only their academic and social needs in school, but their personal needs throughout space and time. It is at this point that authentic learning takes place and students become teachers, and teachers become students.
Bibliography


