THE EFFECT OF USING BOOK CLUBS TO IMPROVE LITERACY AND BUILD A LEARNING COMMUNITY AMONG UNDER-PERFORMING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

Although literature has extensively documented the stereotypes of developing learning communities in schools through book clubs—especially to improve literacy—little is revealed about varied indicators of improvements, such as student self-identification, authentic dialogues, and transforming small groups into learning communities. In this respect, formal efforts on adopting book clubs to improve literacy in Saudi Arabia are simply absent. This thesis presents research findings that seek to explore the effect of book clubs on improving literacy and building a learning community among seventh-grade, under-performing students in Canada. This thesis is contextualized through a thorough review of related literature and discussion of findings from classroom observations, and students’ interviews. The completion of this thesis indicates positive, causal relationships between using a book club as a learning tool and building a learning community, thus improving literacy. The research concludes with implications for using book clubs in Saudi Arabia.
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For my Grandmother,
whom I love and miss so much,
I dedicate this thesis to your soul.
I know that you would be proud of me.
You are always in my heart.
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Chapter One:
Introduction to the Study

Who I Am

I set up the context for this study by exploring my history with reading and schooling in Saudi Arabia. The study reported here, explores the concept of reading in a social context, specifically, a book club. My topic and research questions are informed by the history and culture that I bring to it; hence, I establish my personal landscape for this study.

My history as a child.

In Saudi Arabia, the experience of a book club in my 16 years of education, from elementary school to graduating from university, never emerged. Indeed, the concept of reading, particularly for pleasure and in social groups, was foreign and unfamiliar. Reading seemed limited to assigned textbooks from school. At least from my vantage point, reading ranked low on national and even educational agendas; people did not seem to value reading.

In spite of growing up in this context, I consider myself a reader. My father encouraged me to read and, in fact, gave me money to buy books. When I read something I liked, I immediately talked to him about it and then he would proceed to read it. My siblings, on the other hand, did not read and seem to have little interest in books. When they had spare time, they spent it in playing games, watching TV, or browsing the internet. My siblings and relatives read only when necessary, which seemed to include limited reading from what they saw on the internet. When they looked for information, they simply browsed the internet and read about it. So while they did read, they limited their reading to what the internet offered. They never learned to enjoy reading as a social act or as an activity in which they could enjoy. Instead, they learned to read by necessity and, as a result, their attitudes reflected this.
As I matured, my reading did as well. Reading, I recognized, was intricately connected to writing in a way that each one’s improvement affects the other skill, and vice versa. I was a reader who loved to read everything, and this helped me to learn new vocabulary each time I read a new text book. Consequently, this newfound vocabulary began to appear in my writing.

**Me as a teacher.**

Teaching is my chosen path, and I could not imagine choosing any other career. I often wonder why I feel as passionate about teaching as I do, and why it means so much to me. I believe it is a result of my personal experiences as a student and teacher. Yet, I cannot attribute this to the ways my education developed and unfolded. I am convinced that my education was very limited to teacher-centered and rote memory. I imagine that had my education been richer, more developmental, and more deeply engaging in the content and process of learning, I would be more creative and productive. The way I learned, using rote learning, affected my thinking in a way that made my critical thinking skills weak. Yet, in spite of what I perceive as a less than adequate educational journey, I became a good student and imagined myself becoming a teacher.

As a student, I blamed teachers for not demanding the absolute highest standards. This was because I valued their role in classroom and in my life, and the impact they had on students, as well as myself. I blamed them for not caring if the students understood the lessons they delivered, or not. I always wanted the teachers to make sure we comprehended the information, or not. I expected them to check the students' understanding and to have different instructional methods that they can use in teaching. Nevertheless, I became a
teacher, in part, to make a difference and to renegotiate how teaching and learning happens in Saudi Arabian classrooms.

From these experiences, I identified two important aspects in my profession I wanted to achieve: enhancing my pedagogical practice and being knowledgeable about subject matter. I realized how significant it was for me to be conscious of teaching decisions and aware of applying effective pedagogical strategies in the classroom. Moreover, I realized how it is important for me to be aware about the subject I am teaching.

During my teaching, I learned how important it is to encourage and develop a need for lifelong learning. When I started to teach, I was not well equipped for this demanding career. As a result, I was learning every day. By that time I started to know what works and what does not work in my classes, regarding teaching methods. Teachers continue to learn, as students do. Therefore, being a teacher does not mean that upon graduation the learning process ends, because teachers continue to learn from their students every day, as well as in their teaching practices. They will learn from their mistakes and, eventually learn how to function professionally in the classroom. From my experience as a teacher I noticed that the real success I had was when my students remembered what they had learned, even after their exams. I realize the challenges teachers face when trying to helping their students’ achieve their highest levels of success; however, this will happen if teachers believe in themselves, their students, and in dedicate their work to this goal.

**My education.**

**Beginning the journey.**

From the beginning of my educational journey, I was aware that having my Bachelor’s degree in English language and literature would provide me with an only teaching
job, and would not, unfortunately, help me develop and improve the education system in Saudi Arabia. I was not satisfied with this realization, so I started to look for the right path that would help me achieve my goal. My first step was to complete my Master’s degree. I struggled between two different paths—to apply for the Master’s program in Saudi Arabia and stay with my family or to apply for a Master’s program abroad. However, circumstances and opportunities played an important role in my decision. With no Master’s degree program in curriculum studies and teacher development in Jeddah, the city I lived in at that time, I made the decision to study abroad.

**Starting at OISE.**

I applied and was accepted at OISE/University of Toronto. This fulfilled a promise and dream for me. Instantly, however, the letter of acceptance also brought questions and concerns. I worried about entering a new academic and cultural context and worried about the classes, colleagues, professors and how I would perform in this well-known university. I was full of energy and excitement, as well as fear and anxiety.

As an international student, new to the country, culture, and graduate studies, I entered the program with more questions and concerns. I consider myself lucky to have had Dr. Kooy in my first semester at OISE, because she encouraged and supported me during this transition. She welcomed me in her course, seeming to recognize the importance of doing so, for me as an international student. With her support, I was able to find my way and develop relationships with other graduate students, some who themselves, had recently arrived from diverse national contexts. Together, this allowed me to work hard and develop myself as a student and a researcher who wanted to investigate various areas in the education field. I
consider Dr. Kooy one of the most important people I met, as she affected me positively and supported me fully, during my studies at OISE.

Nevertheless, in my first class, I was nervous because it seemed all my colleagues had broad experiences in teaching. Also, some were head of departments, while others were principals of schools. As a relatively young graduate student, I felt inexperienced. However, it encouraged me to challenge myself and perform better as a graduate student. I learned to ask questions, and call for support and knowledge.

**Shifting Point**

My research readings about education, book clubs, and social learning in my master courses was a shifting point that affected my point of view towards teaching and learning. As a result, I decided to enter Canadian schools and know more about the differences between Canadian and Saudi educational systems. I started to ask questions about reading and looked at the books teachers used in their classrooms. Through my readings, I was introduced to the concept of using a book club as a tool of teaching and learning. I started to ask questions about how social learning can help teachers and students reach better achievements. From here I found myself enthusiastic to explore new methods of teaching literacy.

**Cultural Differences (Entering the Educational Landscape of Ontario)**

Being from a different culture and educational system (for instance, in Saudi Arabia, boys and girls are educated in single-gendered schools) made me aware and inspired to explore a new education system, specifically, to learn and understand the differences between Saudi Arabia and Canada. This led me to seek opportunities to observe and participate in the Canadian urban school system. The most difficult question I faced during this process, was deciding where I should start.
What I learned along the way is that most countries have similar problems in their education systems, regardless of their cultural differences and environment. I would not have learnt this fact if I was not in OISE’s classes. During these classes people from different countries began talking about the difficulties they have in schools as teachers. Through these discussions, it became apparent that there were several common problems that different students with different perspectives shared from different countries. What I noticed is that while we know the problems and we suggest solutions, we rarely apply them and follow up to improve what we are doing.

**Focusing My Studies**

**Literacy.**

My main interest has always been literacy, this may be because I am an EFL teacher or simply because I am a person who enjoys reading. At the beginning I was not sure where I belonged, but after taking different courses I put literacy as a priority on my list of interests. Learning reading and writing involved effort from teachers and parents, as well as students. When I first came to Toronto I was shocked that people read everywhere, in cafés, subways, buses, and while walking on the street. There is no specific age, gender, or place for reading - because everybody reads everywhere.

**Reading.**

Looking back to my childhood, I cannot forget how I learned to read because the process was meaningful and remarkable. Since I was the first child and my mother was not working to assist me in my studying, I was lucky to get her attention all the time, including when learning how to read. She used to type new vocabulary on a large piece of paper using colors as indicators to remind me of the differences between words. My mom used to buy me
picture stories that with her help, I created and wrote their words to. Moreover, she encouraged me to read different materials such as, cartoon magazines, wordless books, and short stories. I grew up gaining this habit and I can say I am addicted to reading. It became my hobby or a healthy habit, if I can say so, as it exercised my brain.

Unfortunately, this was not the case with other students, as the reality that I realized during my school years was that most kids hated reading and they used to wonder how, someone like me, could enjoy it. Looking for the reasons behind this, I discovered that parents played an essential role in the way that a child perceives and enjoys reading. If children have grown up in an environment that encourages reading, this could affect them positively; however, this is not a generalization. Although parents have much to do with helping their kids learn to read and write, teachers have the biggest part in this task, because they spend several hours per day with them in schools. Moreover, teachers can apply more strategies using the different materials the schools provide and can take advantage of having many students in the class. This makes it easier for them to teach using group work, pair work, and several other strategies in classrooms.

In Grade 6, I went with my father to the largest bookstore in Saudi Arabia, and the moment I entered the bookstore I cried. This reaction resulted from the question that came to my mind, regarding how much information I knew. I was only in Grade 6, yet I realized that if I wrote down all that I had learned it would be nothing compared to the thousands of books in this bookstore. This led me to wonder how I could gain a broader sense of knowledge. I do not remember any teacher encouraging me to read in my elementary school. I do not know the reasons for kids hating to read and write. Sometimes I blame technology or teachers, but I do not know who is truly responsible for this attitude towards literacy. As elementary
students, we did not have to read more than the texts that teachers use in their classrooms. I do not remember any extra assigned readings that I did. I did not possess any books in my elementary school, except for the texts for each subject, and the short stories and cartoon magazines my family bought me.

As a reader, I did not limit my readings to Arabic books and I expanded my readings to include English books. I am sure if I knew more languages, I would not hesitate to also read books in those languages. I read such classics as Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and many more. When I was telling this to my friends, they were saying things such as, "Who still reads Shakespeare?" The answer was always me and the others who love literature and reading. Amongst my family and friends, very few stick out as avid readers. As I previously mentioned, my siblings prefer to spend hours playing electronic games, rather than reading. I often wonder, with the advancement of technology and other trends, if there will be anyone who reads books in the future.

When I was teaching adults at the university level, I was shocked when I once asked my students if they read recreationally, and they replied that they do not. As an EFL teacher, I encouraged them to read English stories and books in order for them to learn English. With my class, I discussed the importance of them to read and how reading regularly helps them to become fluent readers, especially in other languages. I suggested some books like ‘Who Moved my Cheese’, ‘Secret’ and ‘Peaks and Valleys’, and I was surprised that soon after, the majority of my students started to read. At this point I stopped and I did not think about how I could further help them sustain this as a habit. One year later, I had the answer from one of Dr. Kooy’s classes, which is establishing book clubs in the school setting.
Learning the Context of Canadian Education

As a student.

In the winter of 2010, during my first semester at OISE, I was taking a course called, "curriculum innovation in teacher education", with Dr. Mary Kooy. In her class, I began to compare education systems in Canada and Saudi Arabia. As a result, I decided to attend an elementary class. I contacted students in the class and Robb responded saying that I was always welcome to observe his Grade 2/3 class. This initiated a relationship that has resulted in collaborate research. This class influenced me as I started to look at the reasons some kids hate reading and writing. Moreover, as a student in Canada, I started to look at possible research topics that I could investigate. This experience made me realize the area I would like to research, which is literacy.

As a teacher.

An assignment to conduct a small research study caused considerable panic and uncertainty. I kept asking myself how I could do such a thing, without having access to schools. Who would be my participants? Attending Robb's classes encouraged and inspired me in many different ways. The possibility of working with Robb's students was the beginning of the collaboration. My research topic was exploring the effectiveness of using group work among Grades 2/3 through reading a story.

To start this project, I built a good rapport between the students and myself. I used to go for observations and tried to assist those who needed my help. Then gradually the rapport between the students and me was built. I explained to them how I needed their cooperation to conduct my research and how I would be glad if I could have the opportunity to work with
intelligent students, like them. I was lucky that the students were engaged by what I did, and I was surprised how they were enthusiastic all the time that I worked with them.

My idea was to read a story to Grade 2/3 students without completing it to the end, and to divide the students into groups and ask each group to complete the story according to what they think would happen. My target behind this was to stimulate them to use their creativity and productivity through cooperation with other individuals. When I mentioned this idea to Robb, he stated that his students do not love writing and they may not do it. Frankly, I was worried because this was the research I would submit for my course and it will be difficult for me to fail at my first attempt to investigate an inquiry. After much consideration, I realized there was no harm in trying my idea, and even if I did not succeed in working with those kids, at least I could explore the reasons behind this and try to solve them.

When Robb told me that his students did not like writing, I knew how this attitude is universal and realized that, even outside Saudi Arabia, there are those who do not like reading or writing. In the end, however, I was satisfied with the students’ performance in the reading lesson. Most notably, I used a wordless book and the students wrote the entire story from the beginning to the end - instead of reading a story and leaving the end open for them to create according to their imaginations. They wrote wonderful stories and they loved what they were doing. This demonstrated that it is the teachers who determine the students’ achievement. If teachers expect more, they will get more, but if they expect less, they will get less.

After finishing the winter semester working with Robb, we said good bye to each other and I thanked him for his kindness and cooperation. It was really a remarkable
experience that supported my theory of believing in our students' abilities. This experience provided me with self-confidence and a strong start as a researcher. It also helped me to attend classes in one of Ontario's schools.

Community of learning.

In summer 2010, for the second time I was taking a course with Mary and again I had to conduct a research study. This time, however, Mary gave us the choice either to conduct the research individually or collaboratively. Coincidently, Robb was in the same class and I felt lucky having had a chance to already work with him collaboratively. The course was "communities of learning". In this course I was introduced to the idea of building a learning community through using book clubs. I wondered how this could help and what the consequences were of using book clubs in the school setting. Dr. Kooy distributed a list of various books and asked each one in the class to choose the book that he or she would like to read for the book club, and I choose to read ‘Still Alice’. She gave us enough time to read the books and eventually the book club day of discussion arrived. She divided us into groups according to the books that we had read and we started the book club. Coincidently, Robb chose the same book as mine and was a member of the same book club. We discussed the book with three more students and it was amazing how our discussion gradually developed and moved on to include our teaching practices, our students, and our desire to try a book club in our schools.

In one of the classes, Dr. Kooy started by asking us to discuss our research topics with other colleagues and I was sitting next to Robb, who started to talk about his summer class which was a Grade 7/8. He said that he mentioned the idea of the book club, such as we were doing in Dr. Kooy’s class, with these students and they were enthusiastic to try it
themselves. They asked him to do a book club in the class, and what appealed to them the most was the ability to choose the book they would like to use. The ability to choose the book is not normally an option for them in their other classes, as they usually read the books their teachers assign to them.

I was happy to hear this from Robb and I said it sounds great, but he did not look as sure and I asked if there was a problem. While we were walking to get beverages during the break, Robb started to explain what summer school means in Canada and he told me that these students did not match the requirements of their grade level, how they were advised to do summer school, and how they were from different schools. He told me that they called them "remedial students", and how they needed help with their writing and reading because they were underperforming. I looked at him and encouraged him to give the book club a try, nonetheless.

The Context of the Study

Initiating the study.

In the following class, Robb told me that the students had picked the book, ‘Three Cups of Tea’, to read. I was shocked, commenting that I thought this was a hard text for them to read, especially as they are remedial students. However, I also told Robb that you never know what could happen, if given the chance. Then it was my turn to talk about my research idea and I told Robb I was also thinking of trying a book club. Unfortunately, I was not teaching in Toronto and did not have a class to establish a book club in. At that moment I remembered that Dr. Kooy had said that this time we could work collaboratively in conducting the research. I expressed my desire to join Robb’s book club and work with him, and he accepted my offer. We went to Dr. Kooy and expressed our idea to work together and
told her about our questions, but she suggested for us to narrow it down because we had too many. What interested her most was our question of whether or not; these struggling students could read the lengthy and challenging book, ‘*Three Cups of Tea*’.

**Questions for the study.**

The course I had in the summer with Mary Kooy about building a community of learning, inspired me and initiated the following research questions: (a) Can we establish book clubs in schools, universities, and colleges in Saudi Arabia?; (b) will this way of building a community work in Saudi Arabia?; (c) how do book clubs affect students' learning?; and (d) will book clubs help with enhancing the students' performances and in what ways can we make this applicable in schools?

**Concerns for the study.**

Despite our cultural and background differences, Robb and I were thinking alike and we had the same questions. Our questions were: (a) Does a community of learning impact students' academic competence and knowledge; (b) Does it affect students’ identity of self and confidence levels; (c) Does it help them construct knowledge in an authentic manner; (d) Does it assist them in their critical and meta-cognitive thinking; and (e) Does it foster co-construction of new knowledge in a social group setting.

Robb and I agreed to investigate these topics and to try to find answers for our questions. We were encouraged and supported by Dr. Kooy to work collaboratively. This led us to conduct our research on how literacy can be used to build a sense of community within a classroom setting, and how using a book club impacts student performances.
The role of book clubs in this study.

If my experiences are any indication, schools in Saudi Arabia neglect to promote connections between students and books. When I was in elementary school, I always heard that the book is your best friend, and that you can spend your time with books whenever you want. I did not understand what this meant until I entered high school. I realized that you need to set an appointment with anyone before you meet; however, the book is next to you every time you want to read and stop feeling lonely. Moreover, I realized that books are your gateway to learning about other cultures and languages.

The friend you have may be an expert in a specific field of study and knows a lot about it, but this friend may lack knowledge in other fields. However, the book is your best friend that knows everything. If we help our students to understand this concept and encourage reading in elementary school, this will help them to become strong in literacy.

When I think about book clubs, I am inspired to try one in an informal setting, such as with my family, and that I should also try one with my students. I am an English teacher in a non English speaking country. We consider English a foreign language, not as a second language. Thus, Arabic is our language that we use in everything and even if we start to learn English from Grade 6, we do not have a place to practice it yet.

As a result, when I was teaching at the university level the students came with no English skills and I started to teach them the basics, which was hard as I was supposed to cover the curriculum I have in a specific time. My task was to teach them, in a limited time, the basics by using extra handouts, while also teaching them all the mandated lessons from the English department. It was overwhelming and now I realized that if I had known before about implementing a book club in classes to improve literacy, I would not have had to suffer
as I did. I am not sure if this idea will work with them; however, I think there is a hope that if I make the students engaged by having a choice in a place where they have had no choices, as students, this may create the difference in their learning.

**The purpose of the study.**

This research is important because it is examining the reasons behind why students fail and struggle in learning literacy skills. It is highlighting some of the missing aspects in the educational context in elementary schools. This research is looking to alternatives than the traditional approaches towards teaching literacy. It is examining the effects of using a book club as a tool that helps initiate a learning community. Moreover, it is examining the impact of the learning community on the students' academic performances. This study will help to (a) explore the impact of using a book club in building a learning community (b) To examine the effect of using a book club on the students' academic performance (c) To examine the relation between implementing a book club among under-performing students and self-identification (d) To explore the impact of reading in a social context (e) To explore the impact of the book club on the small community and the larger community and (f) To offer further suggestions and new teaching practices that may improve the learning and teaching of literacy.

**Research Questions**

My main research question is:

**How does using book clubs build learning communities that improve literacy among elementary students?**

Related research questions:
1. How does a small group become a community of learning?

2. How do the social dialogical interactions affect and shape learning?

3. How does a community of learning impact the students' academic performance?

The Following Chapters

The second chapter details current research in literacy, learning, and communities of learning. It presents the significance of this research. Chapter three details the study design and rationale. The fourth chapter explains what took place during the study, and the fifth chapter presents some of the implications for teaching and learning literacy, such as what it means and why this is important for teachers and their practices.
Overview of My Research

Significance of the research.

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 their effects as well as why these practices are failing to connect with students’ learning strategies and realities.

How am I situated in the research? In the summer of 2010, Robb taught a literacy summer course for approximately 20 under-achieving students. In this course, I joined the students who 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 labeled 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)
Current Relevant and Related Research

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.
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, pp. 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 will 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).

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, 1983, pp. 62-63)

According to Parker and 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.

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 ask: "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 with deTar, 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.

Communities of learning and authentic dialogue.

According to Alvermann and Phelps (2002) "creating a favorable 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 favorable 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 conversation, “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?

**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 Robb's classroom this summer. Before arriving in his classroom, they had been labeled 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 behaviors. 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 he had experienced similar encounters in his 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?

**What the Research Tells Us**

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, this leads Robb to believe that there is a systemic problem that exists in the system. He 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 Canadian current educational systems and in 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.
Robert Walters

The first lesson I learned at OISE when I started my Master’s Graduate Program was the freedom to allow your investigation to take its course, to open new ways of thinking and understanding. I used to think about the results before I start collecting data but I realized that it is better to decide your topic, set your questions, recruit your participants and conduct your research, then see to where this will take you. In some cases, we will find that our conclusions meet our expectations. However, in other cases we will be surprised and get more than what we expected or less because we are dealing with humans who have different perspectives, backgrounds and personalities. In summer 2010, when I was introduced to the idea of using the book club as a tool to build community of learning and improve literacy, I was so excited and hoped if I have a chance to try it with students in a formal setting.

During this semester, Robb 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 he was assigned was literacy. Robb, the ‘math guy’, was expected to help under-performing students improve their understanding in reading and writing! He felt overwhelmed and excited all at the same time. Most concerning, he was nervous how this teaching schedule would coincide with his learning schedule in a graduate class. Nonetheless, he felt up to the challenge and pushed forward.

After Robb's first week of teaching, his first class of the semester began. As the class settled down, he recognized a few people; one of those people was me. 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 Robb feverishly began preparing ideas focused in mathematics. While doing this, his teaching class continued to move forward.

Both Robb and I experienced a significant learning experience in the summer school classroom. He was working with a group of students that: (a) had never really met one another as they were all from different schools, (b) were at an age that he was vaguely familiar with professionally but had limited teaching experience with, and (c) had been identified with significant learning gaps and gaps of knowledge in their literacy understanding. Upon completion of a diagnostic assessment, he 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 Robb 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 Robb 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. Robb knew he needed to act but he felt he
was completely out of his realm on this matter. So, he reached out to his peers in his classes at OISE.

At OISE, many people lent a sympathetic ear and offered Robb a variety of different strategies he could try. But, given the fact that the summer school course he was teaching was so short, he was not certain they would be able to have any meaningful impact. He decided to curtail these conversations while at OISE and focus more on the work that he 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. Robb was so excited about this idea and about the book he was reading that this excitement spilled over to his teaching.

During an early morning discussion, Robb shared with his students that he was excited about his schooling as he was going to be participating in a book club. He shared the details and the reasons why he was excited and the book he was reading, ‘Still Alice’. After this discussion, he returned to the normal routine and stuck to the teacher guide provided to him by the TDSB. It had asked him to read them a picture book called ‘Listen to the Wind’. It is a great picture book but not necessarily one he would have selected for this age group as it seemed far below their level. Regardless, he read the book aloud twice as the students had a snack just as he would to his Grade 2 class that he 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, yet 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 off-topic remarks. 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 students seemed supportive and the naysayers stopped their comments. Robb told the students he would consider it but that he needed to think about it some more first.

For the next several days, a few students continued to ask about a book club. Finally, one student asked him “what are you thinking about exactly?” This student in particular was fairly articulate when she spoke but generally quiet. Her question caught him off guard. What was he thinking about? He knew exactly what his thought were but how could he 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 he had read to them only days early yet they wanted to be responsible to decide on a book to study in a book club? What he was thinking about was how this idea seemed ridiculous if not, impossible and he did not want to support it feeling that it would be a waste of time.

Seeing that he was not yet convinced, two students proposed that they 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 they 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. Robb acknowledged their creativity and promised he would find out if he could make it work.
Once again, back in class at OISE, Robb needed to share what took place in that classroom with someone. Several of his colleagues listened as he shared with them the students’ proposal and his 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 he 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 him or match his research interests so he began to work alone.

In one of the summer classes at the break, Robb 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, ‘Still Alice’. We shared similar feelings about the book and the structure of the book club itself which helped us to bond. As Robb and I know each other for some period, he decided to share with me his dilemma with his Summer School students. I patiently listened until he finished. Although I did not respond immediately, when I did respond, I was very clear; “So what? Go for it!” I felt as though there could be no harm done by letting the students read the text they requested. I then suggested he uses this group somehow in his research inquiry project and shared with him how jealous I was that he 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.

When the professor suggested collaboration for shared interest in conducting research, I suggested to Robb that we create and conduct a research study with the students in his summer literacy course; he immediately supported the research. After the class, we
purchased, ‘Three Cups of Tea’ and distributed them to the students who expressed their desire to join the book club. This initiated our journey of discovery.

**Research**

*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.

**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
**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.

**Population and sampling.**

**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.

Specific participants’ pseudonyms.

Rena. Rena 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.

Anita. Anita 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.

Lena. Lena 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.

**Sarah.** Sarah 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.

**Research approach.**

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

**Research design.**

A qualitative approach is appropriate as it helps we 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. (Mitchelle & Egudo, 2003, p. iii)

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.

**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.

**Ethics.**

**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.

**Analysis Plan**

**Conceptual framework.**

"Critical Epistemology" theory depends on five important aspects: first, including knowledge about what it means to students to be labeled ‘low achiever’ or ‘under-performing’ in school. This knowledge and experience help researchers to understand the meaning that is shared among participants and how it 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.

**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.

**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.

Figure 1. Conceptual map of relationships within the research variables.

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 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.

Data

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.
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 labeling 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 labeling 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.

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:

1. Create clear vision and thinking from assumptions, prior knowledge, and beliefs system

2. Adopt a perspective of unknowing by listening with a third ear

3. Write any beliefs, assumptions, preconceptions, expectations and other information that may impair hearing ability

4. 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.
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 3 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:  
Findings and Discussion

This chapter reports the findings of a study collaboratively conducted during a 4-week summer school course on literacy for four Grade 7 classes of 12-year olds, who had not achieved the standards of performance required by the province of Ontario. My participation included the collaborative planning of an alternate pedagogy for learning that included a learning community, in the form of a book club, in which the students chose their own text, establishing a schedule for discussion meetings, and creating space for students to take responsibility for their own learning.

My journey started in the summer of 2010, when I participated in a 4-week summer school course in Language and Literacy for Grade 7 students who needed to successfully complete the course. As a graduate student from Saudi Arabia new to the culture and processes of Canadian schooling, I eagerly accepted the opportunity to both observe and participate in the class. Simultaneously, I was taking a graduate class entitled, “Communities of Learning” that required conducting a small research study to examine social learning contexts. The opportunities and experiences intersected to make a study possible.

In the first week of the class, four students volunteered to create a book club. They mutually selected ‘Three Cups of Tea’ (provided) and agreed to record their thoughts and ideas on paper to prepare for the book club discussions. The students organized the time and room. Robb and I provided light refreshments and snacks for each session. The book contains 23 chapters and 349 pages with little to no illustrations throughout the text.
Although this study focused on several particular areas of interest and questions, the students determined the nature of their participation. No mandatory questions or responses were provided; however, they collectively agreed on a time frame for completing the book. It must be noted that participants were informed that, at their discretion, they could choose to write about their thoughts and ideas about the book, although this was not a requirement.

The study investigates how the social network of a book club could be used to effectively create a learning community in a classroom context. The classroom used in the study was unique, as it was not a regular classroom. Since the students fell below the standard for literacy in their second term evaluations, they were recommended to attend a remedial summer school literacy course in which this study was conducted. All participants volunteered for the study, attended public schools, and were enrolled in Grade 7 and 8 classrooms in a large urban Canadian city. The majority of the students had not met one another and therefore, the researchers believe that it was an ideal situation to investigate the concept of a social context for literacy learning in community.

**Rationale**

The students participated in the summer action research project, conducted in an English/Language Arts summer school course, through a book club where they demonstrated significant academic and literacy growth. There was a follow-up interview with two of the four students who participated in the book club in winter 2011. This research investigated how a community of learning, in the form of a book club, could have a positive impact on: (a) the small community for their learning development as well as the larger community, (b) student academic performance, (c) social interactions, and (d) student identity as readers and learners. This project uncovered some of the reasons why and how communities of learning
can be implemented as a strategy to engage students and improve self-identity and academic performance.

Throughout my experiences in school (as a student and as a teacher), I have come to realize that all too often students under-perform academically. I believe this under-performance is partially due to individualization of learning and thus, the lack of social interactions within the class community. As a result, I thought implementing a book club in a formal setting would be a perfect opportunity to bring students together and create a community that will hopefully have an impact on not only those students but the larger class as well.

Collaboration

I believe that collaboration between Robb and I helped me to explore the concepts I was researching: building a community of learners, implementing a book club in schools, and, increasing academic performance and developing social interactions. My participation in a book club/community of learning in the graduate class allowed me to understand the concept of using the book club as a tool to build a community of learners and improve literacy in classrooms. As researchers, the experience we had in CTL1007 at OISE in the book club changed our perception of teaching literacy in elementary schools. It made us think about teaching literacy that could have positive impact on different areas that help students to achieve more personally such as a positive change in identity or as a reader or writer, and academically such as their competence and skill levels in reading and writing.

As researchers, we started with building a community of learners that developed during the period of research. We started by a belief, as this research and approach was new for us, and we prepared to learn from each other and the students. Moreover, this helped me
immensely as I am unfamiliar with schooling in a Canadian context. Robb was a very important source for me as a researcher. Taking into consideration that I came from Saudi Arabia with a entirely different culture and approach to schooling and education, I enthusiastically began to explore the Canadian context and link them to my experiences as a researcher in Canada and my experiences in Saudi Arabia as a student and a teacher.

The Beginning

At the first meeting of the book club, I felt anxious and pressured. I have heard about the girls from Robb and they have heard about me from him; however, we have never actually met before. All we know is that our first meeting will be in the first gathering for the book club discussion. One of our concerns as researchers was whether to assign a certain number of chapters for students before each book club meeting, or leave it open-ended so that students could make this decision for themselves. Finally, due to time-line restrictions, we agreed to assign minimum specific chapters and encourage them to read more. However, in the discussions, we stressed that the girls should consider the assigned chapters in order not to disturb, influence, or annoy others who have not had the opportunity to read further.

I met Robb in the school for the first book club meeting and he told me that we have four girls who volunteered for the book club and that they do not know each other because this is a summer school and they came from different schools. I was thinking about their academic performance plus their relation with other peers. I arrived at school early that morning to ensure I was prepared for our meeting. I felt ambiguous, with a mixture of worry and excitement. When I walked into the classroom, I noticed it has one large chalk board, chairs, and desks - but no students are present yet. Robb and I were talking about our expectations for the first meeting and wondering if the students will read all the assigned
chapters. Will this experience succeed? We both felt uncertain. On that day, Robb told me that we will start the book club in the afternoon after they finish the classes. I was happy because this allowed me to attend the large class discussion and observe the girls and their performances prior to working with them. Moreover, this will allow the girls to see me before we start the book club discussions, as well.

After the students' arrival, Robb introduced me to the whole class. Then he started with a community circle activity that I joined, and the students started to share personal anecdotes about themselves. I too shared with them something about myself. They were curious to know about the new visitor, especially the group who volunteered to participate in the book club. On that day, the students were studying the children’s version of ‘Three Cups of Tea’. Noticeably, the girls who were reading the actual text participated much more frequently in the whole-class conversation. In addition, the quality of their responses reflected a higher level of maturity and thinking as their responses were well formulated and thoughtful and added a mature layer to the class conversation.

Within a week, they have become the students that their peers go to to ask questions for clarification. Keeping in mind that three of these girls received extremely poor marks in previous years of their formal education in their oral language abilities as well as their reading marks, this is a considerable feat. It was very exciting to see this happen. Robb actually had to try to encourage one of them to stop for a minute so we could give other students a chance to participate! I am amazed and surprised that just by treating these students as adults and giving them the choice they have been asking for was enough to change their demeanor at school, which hopefully will lead to improved overall academic and social performance.
I was impressed by the ability of the students participating in the book club. While these students did not meet the literacy standards required and are, therefore, in a summer school course, I found it difficult to believe they "failed" or were considered "remedial" students. If left to my own observations, I would identify them as students with competence in their literacy abilities.

When Robb and I discussed the idea of establishing a book club in his summer class, I was not sure that the book club would be successful; especially when I discovered that those students required remedial assistance in their literacy skills. However, I was excited to observe the social learning experience develop.

**Starting the Book Club**

When we started the book club I asked two students from the group how many chapters they had have already read. One said that she had three chapters left and the other said that she had four chapters left towards finishing the book. I was really shocked because the book is a really hard text to read for Grades 7 and 8. It is in the Grade 11 or 12 curriculum, and yet they read it in only 10 days. Why did these students require remedial assistance? Who is responsible for this determination?

At the beginning of the study, all participants replied to an oral survey indicating that they were not strong readers or writers and that they had difficulty in both areas. Rena was wondering about the marks she gets in writing and how each time she rewrites her responses to correct her mistakes, according to the teacher feedback, she got new comments to rework it again, and that her writing was still not at par with the curriculum expectations. This created an identity that she was a hard-working person and despite her efforts and following the teacher instructions, she would still receive low marks. Rena said, "I don’t like writing
because I don’t get good marks. My teachers always gives me a mark like a C 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?"

On the other hand, Lena mentioned that she does not like writing but she has no problem reading. Her only problem is that she cannot chose the texts she would like to read. Moreover, she expressed that all the assigned readings from school are boring and do not match her interests. She said, "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". Also, Anita stated, "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.".

Moreover, Sarah mentioned that she prefers to do something fun rather than reading and writing. This links with Lena ideas as both girls feel bored reading the assigned texts from school. She also complained about her writing marks like Rena, as Sarah said, "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".

It is obvious from the girls’ utterances that they have a problem enjoying the texts assigned by their teachers. Furthermore, they received low marks for their writing and are completely unaware of how to improve them. Overall, they are not interested in reading and writing and they prefer to do activities that are more fun and to spend time learning about concepts, which are aligned with their personal interests.

During our first meeting, two students admitted to not knowing each other and having attended different regular day-time schools. However, they became friends and started to talk
to each other as a result of the book club. The book club built a relationship between those students, as they keep discussing what they have read so far and reflect on some parts of the book.

**Further Thoughts**

The book club started with reading a story and progressed through establishing a community between those readers. The students did not stop on the point of talking about the book, but they expanded their discussion to include their lives, beliefs, opinions, and ideas. They learned how to listen to each other, how to respect each other, and how to help each other. I asked the students to write a few sentences about the book and what they learned. I was surprised that they kept writing until they had finished several paragraphs and expressed their opinions enthusiastically. The one hour time limit passed very quickly and I felt that they wanted to talk more and were enjoying the discussions. I kept asking myself if this was because it is not a mandatory reading or a mandatory task, and if it was mandatory, would they still be productive and enthusiastic.

In my second meeting with the students, I felt that they were still shy. However, they talked about their experience with the book and discussed the process. They emphasized the importance of "choice", as they preferred to choose the book and not being assigned to read a certain book. One of the students mentioned that she participated in a book club before; however, she did not like it because the students had no choice in deciding which book to read and they had to answer certain questions that the teacher gave after reading the book. All the students without exception stated that they liked when they had the choice for determining the book that they read and they were happy that they do not have to answer specific questions, as they prefer open-ended questions that do not test them.
Furthermore, the students knew each other and became friends because of the book club. They knew things about each other and they continued contacting each other, even when the school days ended. They liked the process of the book club and expressed their readiness to repeat the experience if they had the chance again. Moreover, they told us that the rest of the students who were not participating in the book club, were asking them some questions about the book and they responded to them enthusiastically. What great students they were. I was so impressed with their ability to read, write, discuss, critique, agree, disagree and communicate their ideas.

In my last book club meeting, the students felt more comfortable and started to talk more about the book at the beginning. They discussed some significant parts, expressing their different perspectives with respect to others. Then they moved on to talk about their schools, classes, and teachers. Furthermore, they talked about what they liked and what they disliked. At this point, I realized exactly what the benefits of book clubs are. It is not only about reading a book and building a community that discusses that book; instead, it is about opening new horizons of talking about teaching practices. What I noticed is that each book club meeting was different than the previous one. The more we meet, the more established the friendships in this book club became and, as a result, we felt more connected with one another and more willing to share our ideas openly. This is partially because we do not feel insecure any more as no one is a stranger and we feel like we are a family in this book club. We felt more comfortable by the time and our social interactions developed.

These girls stated before the book club how they did not enjoy reading and writing. However, after the book club, they filled a written survey and their opinions radically changed. Rena said, "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!"

Anita also mentioned:

[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.

Moreover Sarah's perspective towards book club changed as she stated, "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”.

**Major Findings**

As the study progressed, the results show that building a community of learning has an impact on the small community, as well as the larger community of the students involved. Moreover, it was apparent that this community of learning enhanced the academic performance of the students who participated in the book club. Consequently, these social learning tools established a relationship between the students who were from different schools prior to the summer school. The enhancing of the students' academic performance affected the students' self-identification. Although the results are unable to conclusively or concretely measure and answer all of these questions, the findings demonstrate some understanding and insights into how communities of learning affect student behavior and learning in and outside of the classroom. I will present the data by listing all the themes I had under each question while referring to the students' statements.
Research Questions

How does a community of learning impact the small community of those students involved in the book club?

Two major themes emerged from this question. The first is the students' attitudes in the book club meetings. The second is their attitudes outside the school.

Students' attitude in the book club.

Through observations, it became apparent that the book club format was an effective strategy for creating community amongst a small group of students. Initially, the girls were shy and timid and spoke very little. They were hesitant to share their ideas and rarely would disagree with a peer’s opinion. Over the course of this study, the girls soon began to demonstrate higher levels of comfort with their group members as well as the researchers. This was noted in the way the girls sat (in the beginning it was very regimented and they sat in chairs singly – in the end they often sat on the desk or shelving unit most often touching each other while they spoke, doing each others’ hair, or leaning on one another). Rena said, "[At first] I was really shy about expressing my ideas and disagreeing with others."

I can highlight how this small community taught us, as book club members, relational learning. This appeared in a way that students started to ask us as researchers about our universities and, specifically, they asked me about my culture, background, and the reason why I am in Toronto. It is not only the book club that we discussed with those students; it is also about ourselves as humans who have different backgrounds, cultures, and interests.

Anita [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.

**Students' attitudes outside the school.**

In addition, some of the girls had 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. The students, as well as the researchers, 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.

On the other hand, this built a strong relation and extended our professional knowledge between Robb and me as we started to discuss each meeting together and reflect on the students' attitudes. We telephoned and emailed each other regularly regarding our research project and our career as teachers. We started to discuss our teaching practices and share personal anecdotes that we experienced in the classroom. This would not have happen if we did not initiate the book club.

That small community included 6 members, 4 under-performing students and two researchers. There was a connection between the whole 6 members and another connection between the researchers and a third one between the 4 students. These relationships would not exist without the book club. That actual book connected the group as readers. The discussion then extended this connection beyond reading to a level of a strong relation that exceeded the academic angle and established social interactions.
How does a community of learning impact the larger community of the whole class?

Throughout linking between Robb's classes that I observed, which include the book club students and the other students, I noticed how the small community of the book club expanded to create a larger community that involves class peers. This larger community shares two major themes A) rich discussions and, B) peer relations.

Rich discussion.

Through my observations, I noticed that the book club members participated 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 stated that by participating in this club, they felt more comfortable speaking about the book as they understood it more clearly. Anita said, "I got comfortable around my classmates. It helped me participate more in class."

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 ‘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 (i.e., Point of View on 9/11). Lena said, "I got comfortable [speaking and interacting] around my classmates".

Peer relations.

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. Anita stated:

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.

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.

**How does a community of learning impact the students’ academic performance?**

As this research was divided into two periods, the book club and the follow up interview, there was a period of 6 months between the two periods which helped us as researchers to highlight the academic performance by looking to the students’ grades following the book club, immediately comparing this to their performance before they started and one semester after the book club.

**Before and after the book club immediately.**

What impact does a book club have on individual academic performance? 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 (Anita, Lena, and Sarah) 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. Anita, Lena and Sarah 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. Rena received a report consisting entirely of Met Expectations.

One semester after the book club.

The follow up interview was held in winter 2011, so the students finished the fall semester after the book club. When asking them about their marks in reading, writing and oral skills, they stated that there was a noticeable improvement. Rena said "my marks are improving I guess for reading and writing and just like oral marks … They really were Cs maybe C- or C+ and they went like to high Bs". Also Anita said that "For me my reading and writing marks have improved because last year I got like high Cs. Now I am getting high Bs because in summer school, I learned how to answer questions and we do that a lot this year. My oral marks had increased too".
This shows how the book club improved the students in a noticeable way. I can tell that the book club was a part that helped the students, as I should mention that Robb's strategies that he used to teach the students important literacy skills added to the book club benefits. I would also like to refer to the fact that the book club period was short; only 4 weeks in duration. What impact can we have if we had more time and implement the book club in a regular classroom?

**How does a community of learning impact the students' social interactions and performance?**

*Social interactions and performance.*

Although many examples have been recorded of how this club had a positive impact on the students’ social interactions and performances, it is important, however, to discuss this as a separate entity. Within the group, it is evident that the social interactions were more positive after the book club was initiated. This can be seen by the number of incidents in which the researchers noticed the students talking to each other, laughing and having conversations about what takes place in and outside schools.

More interestingly, the researchers noticed how this affected the members’ participation in whole-class discussions, as well. The members more frequently participated in whole-class discussions and would more frequently speak up when they disagreed with a peer while supporting their argument. Rena said, "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". Previously, these students infrequently participated in discussions and on no occasion did they outwardly disagree with any non-member.
"For us in summer school, 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", stated Rena. It is how students started with no relationships and following their participation in the book club, they established a deep, connected friendship with one another because they shared their thoughts about the book. This is not only exclusive to the book club members, as through time other students in the class started to ask book club members and talk with them. Gradually, those students began communicating with one another more regularly and friendships slowly developed, which extended beyond the class. More importantly their discussions also extended beyond assigned class work to include facts from their life and other topics.

How does a community of learning impact the students' identity and confidence level?

Self-identification.

The students who participated in the book club were labeled as "under-performing students". Their reception to this label was not negotiable and they accepted this as a fact which apparently came from their teachers and schools. Consequently, this affected their performance and made them believe they cannot read or write. As elementary students, they are not unable to identify the meaning and impact regarding this label nor are they able to overcome it or change it with ease. They were as their teachers believed them to be, and not given the consideration that they could improve their abilities. This label affected their self-confidence and they were no more able to see themselves as students who can improve their academic performance and meet the expectations for their grade level. 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 positively influenced. Sarah said, "I enjoy reading to my own limit", while Anita said, "I did enjoy the book club. It was an amazing experience. I would organize a book club [in my own school]." "I would love to participate in this [the book club] again if it was in a regular classroom", shared Rena.

The students’ experiences in the book club made them feel that they have a voice to share because, as researchers, we told them from the beginning that we are all equal in this book club. We can share, agree, and disagree with respect to others' opinions. This built a level of trust, which resulted in initiating the self confidence in the students. Consequently, this resulted in changing their identity from non-readers and non-writers to readers and writers. Moreover, this changed their identity from under-performing students to students who met the expectations. This change in self-identification affected their academic performance and improved their grades.

**Elements for Effective Learning Community**

What makes this book club different from other book clubs? Or why do we consider this book club to be successful? This question was not in our initial research questions. After conducting the research, we realized that there are some effective elements for community of learners that should be highlighted.

Throughout the research, the data demonstrates there are 5 key elements that are present in an effective learning community that students feel are important: (1) choice (2), structure and format (3), collective establishment (4), collective and collaborative learning (5), and a level of trust and understanding or comfort level.
Choice.

The most obvious observation that resulted from this study is that students (even those who are deemed as under-achieving in the regular classroom), perform better and produce work demonstrating higher level thinking when they are provided an authentic learning opportunity that they are interested in. This is most effectively established when students are provided choice in their learning goals. Rena took it upon herself to create notes for each chapter as she read the book. Sometimes they were notes about what she thought was strange or peculiar, and sometimes they were questions. At times, she would even write down a word that she was unfamiliar with so that she could find its specific meaning later on, so it “don’t disrupt [her] reading”. When questioned why she put so much effort into this book study, she responded she wanted to since it was a book she selected to read.

Choice was really important and significant for the students. It makes them feel that their voices are included and it builds a level of trust between them and their teachers. They believe that choice leads to interesting education, which in turn, encourages them to learn more and think differently and more critically.

Anita: 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.

Giving the students a choice to select the book they would like to read and giving them the choice to determine the strategies they use in reading the book is crucial for them. It makes them carry the responsibility for their learning and it makes them choose the best way
that helps them to improve. Students were offered as much choice as possible, as frequently as possible.

    Rena: 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.

    When the students 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. Lena said, "this was worth reading and I want to read it and that makes a big difference [because she chose the text herself]". On the other hand, Sarah said, "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."

    Some students like to write notes while others like to highlight the important quotes in the book. Also, some of them prefer to summarize each chapter. I think our goal is to support our students to learn and if we make it open for them, this will facilitate their learning.

    Anita: 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.

**Open ended structure, relaxed format and setting.**

The impact of this semi-structured book club with a relaxed setting was obvious in the students' responses. “I’ve been in a book related activity but the teacher just mainly gave
us questions to do and what to read up toll. But, in this book club it was a real change”, explained Rena. Seen here, this student cites that, in her belief, the open-ended structure and setting for the book club both contributed to her high level of engagement. This theme was noted several times throughout the study by other students as well. Rena mentioned that in her class book club, they have to answer specific questions for each section. She explained that her other teacher ” makes us read a section of the book in class, we have people taking turns in reading out loud and then she gives us questions about it in the ending like when we done the section.”

Based on these observations and anecdotal surveys, the research supports the claim that organizing a book club in a relaxed setting with open-ended questions reduces student pressure and allows them to truly think, take risks, and share ideas without worrying. In turn, this leads to rich, engaging conversations and discussions promoting thinking, re-evaluation, and reflection.

Although teachers should ask open-ended questions, they should show their students how to answer them properly. In the summer school, Robb taught the kids how to answer the questions in a well organized way. In the interview Anita said, “when we suppose to answer questions we should properly write down what we would write and then like organize it in a way like one paragraph talks about one thing and then another paragraph talks about something similar to that point but more expanding”.

The teachers’ role does not stop by establishing a book club among kids in a classroom. This is only one part as they are supposed to show students some reading and writing strategies. Moreover, they should teach them some oral skills like how to agree or
disagree with respect to others' opinions. Moreover, it is important to keep the dialogue going between all the book club members.

**Collectively established rules and routines.**

Although no particular student referred to this objective specifically, the researchers believe that part of the success of this club was a direct result of the collectively established guidelines, rules, and deadlines. This permitted students an opportunity to take control and accountability for their learning which initiated the entire project.

Even though we put guidelines for students, we were open to other suggestions and opinions. We asked the students to give us their ideas to build on this book club. We frankly told them that this is our first time to establish a book club and it is a new experience for us. I think by this frankness, we gained their trust and they reached a level of believing that we are all equal. Also, it made them feel that they play a very important role in making this a successful book club and an enjoyable experience.

As a researcher, I can tell how much this made me feel more comfortable and appear honest. Moreover, this shared the responsibility of the book club between all book club members and removed some of the onus and responsibility from the researchers. The students realized that they are responsible for their learning and they are very effective members in the book club community.

**Collective learning leading to new understandings.**

One of the important elements that made the book club successful was the cooperation between the students. The way they were listening to each other and respecting different opinions led them to new understandings. Rena said, “sometimes someone’s point
that you disagree on can, change your point as well ... other people have different ideas that I never even thought about”.

Interestingly, most of the members cited that by participating in this book club, their discussions led to new and more profound understandings of the material. The girls became interdependent on one another. Anita said, "I learned from others [during the discussions], not only myself". Also, Sarah said, "[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." "Working together with others in the book club gives me an opportunity to see things from another view ... I learn more from others too", exclaimed Rena.

Lena said, "[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." All students agreed that the discussion portion of the book club allowed them to share their ideas and create new ones during their discussions simply by hearing other students’ points of view. Thus, we believe that using a book club as a means to increase communication and lead to collective learning and new knowledge is an effective method. As Anita states:

You might be focused on one specific part that you thought it was interesting and another part you never paid attention to because the other part was more interesting for you but when someone else in the book club actually brings that part in the book club then you might think about what they learned from that part that it was actually interesting and then you pay attention, you didn’t know but they cleared it up for you.
As a researcher, I was surprised how much I changed my opinions regarding some parts of the book after I heard the students' perspectives. For example, the hero of *Three Cups of Tea* failed to climb the mountain in the opening chapter and I never thought about the reason. Then in the book club, Rena mentioned that maybe, if he didn’t fail reaching the summit, he wouldn’t be in Pakistan. I was amused and I told her that I had never thought about this. She told me that if he succeeded in reaching the summit, he would return to America. Consequently, he wouldn’t meet Pakistanis and learn about their different culture or help them.

**Safe and comfortable space.**

Anita said, "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]. Although this is a clear statement as to how it is imperative that students have a safe and comfortable space to learn in, it was reiterated several times throughout the research project. Unfortunately, students failed to, or were unable to, specify what specifically happened to make the space safe and comfortable for them thus, we believe more research should be done in this area.

As a researcher, I believe that the way we were sitting in the book club and the fact that we all have an equal say in this book club made the students feel safe and more comfortable. Also, considering that there is no evaluative grade and they will not have marks for this book club and there is no risk of failure helped them a lot. Moreover, they had a clear vision that there is no right or wrong answer because this is not to test them but to make them learn. It is how they think about the book and their interpretation. It is about how they construct knowledge and share with others. All these factors made them feel safe and
comfortable more than the regular classroom that places pressure on them and threatens their marks.

**What Is the Model That All Teachers Look For?**

I never thought about highlighting one specific student from this research over another. I think this is unfair since all students did the best according to their abilities and personalities; however, I would like to present Rena as a case study. The reason I am doing this is not to underestimate or under-value other students, but to highlight the picture that we all as teachers wish to have in all our students.

Rena caught my attention from the first day I met her for many reasons; I realized that she was willing to talk, share, and comment on any and every point. She was so involved in the book club and concerned about the texts she read. Although we did not ask the students to write notes, she did. The way she wrote her notes was unique as she wrote in sticky notes and then put them all together in one booklet out of 40 pages.

I asked her to give me this booklet, if she would not mind, and I promised to return it to her at the next meeting. I was so curious to learn what she wrote in those sticky notes and all those long pages. What surprised me most was the fact I did not understand some of the notes. Some of those were questions she would like to discuss or highlight in the book club meetings, while others were some vocabulary words she did not understand and needed clarification for. However, there were some special notes she took which nobody can understand except her. She made her own special and personal notes that helped her learn in her own way.
This made me learn a very important lesson about giving our students a space to choose the way they prefer to learn. It is unimportant how students learn as long as they are learning. This does not mean we do not watch them because we should be sure they are on the right track. I remembered that smart glance I feel when I looked to Rena's eyes when she spoke in the book club and the confidence she gained gradually. I saw in this girl a promising future and I think she will be a unique person.

In the first meeting Rena told me that she had three chapters left in the book club, then I laughed and told her I had read only five chapters. She almost read the book in 10 days while taking notes and she was very active in the book discussion, sharing her opinions and highlighting very important points for discussion. She was a dynamic student who leaded the conversations often and I was so impressed by her ability of critical thinking.

As a teacher, I wish to see this enthusiasm and hard-working attitude in all the students I teach. This is the model I am looking for and I assume if students alike have her spirit in our students, it will result in learning by desire and students will dedicate all their efforts to improving.

**Future Book Clubs**

In the interview, the students expressed their desire to tell their teachers about the book club experience and asked them to implement it in the classrooms with the same structure for some reasons. As Anita said, "I guess the students think more like get more better understanding because if they don’t understand like the certain chapter or so based on these questions different unique questions you got them, they wanna know more about the character or like other events in the book". Also, Rena said, "some students, they don’t really participate much but in a book club where there is not that many people around them and
most people like your friends and then actually you got a say in it and they don’t usually disagree with you because people are around your side when you say something ". 
Chapter 5:
Conclusion and Reflections

In this chapter, I reflect on the data and determine the interpretations of the differences arising from and through my research. The chapter is divided into five main sections:

1. Discussion / interpretation of the data;
2. Implications for teaching and learning;
3. Limitations of the study;
4. Further questions and issues; and
5. Concluding remarks.

The educational system in Saudi Arabia, with its single-gendered and teacher-centered framework, draws many remarkable interpretations and comments throughout this research. This research is one of the primary steps in improving the Saudi’s typical way of thinking regarding teaching literacy and student-centered processes. This research has also had personal academic enhancement on me, as a teacher and a student. One of the emerging considerations from the completion of this research includes addressing how and why we need to rethink traditional, teacher-centered, curriculum-dominated approaches regarding literacy teaching and learning in elementary schools.
Interpretation

How does a small group become a community of learning?

Initiating the book club among the students who participated in the study resulted in a shifting from a small group to a learning community. Four indicators reveal the process of transformation from a small group to a community of learning, which teachers opt to develop in their classrooms: pace, authentic dialogue, collaboration, and the physical structure of the class. These indicators explain how the 4 students who participated in this study started the book club in a small group and later on established a learning community.

Pace of learning to build community.

The students went through a formal comparative observation throughout the book club sessions. One of the planned aims of such an observation was to witness the impact of time on the students’ attitudes. The students struggled in the first book club session because their experience differed significantly from their regular experience and expectations. They came from different schools and did not know each other.

By the end of the second session, the students’ attitudes began to change. This new experience, however, changed their attitudes at a remarkable speed. The group members met for only 4 weeks and yet, in that short period, they were able to build a community of learning. They accomplished a significant achievement. Rena foreshadows the positive change: "For us in summer school, 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". Through developing relationships, the students were able to create a learning community.
**Authentic dialogue.**

Prior to holding the book club sessions, the students had not met each other or the researcher. This caused some uncertainty regarding the best way to foster an authentic and communicative discourse. However, almost all fears disappeared from both my side and the students, by the end of the first session. Upon the observation, the students were shy at the beginning of the session but after starting the dialogue, their attitudes changed and the hope of building a community of learners in the book club increased. We started to share an authentic dialogue throughout the discussion. The level of dialogue engagement differed among the students, however, encouragement, verbal, and nonverbal reinforcements facilitated the authenticity of our dialogue and fostered the students’ self-confidence.

**Collaboration.**

Self-confidence and an authentic communicative discourse are major characteristics of a collaborative group. Building a small learning community in a limited time frame with low achievers is generally not an easy task, especially when the students know that they are being researched. Regardless of that, the students collaborated with each other and with the researchers to make this experience successful.

**The physical structure.**

In the early sessions of the book club, the physical appearance of the class did not reveal any sense of a cozy, communicative setting that is needed for a learning community. Configuring the furniture of the classroom stimulated and supported learning. As sessions progressed, chairs became grouped as the students favored more direct contact with their peers and the researchers. As we reached the final sessions, two girls were happily sharing
the same chair, and whispering in each other's ears. This is an indicator of how the physical arrangements for this small group provided a signal for a community of learning.

The book club experience in this study situated the students in a setting where they had to communicate with each other and share their thoughts about the book. Consequently, from the first book club meeting, this community started to be shaped by all members of the group.

**How do the social dialogical interactions affect and shape learning?**

This study proved that learning in a social context can play a critical role in the students' learning. The Students’ learning observed in this study has been positively affected by the increasingly meaningful dialogical interactions of the students. This effect was visibly marked by two indicators: formal and informal settings.

*Formal setting.*

During the book club discussions, the students showed a good level of engagement in a way that their dialogue helped them to learn. The way they exchanged the information about the book revealed the students’ maturity and critical thinking skills. The way each girl tried to prove her opinion regarding a piece of the text reflected a deep understanding of the concept they were discussing. Upon a thorough observation of their dialogical interactions, the students were amazingly eliciting and reflecting on ideas and hidden concepts about the topic discussed in the book. The following quotation by Rena further explains the formal discussion during the session: "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".
**Informal setting.**

As an extension to their formal interactions, the students started to use other sources of communication among each other, such as making phone calls and meeting at the public library outside of the class. This type of relation would not have developed within a typical 4-week summer class, but with the book club experience, the students’ relations were extended and, this in turn, allowed their oral skills to develop.

**How does a community of learning impact the students' academic performance?**

As a result of this study, it was demonstrated how a community of learning impacts the students' academic performances positively. Three indicators show the impact of the community of learning on the student's academic performance: test scores, teachers' perception, and self-identification.

**Test scores.**

Test scores matter in all schools. If the students had not been defined by the Ontario standards for literacy as underperforming, they would not have been required to attend summer school. Consequently, increasing the students' marks in reading, writing, and oral skills would be a very important indicator that shows the development in their academic performance. Rena happily noticed how her marks improved after the book club experience. She reported: "my marks are improving I guess for reading and writing and just like oral marks … They really were Cs maybe C- or C+ and they went like to high B’s". This has an impact on performance beyond the class (a critical feature of learning), and affects how Rena and the others identify themselves as learners.
Teachers’ perception.

Teachers’ opinions of their students play a critical role in their academic achievements. Although students build their identity and self-confidence from many sources, a teacher’s perception is one of the most important sources. The students who participated in the study showed they were able to move beyond their expectations and collaborate with other students to develop and enhance learning, leaving me as researcher wondering how come they came to be labeled as low achievers. Actively engaging students in the learning process and using the knowledge they develop, has a significant impact not only on teacher actions, but more importantly, on the changing identity and performance levels of these students.

The hypotheses that students will improve their learning through book club experiences and that their abilities to achieve can be altered and improved, seems to lead to new learning identities that have a positive impact on their future learning in schools.

By the closing sessions of the book club, students deliberately discussed the routines of their school days, their negative school experiences, and the impact of certain teaching methods they found unhelpful in their learning process. This makes them intentionally and meta-cognitively aware of their own learning as a contributing factor to improving their learning processes.

Self-identification.

As the students proved their accomplishments and improved their academic performances, their self-identification changed and improved. Their successful experiences in the book club affected their perceptions about themselves in a positive way, and thus leading them to diminish being labeled as under-performing students. This influences how
they perceive themselves and are perceived by their teachers. A positive identity as a learner has a profound impact on their learning.

**How does a community of learning impact the larger community of the whole class?**

**Past experiences.**

From my own perspective, it is much harder to build a whole class community than to build small communities in the class. As the number of students becomes larger, the chances of developing meaningful relationships (critical to effective learning) decrease. This disparity became clearer as I reflected on my students and my teaching experiences in Saudi Arabia, as a researcher in an Ontario school, and as a student at OISE.

My experience as a student in Saudi Arabia is entirely within a school for girls. In elementary school in the primary grades, I had four close friends in my Grade 2 classes only; I rarely communicated with other students in the class. In Grade 3, my four friends were placed in another class so I developed three new friends. My struggles with communicating with others in the class were made even more difficult because the student seats were arranged in rows, and there was never an opportunity for using group work in the classroom. Learning was completely individualized.

In my teaching year, I attempted to organize small group work in the classroom because, even then, I sensed the need for open discussions. However, I noticed that when I distributed the students into groups for assigned tasks, they asked to be in groups only with their close friends. Some refused to work with other peers in the class and expressed how it is hard for them to work with other students. This raised the issue of why this happened and what needed to happen to facilitate active and social learning in the class.
When I arrived at OISE and began attending classes, I always tried to find familiar students (generally there was 3 in the class has 20). I am uncertain of why I sensed the need to create learning in social experiences and, yet, remained resistant and actually, replicated the behaviors of the students I taught in Saudi Arabia.

As I entered the research classroom, I began to deconstruct my understanding and observed the critical role of the teacher as facilitator, the ways the groups are structured, the assignments, and the role of student choice in the process for effective learning.

*Book club experience.*

When I reflect on these experiences with the book club, I can tell that the book club makes a difference on the students' sense of knowledge. Sarah said, "[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".

I was concerned about the impact of the book club on the larger community of the classroom. Through my observations, I became aware of the strong impact that the book club had on the whole class. Anita said, "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 was clear when the non book club members started to communicate with book club members. The curiosity they had towards knowing about what other peers were reading and the questions they would like to have answers for, was the reason behind establishing this larger community. Lena said, "I got comfortable [speaking and interacting] around my classmates".

Taking into account that this was a summer class, that the students were from different schools, and they may not meet again, this accomplishment is worth considering. If
we are to think about our regular classroom, we need to establish that familiarity between all students in the class. We need to initiate that feeling of belonging to a one family, within the class. Each student should feel that other students are part of his/her family and that they need to communicate and build a community with the whole class.

If we reach this target, we do not need to bother thinking about how we should assign the students into groups - since they all have a good relation with each other. Moreover, we will have fewer problems in the classroom among students. We also will reduce the possibility of having groups who are against other groups. Thus, all students will not care about where to sit and with whom they work and communicate with.

**How does my professional research learning affect this study?**

As a child in elementary school in Saudi Arabia, I always said to my mother, “The teacher said …”, but never, “I believe” or “I think”. I know how it feels when you have no say in your learning. I had no voice. I never heard a teacher ask our opinions towards any learning experiences. We learned how to follow instructions, but we never learned how to question those instructions. Critical thinking, then, remains on the margins of the curriculum or teaching agenda and may explain why students do not reveal what they think because they are openly discouraged from thinking critically.

Although this reality characterized my elementary school experience, as well, a change occurred in my attitude in secondary school; I could no longer hold in my opinions. This got me into troubles with my teachers. In spite of that, I was proud of myself and felt empowered by my voice. Even though this voice did not change the things I did not like, at least I could respect myself and believe that I was a part of society. With this increased self respect and identification, my critical thinking skills developed, thus leading to improving
further skills such as raising questions, comparing, discussing, and negotiating important learning and teaching issues—all issues that emerged in the research study documented in this thesis.

*Personally.*

This research emphasized my belief regarding the rights of students to have a voice in their learning, as they play an important an active role in their learning process. This research made me more open towards teaching practices, and believe in changes for learning that lead to higher academic achievements. Furthermore, it helped me to develop my thinking as a teacher, and to move from teacher-centered classes (the way I was taught in Saudi Arabia for 16 years) to student-centered classes. Also, this study will help me to develop my dream of helping to change the education system in Saudi Arabia. In addition, this study will contribute to the educational knowledge in my country, because the government provided me with this opportunity to study abroad as a scholarship student, and I believe my research can have a significant impact.

*Academically.*

This research is a valuable contribution to my professional and academic life. This research taught me how to be patient and give a listening ear to the students as teacher/researcher, I have become the learner and students became my teachers. This research also taught me the importance of building a community of learning in the classes for improving learning, better teaching, and an environment conducive to learning. I learned lessons about difference and personal preferences and how dialogue engages and challenges students. As a teacher, this research showed me how our beliefs and vision towards students affect their learning and the resulting outcomes.
My aim for this research is to improve understanding of effective pedagogical practices in schools and provide teachers with some insights towards teaching meaningful literacy in schools. Moreover, this research opens new horizons for researchers for more investigations regarding this area. I am looking forward to reading about further research to uncover questions we could not investigate in this research, and help provide clear answers for them.

**Implications for Teaching and Learning in Saudi Arabia**

**Transforming from teacher-centered classes to a learning community.**

Students in Saudi Arabia usually have difficulties transforming their learning experiences from individual or small groups into a community of learning. Regardless of the size and characteristics of these groups, they are intended to adhere to the style of the teacher and the kind of activities designed and controlled by the same teacher. In Saudi classes, learning is teacher-centered with the focus directed to the product rather than the process of the learning experience; therefore, learning is limited to how to “play school,” rather than changing ideas and knowledge.

On the other hand, in using book clubs, the small group became a community within a minimum of 4 weeks. The book club develops a learning community regardless of the students’ different backgrounds, cultures and interests - as they all share the same text, reading collaboratively, negotiation, and co-constructing new knowledge.

**Policy recommendations.**

In conducting the research, I am proving a specific cultural lens informed by my history, culture, religion, and educational contexts. In that light, I bring the research knowledge into the context of Saudi education. Using book clubs is highly recommended,
based upon the findings of this research. Since students in Saudi schools are not allowed to choose their preferred reading texts and other curriculum materials are designed, produced, and controlled by the Ministry of Education and implemented by teachers, we need to use the findings suggested by this research to explore and imagine alternatives. For instance, the Ministry of Education could provide supplementary books to be used in book clubs for each grade. In this way, the Ministry of Education can guarantee that students read appropriate texts, and, simultaneously, allow students to practice a form of freedom of choice. This will enhance their academic identities as they assume responsibility for their own learning.

As in many countries around the world, English as a foreign language is taught in Saudi schools. I can imagine using book clubs designed for both Arabic and English studies. This kind of a teaching and learning experience can promote multilingual literacy in the country.

Moreover, teachers should enable their students to share the lead of the class with them by fostering raising questions, negating meanings and concepts, and searching for further educational possibilities that are related to the content of a specific lesson. This co-leadership improves oral skill and encourages the students to express agreement and disagree, carry on constructive debates, discuss different ideas and, respect different thoughts and opinions.

From the study, I learned that to improve communicative writing skills during the book club, teachers give their students the choice on how to respond and document their understanding and learning, either through notes or highlighting important parts in the book. Also, teachers may encourage their students to think of and write an important question to discuss. Gradually, teachers can ask the students to write a short journal entry to prepare for
discussion during each book club session. These writing activities reinforce and support the
development of oral skills and encourage students to produce writing that documents learning
and provides a, “text for talk”.

Implications for Teaching and Learning in Canada

This study suggests using the effective elements that made the book club a successful
experience, such as offering a choice in selecting the text. This study provides a model that
literacy teachers can implement and use in their classes. However, teachers can add what
they think is best for their students.

What is the impact of using the book club on building a learning community?

The research previously discussed how book clubs have a positive impact on both the
small and larger community. Yet, teachers may question how can they implement book
clubs, or how can this help them as teachers. Teachers usually complain that it is difficult for
them to engage all of the students in their classes. Partly, this is because teachers are
restricted to follow Ontario's Ministry of Education's curriculum expectations. As a result,
teachers sometimes teach according to the designed curriculum and not according to what the
students need. I constantly hear the teachers at OISE classes complain about the
disengagement of their students, saying that this is partly because of the fact that students
study things which are not related to their lives and, therefore, feel disconnected.

This research suggests that teachers can start by using a book club and ask the
students about what they would like to read, and what they would like to know and learn
about. Teachers start by initiating the book club and then ask the students about the topics
and the number of chapters they would like to read for each meeting. They then start using
this tool to create a space where students can have authentic dialogue and different instructions that respect each student’s way of learning. In doing so, this helps to improve the students’ academic performances and successfully results in a higher level of engagement.

**What impact does a book club have on the students' academic performance and social interactions?**

All the evidence in this study shows that book clubs have a positive impact on the students' academic performance and social interactions. This is as a result of the students having a choice and resulting authentic dialogue. Having a safe and comfortable environment, in which they can share their thoughts and talk about their opinions, enhanced the students' social interactions. The book club is the place that the students feel there is no right or wrong answer. Also, it is the place that the students agree and disagree with respect to others' opinions. Sharing different opinions gradually made the students collectively and collaboratively formulated new understanding, which in turn helped them develop their academic performances and social interactions. Overall, teachers can use a book club to lower the stress on themselves and make the students accountable for their learning. By this way, teachers will share the responsibility with their students and less effort will be spent on class managing, and the more effort teachers can put on initiating higher level thinking questions that improve the students’ critical thinking abilities. The study strongly demonstrated that enhancing the students' academic performance affects the students’ self-identification.

**What impact does a book club have on self-identification?**

In this study, a book club proved to have a positive impact on students' self-identification. The students no more see themselves as the recipient of the information from
their teachers. They see themselves as people who can negotiate and co-construct knowledge. They are an active and dynamic part of their learning processes through the book club. This study shows that there was a shifting identity from “under-performing students” to students who can read, write, and speak properly about their thoughts and opinions.

Limitations of the Study

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, and the fact that participants were all female, prevents us from generalizing the results. Nevertheless, the study provokes new learning and questions that can be researched and developed in other educational contexts.

Further Questions and Issues

What can teachers do to transform this knowledge to other academic subjects?

Further inquiries may rise regarding studies on book clubs in teaching and learning. Future researchers may be more concerned regarding using book clubs to improve students’ achievements in other subject areas such as social science, math, and foreign literature.

What is the best format or structure teachers should use in implementing book clubs in regular classrooms?

Other research may investigate the impact of building a community of learning through establishing a semi structured book club in regular classrooms, other than summer schools. More comprehensive research may address the infrastructure of book clubs and the relevant variables of that structure, including the number of students, the number and duration of each session, and the length of the text used.
What are the other possible ways teachers can use regarding the book topic?

One final issue that might be of great interest to some researchers is the comparison between having all students read the same book and discuss its varied topics, or having students read different books that discuss one topic.

What is the role of mixed gender in participating in a book club?

Unintentionally, the students who participated in the book club were all females and that suggests more focus on single gender versus a mixed gender focus group in research strategies. Thus, further inquiries may rise regarding mixed gender book clubs.

Concluding Remarks

Before conducting the research, I assumed 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 increase. Consequently, building a viable learning community may result in 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.

After conducting the research and comparing my findings with the theory I hypothesized, findings both surprised me and confirmed my expectations. However, I did not expect such a noticeable and significant difference in reading, competence, understanding, and identity as effective learners through dialogue with other students.

While current literature is beginning to discuss the effectiveness of communities of learning, few models exist for teachers to establish small communities within the context of their classroom. We need more research on the influence and capacity that the community
has on student learning, how authentic dialogue and learning affects critical thinking, and the value of co-constructed knowledge and its role and importance in the classroom.

This research highlighted the impact of building a community of learning amongst under-performing students and demonstrates its positive effect on student learning and identity. These positive results are important because they deal with under-performing students, which lead us to the promise of improved learning results with students who meet the expectations in their grade level. This research presented the positive impact on the students' learning when they have choices, time, and authentic dialogue as they co-construct knowledge and think critically beyond the text.
References


