An Examination of Elementary Learners' Transactions with Diverse Children's Books

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore the transactional relationship between young learners and diverse texts. Students' perceptions toward difference are shaped by prior, lived experiences, and books provide students with virtual experiences of diversity, which can lead to transformative possibilities. This study explored: (1) How can children's picture books about autism be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary classroom, and (2) What types of responses do primary students have when transacting with children's picture books about autism? Through the use of a formative experiment methodology aligned with Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978), interventions involving (a) a teacher read aloud, (b) student journal writing, and (c) class discussion allowed second-grade students to transact both aesthetically and efferently with diverse texts about autism. Examination of student responses was a qualitative, iterative process that utilized the Constant Comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and intervention data was triangulated with researcher field notes and pre and post-intervention student interviews. Analysis led to a deeper understanding of transactional response, including how (a) increasing awareness cultivates deeper connections with diverse texts, (b) prior perceptions and experiences influence evocation and response, and (c) diverse texts provide necessary virtual experiences with diversity. Student responses during transaction also revealed a process of growth in which students oscillated between various levels of introspection by (a) gaining awareness though an insightful view of diversity (developing understanding of difference/defining and explaining autism), (b) reflecting on similarities to gain an understanding of difference (journeying through the text), and (c) using texts as a reflexive tool and gateway

toward acceptance (affirming care and responsibility). This study gives insight into how

transacting with diverse texts can provide students with opportunities to explore diversity and

increase their knowledge and understanding of difference in order to create a more accepting and

equitable culture.

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General Audience Abstract

This study was designed to explore how young learners respond to diverse texts. Students' perceptions toward difference are shaped by prior, lived experiences, and books provide students experiences with diversity, which can lead to transformative possibilities. This study explored: (1) How can children's picture books about autism be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary classroom, and (2) What types of responses do primary students have when transacting with children's picture books about autism? Second grade students interacted with diverse books about autism through interventions involving (a) a teacher read aloud, (b) student journal writing, and (c) class discussions. Student responses were examined and compared with researcher field notes and pre and post-intervention student interviews. Analysis led to a deeper understanding of how students respond to texts, including how (a) increasing awareness cultivates deeper connections with diverse texts, (b) prior perceptions and experiences influence evocation and response, and (c) diverse texts provide necessary virtual experiences with diversity. Responses also revealed a process of growth in which students moved between various levels of understanding by (a) gaining awareness though an insightful view of diversity (developing understanding of difference/defining and explaining autism), (b) reflecting on similarities to gain an understanding of difference (journeying through the text), and (c) using texts as a reflexive tool and gateway toward acceptance (affirming care and responsibility). This study gives insight into how responding to diverse texts can provide students with opportunities to explore diversity and increase their knowledge and understanding of difference in order to create a more accepting and equitable culture.

Dedication

To my family, friends, teachers, and students –

You gave me books,

And in doing so,

You gave me the world.

And to the One

Who gave us the greatest book –

You gave me the hope

Of a future beyond it.

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Good stories are only as strong as the characters in them, and I am eternally grateful to all of the individuals who began this journey with me, and whose love, support, and encouragement accompanied me to the end. Thanks to my parents Jeffrey and Pamela, for revealing a world of possibilities when they taught me to read, and for reminding me that anything can be achieved through kindness and hard work. To my sisters Sarah, Rebecca, and Joanna, for indulging my eternal love of books with endless trips to the library and curling up for "one more" chapter at bedtime. To my sweet husband, Jared, for being the calming anchor that keeps me grounded, and for reminding me to take my nose out of a book long enough to appreciate the little things in life.

I am grateful to all of my students and fellow teachers for allowing me to share my love of books, and for giving me the privilege of watching you grow into students who love to read and readers who love to teach. Thanks to my fellow classmates at Virginia Tech for helping me live within – and my other, wonderful friends for helping me live beyond – the books I was studying. I'm especially grateful to my dear friend Donna for her unfailing cheer and assurance, and Paige, for her sage advice, and good humor when the books seemed to have no end.

I wish to thank my co-chair Dr. Mary Alice Barksdale, for advising my first steps as a pre-service teacher, and my last steps as a doctoral student; my co-chair Dr. Amy Azano, for directing my steps and being my advocate and mentor; and my committee members, Dr. Bonnie Billingsley and Dr. Cheri Triplett for guiding my steps with inslettul feedback and support. Finally, thanks to Virginia Tech's Center for Autism Research and Graduate Research Development Program for contributing the funds to complete this study. This story may be ending, but there are far more books and possibilities to explore; the only question is where to begin. I hope soon, you are all ready and willing to pen a new chapter with me.

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"Is a story a window, through which we see the world, a mirror, in which we see ourselves, or both?" (Galda, 1980, p. viii).

Chapter 1

Everyone loves a good story. In elementary classrooms, read alouds are arguably one of the most widely and frequently used resources for both instruction and enjoyment. Children's books provide a safe, nonthreatening space for giving students virtual experiences of issues that may otherwise be inaccessible to them in the real world (Galda, 1990a), such as discrimination and intolerance. Books can validate the real world experiences of students who have been exposed to these issues, offering voice to those who have been silenced (Fivush, 2010) and giving control to the disempowered (Rosen, 1986). Books also provide teachers with a valuable tool for discussing difficult topics such as racism and prejudice and promoting democratic ideals such as social justice and equality, particularly when they are used as read alouds. Read alouds, coupled with class discussion provide a context for examining shared experiences, and can lead to the co-construction of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978) and the collective understanding of a variety of current social issues, including bullying, inclusion, disability, and diversity.

While every reader approaches a text with unique, real world experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978) that stem from existing schemata and prior knowledge (Pritchard, 1990), the text provides a new experience that can inform these prior perceptions and beliefs, which in turn, help the reader construct new understandings and values (Galda, 1980). Reading allows students to become "engaged in a complex dance of meaning construction" (Galda, 2013, p. 7), which can lead to powerful, transformative opportunities (Cai, 2008; Galda, Rayburn, & Stanzi, 2000; Galda, 2013). Knowledge and meaning are constructed through the narration of lived and shared experiences (Fivush, 2010), thus, stories have the power to promote awareness, lead to collective

understanding, and ultimately encourage acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000), generating transformative opportunities inside and outside of the classroom. Children's books are powerful (Rosen, 1986; 1992), thus the focus of this dissertation is a careful examination of the use of story and how transactional response to diverse texts can provide transformative opportunities for elementary learners.

Personal Significance

If we are allowed only one great love in our lives, books just might be mine. I have always loved reading. For me, there was nothing more thrilling than inhaling the scent of a new book, cracking the spine, unsticking the pages, and leaving my fingerprints on the crisp white canvas, blackened from the ink of untouched words. My love affair with reading began at an early age, and some of my earliest memories include being read aloud to at night by my parents. My mother would take my sisters and me to the library on a weekly basis, where we would max out our library cards, filling plastic grocery bags with books until the sharp edges poked holes in the sides, and the books rained out like a sieve. I learned from an early age that books have the ability to transport readers to new destinations and virtual worlds otherwise unexplored or inaccessible in the real world. These books also immersed me in the world of story and allowed me to live through the lives of characters, gaining experiences that helped shape my attitudes, emotions, and beliefs.

When I became a teacher, I desired to cultivate the same passion for reading in my students, developing learners who were excited about reading and who wanted to devour books. I soon found that as a novice teacher, books became more than just a shared experience with my students, but a lifeline for teaching new content and difficult concepts. During my first year of teaching, I spent hours on the floor of the children's section of Barnes and Noble, trying to find

the right book to teach abstract ideas like metamorphosis or photosynthesis in science, and to illustrate the importance of social issues through multicultural literature and historical biographies. I also found that books were the first resource I turned to when parents asked for ways to help their children understand or cope with difficult experiences, and I freely sought and distributed picture books dealing with topics ranging from losing a first tooth to losing a family member. Books provided a familiar, nonthreatening way for me to introduce and discuss important social and cultural issues and to address challenges in my class without singling out students, and I used books often to address a range of topics from the first day of school jitters to bullying, sharing, and being a good friend.

Similarly, I quickly discovered that books are more than mere tools for teaching difficult concepts and proving information on new or unknown topics. On the anniversary of September 11th, I shared a beautiful popup, picture book of the Twin Towers to an emotional, captivated class. Books were powerful because they had the capacity to first produce emotional responses as the students immersed themselves in the story world, and they also had the capacity to engender change in my students well after the last page was read. There was nothing more satisfying than stopping at the end of a chapter and hearing the collective groan and familiar plea, "Can you just read one more page?" I loved the shiny light that appeared in my students' eyes as they were transported to the story world of Ruby Bridges, and the genuine, raw emotion and horrified comments that flooded out when they found that she was not allowed in school because of the color of her skin. I was amazed at the transformative powers that books held, as students freely connected imaginary characters' pain to their own lives, and transferred the feelings and experiences of the virtual story world into the real world to help them cope with similar, personal experiences of loss or inequity. I was always amazed at how students were able

to make sense of unfamiliar experiences by living vicariously through the characters, and I took pleasure in their furrowed brows and animated discussions as they tried to make sense of difficult concepts presented in the texts.

Genesis of Research Idea

Upon leaving the classroom to pursue my doctorate, reading aloud to students quickly became the part of teaching that I missed the most, but also served as the catalyst that sparked my interest in research. I began to wonder: Do teachers have similar experiences when they ask students to transact with texts in their classrooms? What do these transactions look like in primary classrooms? I also wondered: How can teachers use children's books as a tool for teaching difficult concepts? Would using children's books provide a context for class discussion and provide transformative opportunities for students to examine their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes? I was particularly interested in how teachers could find a way to broach sensitive topics like racism and prejudice, manifested through sociocultural issues that invariably help shape the attitudes, beliefs, and values of all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. Consequently, I began exploring germane, current, social issues and cultural topics that students face today, particularly focusing on prevalent issues that students may face within the classroom context.

Context for the Study

This idea crystallized as I embarked on a yearlong inquiry into understanding how children's books treated one particular concept. With my dissertation co-advisor and a fellow doctoral student, we questioned how children's picture books teach young readers about autism (see Azano, Tackett, & Sigmon, manuscript submitted for publication; Sigmon, Tackett, & Azano, 2016). This research was based on the growing incidence of autism, and the need for a

rich understanding of how children's picture books inform readers about the disability. In our research, we generated a comprehensive list of available picture books about autism, and 35 texts were selected for content analysis based on specific selection criteria. Our analysis led to five salient themes.

First, we found that children's books provided an overview of the characteristic behaviors of autism by illustrating characters who have speech challenges, social anxieties, and atypical behaviors such as self-stimulation ("stimming"), rocking, and repetition. Second, we found that the texts portrayed individuals with autism as an "at-risk" population (e.g., having a low perception of danger) that could be marginalized and discriminated against by peers. Third, the books highlighted similarities and differences between children with autism and their neurotypical peers, often sending the message that both disabled and non-disabled children have many of the same capabilities and interests while also addressing their uniqueness. Fourth, the books contained powerful language, and provided examples of peers using derogatory terms to address children with autism, while others modeled "people first" language, identifying that a child may have autism, but is not defined by it. Fifth, the books provided "insider" knowledge, with stories often being narrated in the first person by a friend, parent, sibling, or even from the point of view of the child with autism.

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine the content of relevant books about autism to inform teachers' book selection and use in the general education classroom. However, this study was particularly pivotal in my line of research because it presented a pervasive, sociocultural topic for the focus of my inquiry. Upon completion of the manuscript, several questions emerged regarding how the information could be used pragmatically: Could reading and discussing these books help students understand the characteristics of autism? Could the

books help students become more understanding of students with autism and become more accepting of others who express difference in general?

Identifying the Problem

Today, 1 in 68 children are diagnosed with autism, and instances of this disability have increased exponentially over the past decade (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015). The term "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (ASD) describes the range of disabilities associated with the disorder, which can vary in severity along different points of the spectrum (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2014). Characteristic behaviors of autism may include nonverbal or limited communication skills, social anxieties, atypical behaviors like stimming and repetition, and strong reactions to sensory overstimulation (CDC, 2015).

In 1975, Congress passed the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) (originally the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, or Public Law 94-142), mandating that students with disabilities be given appropriate educational opportunities within a "least restrictive environment" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Since this law was enacted, there has been a growing movement toward inclusion in public schools, shifting some of the responsibly for teaching students with special needs from special education teachers to general education teachers. However, within the public school system, general educators are usually unequipped to differentiate instruction according to the needs of students with autism and feel they do not possess the knowledge, research-based tools, strategies, and resources to serve them (Friedlander, 2009; Rogers, 2000). This presents a pervasive need to equip general education teachers with a teaching tool that can help students learn about and understand disability and diversity in general.

With general education classrooms becoming increasingly diverse and more inclusive,

teachers are compelled help students learn how to become more understanding and accepting of those who exhibit differences, especially those with disabilities (Dyches, Prater, & Jenson, 2006; Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010). Similarly, Mesibov and Shea (1998) espouse the assertion that individuals with autism belong to a diverse group that operates like a culture, and includes characteristic behaviors that must be communicated to others in order to be understood. They argue that teachers should treat autism like other diverse cultures, acting as a "cross-cultural interpreter" who must "translate" the characteristic behaviors associated with autism to other, nondisabled students in order to cultivate deeper understanding and acceptance of individuals who express this difference (Mesibov & Shea, 1998). Such understandings could, in turn, create and cultivate a safe and warm learning environment in which students with autism are understood and accepted, and all students can learn.

Study Rationale and Purpose

Due to the exponential increase of students diagnosed with autism over the past ten years (CDC, 2015) and the continuing movement toward inclusion in public schools, this burgeoning diverse group provides an important topic for discussion. This topic warrants a need to provide all students with either lived or virtual experiences of autism in order to "promote introspection regarding awareness, understanding, and acceptance of self and others" (Dyches & Prater, 2000, p. 20) first, within the classroom and second, within the greater context of society. As such, this study focused on using books about autism as one point of inquiry in exploring how elementary students transact with texts as they learn about the disability. It was not, then, a study about autism per se, nor was it an advocacy piece for inclusion. It was, however, one relevant example of a current, challenging, societal topic that is prevalent in public school systems and warrants purposeful discussion and understanding that may be engendered through a transaction with

diverse texts.

While students enter school with varying backgrounds, prior knowledge, and experiences that help shape their beliefs and attitudes (Rosenblatt, 1978), many students lack experiences with diversity (Leininger, et al., 2010; Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006). Books provide a simple, inexpensive, and effective tool for providing students with these experiences, and can provide interventions aimed at encouraging personal growth (Dyches, et al., 2006), exploring difficult topics (Berns, 2004), increasing student knowledge and awareness, and encouraging understanding and acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000).

Children's picture books can provide a valuable tool for teachers when addressing salient issues in today's society. Reading texts that depict characters from different cultures or diverse groups can help students self-analyze and reflect on their personal attitudes, actions, and feelings toward others who are different (Prater, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006), and this self-analysis may lead to transformative possibilities (Cai, 2008). Boyd, Causey, and Galda (2015) suggest that "as a social construct, diversity is complex, complicated, multidimensional, and fluid" (p. 379), and moves beyond the scope of outwardly visible differences like race, ethnicity, and language to also refer to other forms of difference. However, traditionally defined "multicultural texts" tend to have a narrow focus on cultural differences, characterizing diversity as a difference in race or ethnicity, and emphasizing themes like dominant cultures, privilege, and power (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Moreover, Boyd, et al. (2015) points out that many researchers believe that a broader definition of "culturally diverse literature" (p. 379) is needed to refer to books that include characters belonging to less traditionally defined cultural groups, including individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, gender identities, religions, and levels of ability.

For the purpose of this study, I use the term "diverse texts" to refer to any books depicting characters who express any form of "difference" in regard to dominant religious beliefs, practices, ideologies, and abilities. Most specifically, I use this term to refer to any books that represent characters with a disability, such as children's books about autism. I propose that books may provide teachers with a viable tool for helping students increase awareness and understanding of autism, and that these books can benefit both the student with a disability and non-disabled peers as Leininger, et al. (2010) suggest. When students with disabilities interact with books that portray characters that are similar to them, they are better able to understand their own lives. Conversely, interacting with these books allows non-disabled students to recognize commonalities they share with those characters that are different (Leininger, et al., 2010). Ultimately, the focus of this dissertation was on the transaction between the reader and the text, and how diverse texts can serve as a resource for helping students gain knowledge and understanding of emerging, diverse topics of interest like autism.

Description of the Study

This study was designed to explore how a teacher can use diverse read alouds, like children's picture books about autism, to better understand the transactional relationship between these texts and students' growth in relation to gaining knowledge and understanding of those who are different. Study materials included picture books about autism, a pervasive topic in today's public school system. In this research project, a teacher encouraged transactional responses to read alouds in order to address and promote awareness, understanding, and acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000) toward those who are different, and to ultimately provide opportunities for continued growth and learning in regard to diversity with a specific focus on autism.

A formative and design experiment methodology (Reinking & Bradley, 2008) enabled me to form a collaborative partnership (Cole & Knowles, 1993) with a general education teacher, in which diverse texts, discussion prompts, and instructional strategies were purposefully selected for the intervention and iteratively modified to meet the needs of the students. Data generation included classroom observations and class discussions, pre and post-intervention student interviews, student journal writing, and both formal and informal teacher meetings and interviews. Thorough field notes during read alouds and class discussions provided a thick description of the intervention. Student literature journals and weekly collaborative meetings with the teacher informed the intervention, which led to a deeper understanding of transactional response and how it could be practically applied to authentic classroom settings in order to provide transformative opportunities for elementary learners. Similarly, pre and post-intervention student interviews provided data on how students responded to these texts, allowing for exploration into the possible learning and growth that resulted from transactions.

Data analysis was an iterative and inductive process that utilized the Constant Comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Emerging themes were continually revisited and modified as new thematic understandings emerged in the data, and findings were shared and discussed with the classroom teacher, who served as a collaborative partner throughout the intervention process (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Reinking & Bradley, 2008).

Research Questions

My research questions for this study were: (1) How can children's picture books about autism be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary classroom, and (2) What types of responses do primary students have when transacting with children's picture books about autism? Understanding how teachers and students use picture books depicting diversity,

with a specific focus on autism, informed a larger picture concerning the power and possibility of diverse texts in the elementary classroom.

In Chapter 2, I present the theoretical framework that underpinned this study and synthesize and discuss the pragmatic implications of relevant empirical studies. In Chapter 3, I explain the purpose of using a formative and design experiment and propose how diverse children's picture books can be used as an intervention tool for elementary students to explore and discuss difference. In Chapter 4, I describe the intervention procedures and present findings and thematic understandings extrapolated from qualitative analysis of the collected data. In Chapter 5, I discuss and draw conclusions from the findings in relation to the research questions and current literature. Finally, I discuss limitations to the study, implications for teachers and researchers, and areas of interest for future explorations.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive review, synthesis, and critique of the existing research regarding transactional response for elementary learners, within the context of diverse texts that specifically focus on autism. This literature review was conducted in order to identify gaps in the existing research and to provide examples of how a transactional approach has been used in elementary settings. This synthesis informed my research focus of using children's books to promote accepting and positive views toward diverse groups like students with autism. While searching for applicable research, I utilized multiple databases such as *ERIC* and *JSTR* to identify pertinent literature, including dissertations, books, and peer-reviewed journals. Based on the purpose of my inquiry, I developed four methods for approaching the existing literature.

Approach to the Literature

First, I focused on empirical studies conducted in the United States in order to examine the existing research on how to use a transactional response in elementary classrooms. These studies provided context-specific examples of transactional approaches used in U.S. classrooms, allowing for easy replication and transference of strategies. This criterion was particularly pertinent to this study, which focused on pragmatic, formative design within an authentic, elementary education classroom within the U.S.

Second, while a strong research base for using transactional response with adolescents and students in middle and high school contexts exists, studies conducted at the elementary levels are less prevalent. Since they did not match the focus of my inquiry, I excluded all studies that were not conducted at the elementary level. I found that within this context, empirical research was

dominated by studies completed with older students in fourth and fifth grade (Sipe, 2008). However, I placed particular emphasis on searching for and examining studies conducted in the primary, K-2 grades to inform my understandings because (a) there was some contingency in the existing research about whether or not young readers could effectively transact with a text, and (b) younger students were the most likely to utilize picture books as read alouds in their classrooms, which was one of the primary instructional strategies used in this study.

Third, when developing the theoretical framework that underpins this study, I focused on the Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (Rosenblatt, 1978) and its origins within the field of reader response. While primarily focusing on Rosenblatt's prominent theory of transaction (1978; 1995), I also read the works of similar theorists in the field such as Britton (1970), Harding (1937), Bruner (1986), and S. Langer (1953) in order to gain a comprehensive view of the different, converging theories and terminology used in the literature that describe how students interact with texts. This allowed greater understanding of the similar theories and terms often used interchangeably by different researchers in empirical studies while being sensitive to subtle nuances and differences of each.

Fourth, for my specific focus on how teachers may use diverse texts with a transactional response, I located information specifically pertaining to the availability and quality of books about autism over time. However, due to the more recent prevalence of autism over the past decade (CDC, 2015), there was a large research gap in the existing literature specifically focusing on books about autism. I, therefore, had to broaden my search criteria to include studies that addressed autism under the more general term of "students with a disability" and then I examined the findings of these studies for information that specifically addressed autism, using supplemental information about other disabilities as context. Additionally, I drew from a pilot

study (Azano, Tackett, & Sigmon, manuscript submitted for publication) to inform my research.

The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work

While commonly viewed as an individual, cognitive practice, the definition of reading has developed into a social and cultural activity enhanced by group interaction (Heath, 1983; Snow, 1983). Galda and Liang (2003) described reading "as an active, constructive, social experience" (p. 269) in which the reader transacts with a text to construct meaning and understanding from within what Benton (1983) referred to as the "secondary world." Similarly, Judith Langer (1990) posited that texts provide readers with an evolving "horizon of possibilities" for interpretation, or allow them to concentrate on a "point of reference" for learning (p. 248). Further, she defined reading as a journey in which the reader oscillates between different stances, including "stepping into" and "moving through" the "envisionment" of a text, before "stepping back and rethinking what one knows," and "objectifying the experience" (J. Langer, 1990, p. 238). Therefore, reading is more than the cognitively focused ability of decoding a text, or reading printed words aloud with prosody and fluency. For the purpose of this study, I operationalize reading as an active, interpretive, and social activity that requires students to experience and transact with written or audible text; a definition informed by Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978), which provided the framework for this study.

Louise Rosenblatt's seminal book *Literature as exploration*, first published in 1938, and now in its fifth edition (1995) was the first to focus on how individual readers respond to stories and how they extrapolate meanings from texts (Galda, 1980). Rosenblatt's (1995) reader response theory prompted a paradigm shift from viewing the text as a separate entity to viewing reading as an inextricable relationship between the reader and a text. In fact, Rosenblatt (1978)

used a metaphor of being plugged into an electrical circuit to espouse the idea that the text and reader are intricately connected. Prior to her book, researchers largely believed that the text contained a single interpretation that did not take into account the individual lives and experiences of the readers. However, Rosenblatt (1978; 1995) supported the belief that readers approach texts with different lenses that are shaped by prior knowledge and experiences, which allow them to uniquely interpret a text and actively construct and internalize meaning during transaction. In her subsequent, equally groundbreaking work, *The reader, the text, and the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work* (1978) Rosenblatt used the term "poem" (p. 12) to refer to how the reader responds or "evocates a story world from the text" (Cai, 2008, p. 215) while reading. She also adopted John Dewey's term "transaction" to describe the process that occurs as the reader constructs and negotiates meaning from the text.

Reader's Stance: Aesthetic and Efferent

The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (Rosenblatt, 1978) addresses the "stance" of a reader, or the prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs that influence they way readers view and transact with new texts (Galda & Liang, 2003). In her book, Rosenblatt (1978) proposed that readers approach and read new texts using an (a) aesthetic or (b) efferent stance.

Aesthetic stance. During an aesthetic stance, a text becomes more than mere words on a page, but "an extension, an amplification of life itself" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 264). Reading a text aesthetically involves "living through" (Rosenblatt, 1978) or becoming fully immersed in what Suzanne Langer (1953) called the "virtual experience" of the story. When readers take an aesthetic stance, they are encouraged to enjoy the text and embrace any emotional, pleasurable, or visceral response they may have to it (Rosenblatt, 1978), which may include being silently

captivated by the text, or participating in the story world through "expressive engagement" (Sipe, 2002).

Additionally, an aesthetic stance is powerful because it allows the reader to step into the shoes of the characters in order to gain a new perspective. Bruner (1986) suggested that the text provides a "subjunctive" experience, and Harding (1937) proposed the reader acts as an "onlooker," observing and evaluating what is happening within the virtual world of the story without the added pressure of direct response that is often necessary in real world situations. Taking this idea a step further, Britton (1970) believed that the reader could become a "spectator" who evaluates how he or she would personally react to similar situations the text, in order to construct responses to new experiences that could then be transferred to real life. Therefore, reading aesthetically enables a reader to "live through" (Rosenblatt, 1978) and evaluate (Britton, 1970; Harding, 1937) new, virtual experiences that may be unfamiliar to them, providing students with new understandings of themselves and others that are derived from experiences in the literary, rather than the real world (Britton, 1970).

Efferent stance. In contrast, an efferent stance involves purposely reading with an end goal, or the acquisition and transmission of knowledge in mind (Rosenblatt, 1978). The ability to examine literary elements or identify story characters, events, problems, and solutions, are markers of a more efferent stance toward a text (Galda & Liang, 2003). When teachers conclude a read aloud experience by asking factual or literal comprehension questions, or if a teacher asks students to approach a book with a predetermined set of questions that can be answered by reading the text, they are asking students to take an efferent stance toward reading (Galda & Liang, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1978). Conversely, when teachers ask more critical, interpretive questions with no right or wrong answers that require students to examine a text by making

connections between the story and their own, personal experiences, they can promote aesthetic reading (Galda & Liang, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1978).

Similar to Rosenblatt, James Britton (1970) described aesthetic and efferent stances using the terms "spectator" and "participant" respectively. Like Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance, Britton defined a spectator as a reader who enjoys evaluating the "experience" of a text. Parallel to Rosenblatt's efferent stance, Britton defined a participant as a reader who reads in order to attain knowledge that can then be transferred into the real world. In her later works, Rosenblatt (2005/1991) further distinguished between these two stances, noting that an aesthetic stance often requires a more "private" and personal connection with the text, whereas an efferent stance often requires an element of the text to be transferred into the real world, resulting in a more "public" transaction (p. 93). However, Rosenblatt (1978) also reasoned that readers rarely use one discrete stance while reading, but that transactions occur on a continuum, with readers oscillating between aesthetic and efferent stances as they read various texts for different purposes.

In the literature, an efferent stance is often viewed as a narrow, simplified, and superficial transaction that may hinder the pleasurable experience of reading. Similarly, in the existing empirical research, aesthetic and efferent stances are almost exclusively studied as discrete entities (Cai, 2008), often with an overemphasis on the importance of aesthetic response (Lewis, 2000). In actuality, efferent reading is not simply the acquisition and transmission of information. While an aesthetic stance allows the reader to "participate in the experience that a literary work offers," conversely, an efferent experience allows the reader to "carry away something to use in the world" (Galda, 2013, p. 6). Therefore, while an aesthetic stance may provide students with formative experiences within the context of the story world, examining

these experiences from a more efferent stance may provide the opportunity for transformation and growth within the real world.

Transformation

One of the criticisms of Rosenblatt's transactional theory is that an aesthetic stance focuses mainly on spontaneous, emotional responses, without addressing critical perspectives like the analysis of a text, or further, an analysis of students' evocations to the text (Cai, 2008). However, Rosenblatt (2000/1985) claimed that an aesthetic stance should merely provide "the starting point of a further transactional relationship between reader/critic and text" (p. 45). Cai (2008) expanded on this idea by similarly suggesting that an aesthetic stance is merely the anchor that must precede critical interpretation, and that an analysis of both text and self requires extending aesthetic response into a more efferent realm.

Critical analysis. Stories can help students make sense of daily life, events, and experiences, and allow children and educators to build a collective understanding of the world around them, which can give children a sense of control and power over their lives (Rosen, 1986; 1992). In order to encourage students to take an aesthetic stance towards a text, they must first be given the opportunity to spontaneously and emotionally react to the new experiences presented through the text in order to construct personal evocations (Rosenblatt, 1978). Then, only after aesthetically responding to and creating evocations can students (a) be encouraged to critically examine the *text*, and (b) critically examine their personal *evocations* to the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Evocations stem from students' aesthetic responses to new, virtual experiences during transaction. Therefore, a critical examination and analysis of these evocations may be the stimulus for transformation within the reader (Cai, 2008).

Since evocations are responses that are generated while reading aesthetically, the importance of beginning with this stance before moving toward more efferent responses and transformative possibilities cannot be understated. Rosenblatt (1995) warned that when reading, aesthetic response and evocation should precede any form of efferent response involving critical or literary analysis. Similarly, Galda (2013, p. 11) pointed out,

> If readers do not have the opportunity to evoke a poem as they read, if they are reading with specific directions given to them by their teacher, with outcomes predetermined, even for good reason, *the opportunity for transformation is lost*. (Italics added for emphasis).

Comparably, Lewis (2000) suggested students should "take pleasure in both the personal and the critical" (p. 264), enjoying a text on an emotional level before transitioning into a critical realm.

While Rosenblatt (1995) and Prater, et al. (2006) suggested that students gain awareness for diversity through personal experiences and interactions with others who are different, not all students are offered these opportunities. Greene (1994) similarly believed that the perceptions or "landscapes" of individuals are shaped by personal experiences, but that a lack of experience with diversity could lead to "voids" or "holes in my own experience" (p. 19) that would need to be filled in order to understand and appreciate others who are different. As stated earlier, it may be possible for teachers to help students fill these "voids" by providing them with virtual experiences of difference through diverse children's books, which can provide students opportunities to explore and experience diversity. By using these diverse texts as a catalyst for aesthetic response, students may also be encouraged to adopt an efferent, critical analysis of self which may lead to transformative possibilities.

Encouraging awareness, understanding, and acceptance. In her collection of works entitled *Making meaning with texts* (2005), Rosenblatt identified the importance and value of learning about and understanding diverse groups and different cultures. In her review essay of this work, Connell (2008) elucidated on Rosenblatt's (2005/1946) belief that providing students opportunities to explore diverse texts could help reduce superior attitudes and bias toward unfamiliar groups, cultures, and others who express difference. Connell (2008) also expanded on Rosenblatt's (2005/1946) writings, stating that examining and exploring familiar and unfamiliar cultures could help students value their own cultural identities, without diminishing the value of others. Comparatively, Prater and Dyches (2000) postulated that diverse texts could provide students with opportunities to connect with characters who are different, "even though they may be separated by space, time, culture, language, or ability" (p. 20). As such, utilizing diverse texts and encouraging a critical, efferent stance after aesthetic response may lead to increased awareness and understanding of different cultures and the diverse people in them.

As stated earlier, an aesthetic stance is a necessary, initial step of transactional response, but it alone is not strong enough to actualize transformative possibilities (Cai, 2008). In order to create the opportunity for transformation, students must not only be asked to critically respond to texts but to critically respond to their own, aesthetic reactions and evocations to the text as well (Cai, 2008). However, researchers (Galda, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1995) caution against evading aesthetic response and moving straight to critical interpretation and analysis, which is likely to force a specific outlook or interpretation onto students without allowing them to come to their own conclusions and understandings (Cai, 2008). Similarly, as Cai (2008) reminds us, Rosenblatt cautioned that sometimes the "tendency is to turn away from the lived-through experience and to efferently apply a ready-made system of analysis to the reading" (1985, p. 39). This warning is

particularly salient when utilizing diverse texts, as well-meaning teachers sometimes feel the need to provide students with their own, "authoritative" interpretations of the material (Cai, 2008) in order to promote positive ideas toward inclusion, acceptance, and antidiscrimination, which are often the end goals of these encounters (Galda, 2013). However, simply providing an example of a different culture or character depicted in a book and then teaching an authoritative interpretation to students is not nearly as powerful as asking students to first form an aesthetic response, and then guiding them toward a critical analysis of the text and their own, personal interpretations of it (Cai, 2008).

Research suggests that the key to cultivating understanding is to first, provide students a space that encourages personal, honest aesthetic response and evocation, and second, provide support as the students reflect critically on their evocations to the text, which can then transform the reader's prior understandings. After reading, teachers should encourage students to question, "What in this book, *and in me*, caused this response" (Rosenblatt, 2005/1956, p. 70) so that they can "understand what in the work and in himself produced that reaction" in order to then "modify, reject, or accept" that evocation (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 89). During this time, it may be particularly important for students to work together to discuss the text and their own evocations to the text within a group setting (Villaume & Hopkins, 1995). Through discussion, students can collectively work to critically analyze the text and themselves in order to co-construct meaning and develop understandings (Vygotsky, 1978) of the text and the experiences it provides.

Additionally, Dyches and Prater (2000) caution that while students may be able to gain awareness and understanding of difference, some many never reach the final level of acceptance toward diversity which is the ultimate goal toward transformative thinking. However, a carefully selected diverse text can serve as a catalyst for introspection (Prater, et al., 2006) by encouraging

students to accept or reject their own evocations (personal beliefs, feelings, and reactions) to the text, and to discuss, confirm, or rebuff the evocations of others. Such analysis may prompt students to develop positive attitudes and acceptance toward others who are different. Therefore, transaction can be used not only as a method for responding to texts but also as a medium for helping students examine their reactions in order to challenge their beliefs and assumptions and to grow as individuals (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1995). Researchers also suggest that learning can be amplified when teachers read aloud a story in its entirety in order to allow students to first, freely interact with the text and form their own understandings (aesthetic stance), and then to reread the story, pausing to ask guiding questions (efferent stance), and eliciting responses aimed at promoting understanding and acceptance (Prater, et al., 2006). This may help a teacher promote growth and change by encouraging students to re-evaluate their initial, preconceived notions, experiences, and understandings (Lehr, 1995) toward different cultures and characters depicted in the texts as they read.

According to Cai (2008), extending aesthetic response into a more efferent, critical realm while reading diverse texts may cultivate learning opportunities in a similar way that James Banks' Theory of Transformation (1997), allows students to "transact-to-transform" while reading multicultural texts. In this similar approach (Banks, 1997), students are encouraged to view multicultural texts from a variety of perspectives in order to transform their thinking toward other diverse groups and cultures (Cai, 2008). In a comparable way, Cai (2008) believed transaction could be used to "teach students a critical perspective that encourages self-change and social transformation" (p. 219). Similarly, Galda (1998) and Prater, et al. (2006) posited that reading diverse texts may give readers insight into the lives of characters that are different, and may provide virtual experiences that allow students to adopt multiple perspectives in order to

understand the lives of others. Therefore, extending the aesthetic, transactional experience and stepping into a more critical stance while exploring diverse texts may present transformational opportunities (Cai, 2008).

Conclusion

Simply put, "landscapes" (Greene, 1994) help determine the evocations that are aesthetically constructed through both lived and virtual experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978). Subsequently, a critical, efferent stance influences what the reader takes away from the text into the real world (Galda, 2013), which can include transformative responses to students' prior understandings (Rosenblatt, 1978; Villaume & Hopkins, 1995). In order to move beyond merely an aesthetic response into an efferent, critical reading and analysis, the teacher must first give students the opportunity to respond aesthetically (Galda, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1995), and then lead students toward a more critical analysis of the text by assuming a more efferent stance (Cai, 2008; Lewis, 2000). If transaction is executed to include both aesthetic and efferent responses in conjunction with the critical analysis necessary for student transformation, then it can provide a valuable framework for addressing diverse texts within the classroom (Cai, 2008). However, while the existing literature regards aesthetic and efferent responses as discrete entities, further investigation is needed to explore how aesthetic and efferent stances intersect (Cai, 2008), and if this intersection can further transformative opportunities, as was explored in my study.

Cognitive Development and Transactional Response

Over the years, Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional response has propelled a strong interest in how older students and adults respond to texts (Galda, 1980; 1982; 2013). However, current research exploring transactional response with elementary-age students is limited and largely did not exist after Rosenblatt's initial, 1978 publication (Galda, 1980; 1982; 2013). This may be

partially attributed to Applebee's (1978) pivotal study exploring the influence of cognitive

development on student response. This study suggested that any level of quality response is not

only dependent on students' prior experiences, but on their cognitive ability as well.

Applebee's Pivotal Study

In 1978, Arthur Applebee wrote *The child's concept of story: Ages two to seventeen*

based on findings from his dissertation and Britton's (1970) theory of response. In his study,

Applebee (1978) examined how students responded to and evaluated texts. He found that

students' evaluative responses differed according to age, ranging from literal to more abstract

thought, which mirrored the stages of cognitive development. The succession of evaluative

statements increased in complexity depending on the age and cognitive ability of the students,

and included (1) "unintegrated," (2) "categoric/class attribute" (3) "analysis" and (4)

"generalization" responses (Applebee, 1978).

The first level, "unintegrated" response was usually elicited from younger readers, and

involved responses in which memorable parts of the story were retold, often in no logical order,

accompanied by evaluations that were inseparable from the text. The second level, "categoric" or

"evaluation as a class attribute" dealt with responses that focused on classifying and categorizing

stories. The third level, "analysis" dealt with responses that involved an analysis of the text or its

literary features. The highest and most abstract level, "generalization" dealt with how students

used the text as a means to understand, make generalizations, and interpret the world, similar to

the previously proposed notion using transaction to promote transformation. Applebee (1978)

then compared these leveled responses to the stages of cognitive development proposed by

developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget. According to Applebee (1978), unintegrated responses

were commonly elicited from students in Piaget's preoperational stage, and categoric/class

attribute responses were elicited in the concrete operational stage, while analysis and generalization responses were found in the formal operational stage.

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development claimed that children progress through four distinct stages of development: (1) "sensorimotor," (2) "preoperational," (3) "concrete operational," and (4) "formal operational" (Ormrod, 2009). Since the sensorimotor stage concerns children who are two years old or younger (Ormrod, 2009), this review is most concerned with the following three stages, which occur in school-age children, with a particular emphasis on the preoperational and concrete operational stages, which involve this study's focus on primary level, K-2 learners. The preoperational stage typically includes children from two to seven years old who are acquiring language (Ormrod, 2009) and who tend to retell stories by focusing on interesting story parts (Applebee's unintegrated response). In the concrete operational stage, children who are typically seven to eleven years old prefer realistic, concrete experiences (Ormrod, 2009), and may systematically categorize or summarize stories (Applebee's categoric/class attribute response). The formal operational stage typically includes children who are eleven years or older, and are able to move beyond concrete experiences toward more advanced, abstract thought (Ormrod, 2009) which is needed to critically examine texts (Applebee's analysis response) and to make generalizations about the text and the world (Applebee's generalization response). Therefore, Applebee's (1978) findings suggest that while primary-level students may be able to respond to texts outside of their personal experiences, they may not have the cognitive capacity and level of abstract thought needed to move into the analysis and generalization of the text and self that is necessary for quality transactions and critical, transformative experiences.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

In contrast to Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that cognition is socially contextualized, and must be developed by interaction with others before it can be individually accepted and internalized. This suggests that any form of understanding or acceptance must be collectively and socially constructed *first,* before it can be individually accepted. Vygotsky (1978) also posited that students have an "actual" (p. 85) level of cognitive ability in which they are able to independently complete tasks with little help, and a "potential" (p. 86) level of cognitive ability in which students can complete more challenging tasks with the help of a more knowledgeable peer or teacher. Essentially then, a teacher could presumably scaffold instruction, guiding a class through discussions compatible with the students' "zones of proximal development" (p. 86), effectively bridging the distance between these two levels of ability. This would enable students to collaboratively move beyond their actual ability into their potential cognitive ability, in order to respond to texts on a deeper, more critical level.

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that language and meaning are constructed through discussions with others. Thus, discussing a text in a sociocultural context after a read aloud may provide the necessary scaffolding needed to help shape a student's evocation to a text (Villaume & Hopkins, 1995). Additionally, existing empirical studies conducted with elementary and primary-level students suggest that personal responses are not simply dictated by stages of cognitive development, as Applebee (1978) suggested, but that "learning presupposes a specific social nature and process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). This suggests that when students are allowed to engage in teacher facilitated, social discussions with peers about a text, they are capable of critical thought.

Therefore, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that while younger students may possess lower cognitive development and ability for abstract thought needed to explore and understand virtual experiences that extend beyond their own, concrete realities, knowledge and understanding may be developed through social interactions with peers. Moreover, a sensitive teacher may be able to scaffold these "potential" cognitive abilities during group discussion built around the students' zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Ultimately, carefully guided class discussions may help students develop transactional responses that encourage social construction of meaning and lead to a collective and critical understanding of a text and their responses to it.

Further Examination of the Influence of Cognitive Development

In response to Applebee's (1978) study and to the gap in the literature concerning elementary students' ability to transact with a text, Lee Galda began examining the responses of young readers at the elementary level. Galda first explored elementary students' transactional responses in her dissertation (1980) and journal article describing her study and findings (1982). She examined the responses of three fifth-grade students in order to determine if they utilized Britton's (1970) "spectator" (aesthetic) stance while reading and discussing two different texts. Her findings revealed that these students were still unable to consistently read and respond from the view of a spectator. This suggests that even fifth grade students might not have the necessary cognitive capacity for consistently forming quality responses to a text, further corroborating Applebee's (1978) notion that quality transaction in the elementary grades is futile. However, Galda (1982) questioned if peer discussion, coupled with teacher guidance could help students develop and sustain a spectator stance while reading.

In 1990, Galda conducted a longitudinal study utilizing a cross-sectional design that further sought to confirm or refute Applebee's (1978) claims by determining how the responses

of students change over time as students move from fourth to ninth grade. Over the course of

four years, 35 fourth, sixth, and eighth-grade students orally responded to realistic fiction and

fantasy texts within small groups. Discussions were transcribed and evaluations were coded

according to Applebee's (1978) aforementioned levels of response. This process was also

replicated with eight students over the course of four years, from fourth to seventh grade. The

longitudinal data from this study corroborated the results of Applebee's (1978) study, finding

that quality, evaluative responses did develop as students increased in age and grade level, with

fourth graders exhibiting more categoric evaluations than other, older students. Like Applebee

(1978), Galda (1990b) found that students' capacity for abstract thought increased with age, as

students were more likely to suspend disbelief in order to "live" in the virtual world of fantasy,

while younger students preferred texts that mirrored the real world. However, Galda's (1990b)

findings also indicated that Applebee's (1978) highest level of response (generalization) did not

emerge until students were in eighth and ninth grade, again suggesting that this type of critical

response may not exist at the elementary level at all.

The Influence of Genre on Transactional Response

Ultimately, the findings of Galda's studies (1980; 1982; 1990b) corroborated Applebee's

(1978) belief that Piaget's stages of cognitive development may play a role in student ability to

transact with and critically evaluate a text. This suggests that students at elementary levels may

not have the cognitive capacity needed for quality transactional responses. However, one factor

that may have influenced the findings of these studies involves the genre of texts students were

asked to transact with.

In addition to examining the cognitive capacity needed for quality transactions with a

text, Galda (1990b) also questioned if the genre of stories played a part in students' ability to

adopt Britton's (1970) spectator stance. Until Galda's study (1980; 1982), all existing literature, including studies conducted by Bettelheim (1977) and Favat (1977) dealt with how children responded to fairy tales (Galda, 1980). This proved problematic, as reading the fantasy genre requires a "suspension of belief" and abstract thought that according to Piaget does not develop until later stages of development (Ormrod, 2009). Therefore, the second objective of Galda's (1990b) study sought to determine if younger children in lower cognitive stages of development were capable of the abstract thought necessary to transact with fantasy stories, or if they responded more thoughtfully to realistic fiction stories that required more concrete thought.

The results of the study (Galda, 1990b) indicated that the genre of stories did, indeed elicit different responses from students. When sixth and seventh-grade students were presented with fantasy and realistic fiction texts, far more categorical responses were generated for fantasy stories whereas more analytical responses were generated for realistic texts (Galda, 1990b). This is perhaps because when presented with an unfamiliar story world, students more heavily depend on their reading strategies and knowledge of plot elements to respond to the text, whereas they feel a greater connection and identification with the realistic fiction, which is more innate and familiar to them (Galda, 1990b).

This suggests that when encouraging transactional responses, particularly with primary learners, realistic texts that are easily identifiable to the students should be utilized, so that students can practice transacting with texts in "safe," familiar space, until transactional response is more developed (Galda, 1990b). Additionally, using realistic texts with younger elementary students does not require the high levels of abstract thought needed for immersion in the virtual world of fantasy. Thus, even though younger students may be less developed cognitively and have limited capacity for abstraction, transaction may still be able to occur if students are

presented with familiar, realistic texts that mirror authentic settings (Galda, 1990b). Therefore, when using transactional response with primary students, it may be pertinent to utilize books about autism that take place in realistic, familiar settings like homes, playgrounds, and schools.

Elementary Students and Transactional Response

While early research findings examining student responses to texts in the elementary grades were inconclusive, subsequent studies conducted in the mid 1990's supported the idea that elementary students are capable of producing quality responses when transaction is developed through social interaction and discussion. Although these studies focused on the more intermediate, 3-5 grade levels, they provide evidence that transactional response can be developed in social contexts with elementary learners.

In 1992, Cox and Many studied the responses of 38 students across two fifth grade classes, specifically focusing on (1) reader's stance, (2) student understandings, and (3) how stance influences these understandings. Students were asked to freely respond to five movies and four texts all belonging to the realistic fiction genre. Students' written responses were collected biweekly, and responses were measured from 1-5, ranging from efferent response (level 1) to an aesthetic response (level 5). Findings indicated that fifth grade students were able to frequently provide high-level aesthetic responses. These findings again point to the importance of utilizing realistic texts to promote transactional response, and refute Applebee's (1987) notion that elementary students may not be cognitively capable of quality transactions.

Wiseman, Many, and Altieri (1992) examined the responses of third-grade students during class discussions. In this study, students were divided into three groups that included (1) student-led discussion, (2) teacher-led, aesthetic discussion of students' experiences with the texts, and (3) teacher-led aesthetic discussion supplemented by an efferent examination of the

text and illustrations, and how they influenced students' aesthetic responses. Findings indicated that students in the two teacher-led groups both produced comparable levels of quality, aesthetic responses, whereas the student-led group focused more on an efferent analysis of the text with very limited aesthetic, quality responses. This indicates that teachers can guide students toward providing quality aesthetic responses, and also suggests that additional efferent analysis informs, rather than impedes students' aesthetic response.

In 1995, Villaume and Hopkins conducted a study to examine the transactions of fourth grade students in order to determine if social discussion influences response. The study particularly focused on the responses of five students in one literature group who were asked to read part of a text and then write a response that they wanted to share during a 25-minute discussion. Discussions were captured through vignettes, which were coded according to how often the transactions indicated that students had entered the (1) "text world," (2) "personal world," (3) "improvised world," and (4) "related text world" (p. 194). Results indicated that students were capable of navigating between the different worlds during discussions, and further suggested that social interactions with the text may influence a student's response more so than cognitive ability. This further corroborated Vygotsky's (1978) idea that meaning and understanding can be co-constructed through social interaction and response.

The Emerging Cultural Perspective

More recently, from the late 1990's to the early 2000's, empirical studies have shifted to focus on how culture influences response (Gee, 2000). Particularly with the increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students, researchers are beginning to question if discussing texts can help improve literacy instruction for these diverse students and for students learning English as a second language (Gee, 2000). According to Martínez-Roldán, and López-

Robertson (1999), many believe students must master a specific set of decoding skills and

English language proficiency before they are able to critically discuss literature. However,

emerging studies corroborate the assumption that regardless of prior experiences and language,

students can collaboratively and socially work together to construct meaning and understanding

(Vygotsky, 1978). Ultimately, these studies indicate a current trend in using transactional

response to help students understand their own, personal experiences and to understand the

experiences of others from different cultures. However, as seen in the prior literature, existing

empirical research at the elementary level is still dominated by studies conducted in intermediate

grades.

Goatley, Brock, and Raphael (1995) conducted a three-week case study of a diverse

"book club" consisting of five fifth grade students that included three students with various

reading, language, and learning abilities. At the end of the year, the book club read and discussed

a novel centered on the Vietnam War, and one Vietnamese student named Mei used her cultural

background and experiences to emerge as a leader within the discussion group. Due to her

cultural background, she was viewed as an expert on the text, which allowed her to capitalize on

her cultural background knowledge and personal experiences in order to co-construct knowledge

with her peers (Goatley, et al., 1995). This study suggests that transactional response may help

diverse students better understand and share their cultures with others, leading to a deeper,

collective understanding of difference.

Likewise, Martínez-Roldán, and López-Robertson (1999) discovered that first grade,

Spanish-speaking, bilingual students actively and aesthetically responded to texts by creating and

sharing evocations manifested through "scary stories." These stories helped the students relate

the text to their prior, cultural experiences, which helped them make sense of the story and also

helped them make sense of events in their own lives. Interestingly, however, the English-speaking students refrained from storytelling and aesthetic response, preferring a more efferent, literal interpretation of the text (Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999). These findings suggest that students with similar backgrounds and experiences may be able to help make sense of their own cultures and experiences by analyzing their personal and collective evocations (in this case, "scary stories") to a text.

In addition, DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006) conducted a semester-long, ethnographic study that examined the responses of fourth grade students enrolled in a bilingual language arts classroom. An examination of qualitative data including recorded student responses and student interviews indicated that literature discussion groups enabled students to share their personal cultural backgrounds in order to critically discuss difficult topics presented through multicultural texts. Discussion of these texts also helped promote understanding and awareness toward diversity (DeNicolo & Franquiz, 2006), which suggests that reading and discussing diverse texts may help students understand and appreciate familiar and unfamiliar cultures.

In 2013, a five-month ethnographic study of a semi-rural third-grade classroom was conducted to explore how students responded to and extrapolated meaning from multicultural texts (Robinson, 2013). This study found that when students were encouraged to personally (aesthetically) and critically (efferently) respond to multicultural texts, they were able to activate a classroom discourse that rejected "a pedagogy of silence" (Robinson, 2013, p. 50). Findings indicated that interactive readings allowed students to reflect and make connections from their lives and experiences, giving them the opportunity to critically engage and learn about different cultures (Robinson, 2013). This suggests that students can be encouraged to make efferent and

aesthetic transactions, and that these texts can help encourage understanding, and acceptance of others' cultural and social experiences.

Conclusion

Within the transactional theory, the existing empirical research on student responses at the elementary level is thin and inconclusive. There is a large gap in the research focusing on how transactional response can be used with younger students in the primary grades. Some studies (Applebee, 1978; Galda, 1980; 1982; 1990b) suggest students must achieve higher levels of cognitive ability and abstract thought in order to produce quality transactions. Other studies (Cox & Many, 1992; Wiseman, et al., 1992; Villaume & Hopkins, 1995) suggest that social interactions can develop such responses. Finally, more current studies (DeNicolo & Franquiz, 2006; Goatley, et al., 1995; Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999; Robinson, 2013) corroborate the idea that students bring their own beliefs, backgrounds, cultures, and values to a text, and that text discussions can provide a context for affirming or challenging these experiences and creating cultural understandings. While the current trend seems to be shifting toward a more narrow focus of how students from specific cultures transact with texts, there is still a need for research on transactional response in the primary grades. My study provides further insight into (a) how transactional response can be cultivated in the primary grades, and (b) what kinds of responses primary students produce when transacting with diverse texts that represent difference.

Class Discussion

As previously illustrated, research from 1980's and 1990's primarily focused on the connections students made between their personal experiences and the text, while more recent research conducted in the late 1990's and early 2000's focused on how culture influences student

responses (Gee, 2000). Today, there is still a need to merge students' personal and cultural experiences and evocations to determine how students read and respond to texts within a sociocultural context (Galda & Beach, 2001; Villaume & Hopkins, 1995). Even today, very little research has explored the types of transactions young elementary learners make (Sipe, 2008), and there is a continuing need to combine the theories of Rosenblatt (1978) and Vygotsky (1978) to determine how discussing a text within a social context may influence the types of responses that are made at this level (Villaume & Hopkins, 1995).

Read Alouds

While they are consistently visible in elementary classrooms, some researchers view read alouds as an activity disconnected from classroom content and learning, which can result in missed opportunities for critically discussing and interacting with texts (Hoffman, 2011; Hoffman, Roser, & Battle, 1993). After observing 537 classrooms, Hoffman, et al. (1993) characterized read alouds as an arbitrary time teachers spent reading texts that were unrelated to the classroom content for about 10-20 minutes, accompanied by less than five minutes of discussion. In order to be effective, read alouds must move beyond simple enjoyment to purposeful, collaborative transaction. Read alouds allow students to distance themselves from the cognitive demands of decoding, and simply enjoy the reading experience (Galda, et al., 2000). Additionally, read alouds provide students the opportunity to experience more complex stories, multidimensional characters, and sophisticated vocabulary often not found in grade-level readers (Dyches, et al., 2006; Galda, et al., 2000).

The act of creating a read aloud context in which all students are actively engaged with a single text at the same time allows students to collectively discuss and construct meaning while simultaneously constructing individual, unique experiences with a text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Most

specifically, in the context of this study, read alouds provide younger, primary level students opportunities to *experience* quality, complex literature, without being confined to less cognitively challenging texts and/or topics often absent from lower level readers. Rosenblatt (2005/1956) points out: "The beginner, sounding out correctly the words found on the printed page without comprehension of their meaning, has failed to link words to experience" (p. 65). Thus, read alouds may encourage what Rosenblatt (1978; 1995) suggests is an inextricable relationship between the young reader and the text, which can lead to higher quality transactions and transformative possibilities.

The Importance of Student Dialogue

Within the literature, collective, sociocultural discussions are referred to using a wide variety of terms, and are "variously called 'grand conversations,' 'literature discussion groups,' 'literature circles,' or 'booktalks'" (Sipe, 2008, p. 75) among many others. Regardless of the label, class discussions allow students to orally respond to a text and construct meaning with others. In fact, Rosenblatt (1978) believed that in order for learning to occur, students needed to move beyond simply reading a text to engaging in discussion with others in order to confirm or clarify individual and collective interpretations.

Unlike Applebee's (1978) earlier assertions, scholars are beginning to recognize that young readers are thoughtful and critical thinkers (Sipe, 2008). Some researchers believe "children know a lot more about the world than we often assume and they need opportunities to discuss their concerns, anxieties, and confusion in supportive situations with peers and compassionate, knowledgeable adults" (Sipe & McGuire, 2006, p. 9). Vygotsky (1978) viewed learning as a social experience, which suggests that students learn and construct understandings through collaboration with others. Rosenblatt (1978) posited that transaction allows readers to

create personal interpretations of texts, which can then be shared during social interaction, and Galda (1982) suggested that discussion allows students to further explore their evocations to the text. Bleich (1975) believed that any interpretation of text is affirmed or rejected based on the opinions of others, and Fish (1980) similarly believed that an "interpretive community" could influence students' responses. Moreover, Mills (1976) stressed the importance of providing a space for students to authentically discuss texts, suggesting that others must confirm and validate any reader's evocation of a text within a sociocultural context in order for it to be accepted.

In 1997, Galda conducted a yearlong study in collaboration with teacher Lisa Stanzi and doctoral student Shane Rayburn to explore how second-grade students transacted with texts during teacher-facilitated discussions. The findings and transcripts from this study were compiled into *Looking through the faraway end: Creating a literature-based reading curriculum with second graders* (Galda, et al., 2000). The study focused on how a teacher can promote transactional response in the primary grades by asking open-ended, guiding questions, managing discussions, and teaching students how to listen and respond to each other. During this time, Galda documented evidence that (a) primary level students can produce quality transactions to a text, and that (b) the teacher plays a vital role in teaching students how to become thoughtful and critical responders during class discussion (Galda, et al., 2000).

In particular, Galda, et al. (2000) found that when the teacher refrained from leading the discussion and instead focused on actively listening to the conversation and valuing the ideas of the students, she was able to guide students toward constructing more critical responses to the texts. At the end of the year, students were asked to write a final journal entry to describe how this transaction had changed them. Students were able to identify even the most nuanced changes they underwent after learning how to transact with texts, and they articulated how transaction

had made them stronger readers (Galda, et al., 2000). One student constructed an analogy for how his reading had evolved from looking at a bird using the "close-up end" of a pair of binoculars, to using the "faraway end" of the binoculars to gain a holistic view of the bird and the tree it was perched on (Galda, et al., 2000, p. 1). Based on the practical application and transcripts of authentic classroom context and student discussion, this text provided a valuable resource and model for my study, and offered insight into how I could encourage transactional response specifically within a second grade classroom.

In 1995, Almasi also examined the importance of class discussion during an 11-week study that examined the frequency and types of responses 97 fourth-grade students made in student-led and teacher-led groups. The study found that students had significantly more responses (94%) and asked considerably more questions (78%) in the student-led groups. Contrastively, in the teacher-led group, the teachers dominated 62% of the overall dialogue, and asked 93% of the questions, which ultimately limited the students' ability to freely discuss, critically analyze, and co-construct meaning from the texts (Almasi, 1995). Additionally, while discourse in the student-led groups increased in quantity, the caliber of responses also improved, with critical and complex student responses accounting for 26% of the dialogue in the student-led groups when compared to 15% of the student responses in the teacher-led groups (Almasi, 1995).

Interestingly, students in the peer-led groups were also able to interpret and extrapolate meaning from the texts by experiencing cognitive dissonance between their lived experiences and the virtual experiences presented in the text (Almasi, 1995). They used critical dialogue to resolve this conflict, which gave them the new perspective needed to form new understandings. In contrast, students in the teacher-led group did not experience conflict with themselves or others; instead, they experienced conflict with the text, which was created when the teacher

exercised an authoritative stance and asked literal questions with discrete answers. Conflicts arose when the students did not provide the "correct answers" to these questions, and were forced to assume a more literal interpretation of the text instead of relying on their own interpretations and the ideas of others for understanding (Almasi, 1995). This study not only points to the importance of allowing students to freely discuss a text in order to refine their interpretations, but also reiterates the importance of the teacher taking a less authoritative role, allowing students to draw their own conclusions from the text.

Creating a Responsive Environment

According to Rosenblatt (2005/1982), teachers should cultivate a safe learning environment in which students are free to honestly and openly explore a text alongside their peers. Elucidating on Rosenblatt's work (2005/1982), Connell (2008) stated:

> To be successful, literature classrooms need to be places where students receive supportive critical evaluation and encounter multiple perspectives through reading diverse kinds of books; such an environment helps young readers to engage with a whole range of beliefs and values in our culture. (p. 114)

Likewise, Galda and Liang (2003) agreed that in order for students to transact with a text, it is important create a context in which students feel comfortable sharing their personal thoughts during transaction. Wells (1999) also posited that transformative learning experiences are cultivated when students are given the necessary resources (in this case, diverse children's books and sociocultural discussion) for co-constructing meaning and understanding from within an expertly guided "collaborative community of practice" (p. 137).

Additionally, discussion groups must consist of "community of listeners" (p. 96) who are ready to receive and consider the different ideas and experiences of their classmates, and to use

these new perspectives to create collective understandings (Fivush, 2010). Therefore, to ensure that the voices of all students are heard, students "need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them" (Brison, 2002, p. 51). Furthermore, Rosenblatt (1978) suggested that students' discussion responses should be considered viable so long as the students use the text to justify their responses and so long as they are not "contradicted by any element of the text" (p. 115). Similarly, Sarah Michaels's "Sharing Time" study (1981) indicated that teachers and students must be ready and willing to listen to the experiences of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, keeping in mind that these personal experiences, values, and beliefs may differ from their own.

The Role of the Teacher in Eliciting Response

The stance of the teacher, or simply, how the teacher approaches and uses a text for instruction can significantly influence student responses. Teachers can scaffold (Vygotsky, 1978) students' ability effectively interact with others by discussing appropriate behavior for class discussions, such as taking turns, listening to others, and "jumping in" to the conversation (Galda, et al., 2000). This guidance may encourage a shift from teaching students to *talk* (spontaneous, aesthetic response) to teaching students to *think* (efferent, critical analysis) as time goes on (Galda, et al., 2000). Researchers propose that teachers can further encourage transactional responses by actively listening to student responses, and asking questions to clarify, summarize, or extend students' understandings and interpretations of the text (Galda, et al., 2000). Additionally, asking students to take responsibility for how well a class discussion goes may give the students ownership over their responses and may increase the caliber of their social interactions (Galda, et al., 2000). Furthermore, Galda, et al. (2000) provided guidelines for

questions teachers could ask during group discussion in order to encourage students to transact with texts. These suggestions include pedagogical practices such as increasing wait time, asking higher order, open-ended questions, asking students to make their thinking visible, actively listening, and allowing students to lead the majority of the discussion.

Elementary Students and Class Discussion

As stated earlier, there is limited research aimed at exploring the sociocultural influence on transaction (Villaume & Hopkins, 1995), particularly regarding students' responses in primary grades. Similarly, information regarding the role of the teacher in eliciting transactional response is scarce, as existing research usually focuses on the ways *students* respond to texts, failing to illustrate how teachers can elicit these responses (Hoffman, 2011). The following studies, while still examining student responses, also suggest implications of practice for teachers hoping to use transactional response at the elementary level.

McGee examined the "grand conversations" of first-grade students in 1992, and specifically explored how the teacher elicited these responses. After a storybook reading, students were asked to freely discuss the text, and these responses were recorded, transcribed, and coded. McGee (1992) discovered that primary students ranged between two extremes, either focusing on the reader (more aesthetic in nature) or focusing on the text (more efferent in nature). Additionally, McGee (1992) found that when the teacher began using prepared, open-ended questions that required interpretation, students responded more thoughtfully to the texts, suggesting that the types of questions teachers use influence the nature of student responses.

Many and Wiseman (1992) explored how different instructional methods influenced third-grade student's responses to texts by collecting, examining, and coding student responses from (1) a "literary analysis" group that examined the text (efferent stance), (2) a "literary

experience" group that examined students' personal experiences with the text (aesthetic stance), and (3) a group that did not discuss the text. Predictably, the "literacy analysis" group produced more efferent responses that focused on the text's literary qualities, the "literary experience" group produced more aesthetic, personal responses and reactions to the text, while the control group simply summarized the story. The findings of this study again suggest that the types of questions and requests used by teachers play a large part in the responses that students produce during discussion.

Similarly, McGee, Courtney, and Lomax (1994) explored how teachers can encourage quality text discussions. In this study, first grade teachers read a story aloud, and then prompted discussion by asking the students what they thought about the text. Conversations were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, and researchers found that during discussion, teachers became a (1) "facilitator" who supervised the discussion, (2) "helper/nudger" who helped guide students to understandings, (3) "responder" who helped students build on ideas, (4) "literary curator" who capitalized on emerging understandings, and (5) "reader" who read the text. While the roles of the "facilitator" and "helper/nudger" occurred the most frequently as teachers managed discussion, the "literary curator" role occurred the least frequently, even though it produced the highest quality, interpretive responses from the students. This again suggests that teachers should not simply facilitate discussion, but serve as active listeners, and capitalize on pertinent, teachable moments that emerge through discussion in order to help build collective understandings rather than taking an authoritative stance toward a text.

In a yearlong study, Galda, Shockley, Bisplinghoff, Pellengrini, and Stahl (1995) explored the role of teacher Betty Shockley in shaping her first-grade students' responses during discussion. Students responded to written and personal narratives during a class meeting time

called "Y'all Know What?" reminiscent of "Sharing Time" from Sara Michael's (1981) study. In this setting, the teacher or student would say, "Y'all know what?" (p. 335) and then share an oral narrative. This activity developed into a safe space for students to practice telling stories and sharing their own experiences. Additionally, the teacher encouraged students to construct and share personal narratives, which helped students gain a better understanding of their lives and the world around them (Galda, et al., 1995). By sharing and telling stories, the students were able to (a) bridge the gap between home literacies and classroom instruction, (b) learn about each other and create trusting relationships, and (c) continue to explore these stories during other classroom literacy activities. This study substantiated earlier claims that younger students in the primary grades can transact with texts (e.g. either published or personal), so long as they are realistic and innately familiar to them.

Using Student Literature Journals

Furthermore, teachers can cultivate student responses by providing resources that can help mediate and encourage thoughtful transactions. As Glada & Liang (2003) pointed out, researchers use many different methods for cultivating aesthetic experiences with texts, such as journal prompts, dramatizations, and dialogue journals. However, one of the most effective tools for encouraging a transactional response within the elementary grades may be the implementation of literature journals, which enable students to spontaneously react to the text through writing (Galda, et al., 2000; Martinez, Roser, Hoffman, & Battle, 1992; McMahon, Raphael, Goatley, & Pardo 1997). These researchers assert that literature journals can specifically encourage transactional responses by allowing students to aesthetically and individually respond to a text by organizing their thoughts and creating personal evocations

before discussing the text whole-class (Galda, et al., 2000; Martinez, et al., 1992; McMahon, et al., 1997). Specifically, Galda, et al. (2000) illustrate:

> As time went on, the children began to learn that journal writing was a time to rehearse what they might want to discuss later, and to write down "wonderings" and questions that occurred to them as they read. These questions and wonderings began to initiate extended conversation. (p. 36)

A list of possible journal response prompts derived from Hirsch's (1997) work with third-grade students is provided in Galda, et al.'s book (2000), and is a suggested tool for scaffolding student response after a read aloud. This list includes prompts such as "If I were in this story…" or "This reminds me of something in my own life…" or "The character most like me is…" (p. 34). After journaling, students should be encouraged to join the discussion using their written, spontaneous, aesthetic responses and evocations as a guide for response.

Conclusion

Collectively, these studies (Galda, et al., 1995; Many & Wiseman 1992; McGee, 1992; McGee, et al., 1994) illustrate the importance of class discussion and provide evidence that giving young students the opportunity to interact with texts through guided class discussions can produce more complex thinking and response (Hoffman, 2011). Additionally, these studies point to the need for teachers to carefully consider their role in facilitating discussions (Almasi, 1995; Galda, 1997; Galda, et al., 2000; McGee, et al., 1994) in order to encourage transactional response. Findings suggest that interpretive, open-ended questions may encourage higher quality responses and thinking (McGee, 1992), and that student responses may be guided through the use of literature journals for spontaneous student response (Galda, et al., 2000; Martinez, et al., 1992; McMahon, et al., 1997). It may also be important to select familiar, realistic texts that

mirror personal narratives, allowing students to make personal connections (Galda, et al., 1995), and to capitalize on teachable moments that emerge during student transaction and shared experiences (McGee, et al., 1994). Ultimately, these studies suggest that even students in primary grades are capable of complex thought when sociocultural discussion is used as a scaffold (Vygotsky, 1978). However, a review of these existing studies again indicates that further research in this area is needed, as studies at the primary level are still uncommon (Sipe, 2008; Villaume & Hopkins, 1995).

Diverse Texts

A student's brain organizes background knowledge and experiences into representative structures called schemata, which enable students to transfer and apply prior knowledge to new topics in order to form understandings (Pritchard, 1990). Prior knowledge, culture, and experiences provide the basis for schemata, which can provide students with an "interpretive framework" (Pritchard, 1990, p. 75) for approaching new situations. Schemata are particularly important when reading, interpreting, and constructing meaning from new texts because they can aid understanding when students are presented with new experiences (Pritchard, 1990), or when dealing with abstract or unfamiliar topics like autism.

Because all students have different schemata, disequilibrium may occur when the students' past experiences do not align with those experiences presented through the text (Sipe & McGuire, 2006). For example, Ketter and Lewis (2001) described a research project aimed at including more multicultural literature into three predominantly white, middle school classrooms. They found that white students aesthetically responded to texts that were similar to their own, existing schema but were not given many opportunities to transact with other texts addressing controversial themes like racism and prejudice. Conversely, while reading *Sounder*,

one Black student had a very different response to the text, presumably drawn from prior,

existing schema, which divided him from his peers. Therefore, Ketter and Lewis (2001)

suggested that teachers should provide more opportunities for students to transact with quality

multicultural literature in order to help expand students' existing schemata and to broaden their

experiences toward others who are different.

The Text as a Mirror and a Window to View the World

Teachers face the unique challenge of identifying texts that align curriculum-based topics

with the cultural backgrounds and individual interests of all students (Connell, 2008).

Additionally, Connell (2008) suggested that these texts "need to meet the larger social aims of

using literature to stimulate imagination and understanding of culture in the service of

democratic values" (p. 118) as Rosenblatt (2005/1956) suggested. Similarly, Galda, et al. (2013)

posited that diverse books help students learn about other cultures, which by extension helps

them understand the world. Moreover, McGinley and Kamberelis (1996) found that books can

provide transformative opportunities for third and fourth grade students, who used them to (a)

reflect on themselves and their personal, lived experiences, and (b) gain a deeper understanding

of their own lives by drawing parallels between conflicts described in the virtual world to similar

conflicts they experience in the real world.

However, while the United States public school system is consistently becoming more

diverse, the number of books published in the United States that depict different cultures or

diverse groups are not representative of these changing demographics (Galda, et al., 2013). In her

powerful article, *The all-white world of children's books*, Nancy Larrick (1965) claimed that

children need to "see themselves" in children's books in order to actively connect with a text and

to identify with the characters in it. However, Larrick (1965) also warned that only reading books depicting one, specific culture, would privilege one diverse group over another.

According to Galda, et al. (2013), diverse texts are powerful because they "portray the uniqueness of people while demonstrating a common humanity that connects us all" (p. 30). This suggests that students must be given the opportunity to transact with texts that depict a variety of characters so they can look beyond the difference in order to identify and "appreciate the similarities as well as celebrate the uniqueness of cultural groups" (Galda, et al., 2013, p. 30). Similarly, in her famous metaphor, Bishop (1990) espoused the idea that children's books can serve as "mirrors" for viewing and reflecting on one's own self and culture, "windows" for viewing cultures belonging to others, or "sliding glass doors" which allow the reader to enter the virtual world of the story (p. ix). Galda (1980) took things one step further, questioning: "Is a story a window, through which we see the world, a mirror, in which we see ourselves, or both" (p. viii), suggesting that exposure to diverse texts and characters may simultaneously provide a way for students to view themselves, while also learning about others and then reflecting on the commonalities they share (Galda, 1998). Likewise, books about disabilities (Leininger, et al., 2010), and most specifically autism (Azano, et al., manuscript submitted for publication) allow students to identify both the uniqueness of characters while also focusing on the commonalities they share. Therefore, diverse books may serve as a catalyst for helping students construct deeper understandings of themselves and others in the world who are different (Boyd, et al., 2015).

Student Resistance: A Teachable Moment

Students bring their own beliefs and experiences to a text. Therefore, when a text challenges these lived experiences or presents a discrepancy in what is known, students may experience disequilibrium and subsequently, resist or reject texts (Beach, 1997; Sipe & McGuire,

2006). However, instead of viewing this resistance as deterrence, it is suggested that teachers embrace resistance as an opportunity to further analyze and elucidate upon difficult topics presented through diverse texts (Cai, 2008; Sipe & McGuire, 2006). Rosenblatt (2005/1956) points out:

> Teachers and pupils need to be relaxed enough to face what indeed happened as they interpreted the printed page. Frank expression of boredom, or even vigorous rejection, are more valid starting points for learning than are docile attempts to feel "what the teacher wants." (p. 64)

Therefore, resistance can provide a catalyst for introducing and discussing difficult topics within a critical, efferent stance, and may lead transformative opportunities or growth as students re-evaluate their personal beliefs, attitudes, and values.

Sipe and McGuire (2006) examined 74 transcripts of student responses from read aloud sessions in kindergarten, first, and second grade, after students were encouraged to engage in "read aloud talk" or to freely and aesthetically react to the story as it was read aloud. Transcripts were categorized into six forms of resistance: (1) "intertextual" (rejecting a new representation of a familiar text), (2) "preferential/categorical" (rejecting a text based on initial perceptions of the story), (3) "reality testing" (rejecting a text because the story world does not align with the real world), (4) "engaged/kinetic" (rejecting a text because the story was too distressing), (5) "exclusionary" (rejecting a text because it does not include characters the student can identify with), and (6) "literary critical" (rejecting a text based on how it was written).

Most interestingly, the findings suggested that one of the reasons students rejected texts was because they did not "see themselves" (Larrick, 1965) in the stories, or if they did, these characters were illustrated in a negative light (Sipe & McGuire, 2006). Students resist stories for

a number of reasons, usually due to (a) discrepancies between personal experiences and virtual experiences presented by the text (Beach, 1997; Sipe & McGuire, 2006), or (b) conflict with the ideologies presented in the text involving a story's word choice, plot, or images (Sipe & McGuire, 2006). However, resistance may present an "occasion for powerful teachable moments, generating deeper comprehension and more thoughtful interpretation" (Sipe & McGuire, 2006, p. 6) of a text, which may be capitalized upon to guide students toward opportunities for learning and growth (Cai, 2008).

Selecting Quality Diverse Texts

While it is evident that finding diverse texts is important, it is very difficult to find high-quality texts that portray minority groups. According to Boyd, et al. (2015), not even 5% of the texts published during the last 30 years depicted characters from different races, and an even greater disparity existed for texts portraying characters with differing levels of ability, geographical backgrounds, sexual preferences, or religious practices. Moreover, books should not be selected merely because they contain a diverse character; a text must be critically examined to see how characters from different cultures are represented, and to determine how the story is told, and what ideologies it may contain (Sipe & McGuire, 2006) in order to determine if it is a viable tool for transaction in the classroom.

Apart from literary quality, which can include the development of strong, compelling plots and multidimensional characters (Dyches & Prater, 2000), societal and cultural factors and perceptions can also determine a book's quality (Stevenson, 2006) and influence how characters with disabilities are portrayed (Dyches & Prater, 2000). Additionally, Boyd, et al. (2015) suggested that teachers may be able to determine the quality of a text by examining its (a) "visual and verbal sensitivity," (b) "authenticity and accuracy," and (c) "ideology" (p. 383). In order to

ensure that a text is sensitive to the culture or group it is depicting, diverse texts should be examined for stereotypical utterances (Boyd, et al., 2015) which may include how (a) characters from different regions who have dialects, (b) characters with disabilities who may have limited communication skills, or (c) characters that are native English speakers who are learning the language speak in the texts. Likewise, texts about disabilities should be examined for influential language, such as describing individuals as someone with a disability instead of someone defined by it (Dyches & Prater, 2000). More specifically, labels should be examined to see how authors and other characters describe individuals with disabilities like autism (Sigmon, et al., 2016).

Similarly, students are likely to resist a text that does not provide an accurate depiction of a diverse group or culture (Enciso, 1994; Sipe & McGuire, 2006), does not provide an authentic portrayal of a character from that culture (Sipe & McGuire, 2006), or presents a story that does not align with the students' personal, lived experiences of that culture or group (Beach, 1997; Sipe & McGuire, 2006). Consequently, it is important to analyze how the perspective of the author, current societal trends, and historical events may influence how characters in these texts are presented over time (Galda & Beach, 2001). Carefully analyzing books for positive, accurate depictions of characters with autism, for example, may encourage teachers to utilize these books as a resource in classrooms to help promote students' acceptance and understanding of people with disabilities (Leininger, et al., 2010; Prater, et al., 2006; Sigmon, et al., 2016).

Finally, similar to avoiding an authoritative interpretation of a text (Cai, 2008), Galda & Beach (2001) caution against accepting others' covert or overt ideological interpretations of texts. These ideologies may advance the intended message of a text over the personal experiences of the reader, causing dissonance when students create evocations. Additionally,

books should be examined for covert and overt themes and messages that may perpetuate

stereotypes, biases, and messages of prejudice (Boyd, et al., 2015).

Choosing Strong, Diverse Characters

Transactional response allows students to "to spontaneously share and refine their

personal responses through self-reflection and social dialogue, and to see the world through the

eyes of others" (Galda, 1998, p. 9). Because of this, selecting books with strong characters is

essential, as students often connect with characters on a personal level, regarding them as real

people even though they are only part of the virtual world of the story (Mellor & Patterson,

2000). Furthermore, Schlager (1978) found that young children in Piaget's concrete operational

stage were drawn to books that depicted characters undergoing similar stages of growth as the

reader, not necessarily books that were high in literary quality. This suggests that young students

connect most closely with texts that depict relatable, realistic characters that mirror their own,

real lives.

Moreover, Dyches & Prater (2000) asserted that diverse texts need lifelike characters that

change as the story goes on, and who, like the reader, possess strengths and weaknesses. They

suggest these characters should be multidimensional, with decisions and actions that reflect their

developmental and cultural backgrounds (Dyches & Prater, 2000). They also advised that books

about disability contain characters that are realistic and exhibit accurate characteristics and

behaviors so as not to perpetuate incorrect stereotypes of those who are different (Dyches &

Prater, 2000).

Available Texts About Disability

Since the focus of this inquiry was to explore how students transact with diverse texts, it

was pertinent to review the existing research on the availability and quality of books about

autism that are accessible to teachers. I found that most of the existing research on this topic centered on studies examining increases in the number of texts about disabilities, or, as Ayala (1999) pointed out, consisted of descriptive lists of children's books accompanied by suggestions for use (e.g. Baskin & Harris, 1984; Dyches & Prater, 2000). Additionally, several studies examined the number of available books about disabilities and how that number has changed over time, particularly with the implementation of IDEA (originally the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, or Public Law 94-142), that was passed in 1975.

Baskin and Harris (1984) found that books written about disabilities increased considerably when comparing books published from 1940-1975 or before IDEA (1975) was passed to 1976-1981 once the law was placed into effect. Similarly, Harrill, Leung, McKeag, and Price (1993) examined books containing characters with disabilities published before and after the IDEA (1975) was enacted and found that books published before 1978 (15 books) primarily focused on physical and visual impairments, while books published after 1978 (30 books) began to illustrate a wider range of disabilities. These findings were corroborated by Carlisle (1998), who examined the growth and availability of books about disabilities from 1940-1980. Carlisle (1998) found that books focused on physical or visual disabilities until 1975, and then the quantity of books increased considerably, and newer disabilities, like autism became more visible. However, Carlisle (1998) also found that while the quantity of books about disabilities increased, quality often did not, as books were characterized by weak plots, characters, and language.

In a similar study, Ayala (1999) examined 59 books published from 1974-1996, and found that most books focused on orthopedic or visual impairments, with only the more recent books (1989-1996) depicting other disabilities like autism (5%). However, overall, while the

number of books published increased in quantity, many books lacked quality, with only 20%

realistically depicting characters with disabilities (Ayala, 1999). Even more interestingly, many

of the books depicted characters in a condescending nature, corroborating Mellon's (1989),

assertion that characters with disabilities are often portrayed as "brave little souls" (63%) or

"poor little things" (10%). One book even depicted a character with a disability as a villain.

Additionally, this study pointed toward the need for more books depicting characters with

disabilities in order to more accurately reflect society's changing demographics.

Similarly, Dyches, Prater, and Cramer (2001) analyzed 12 books published between

1997-1998, and Dyches and Prater (2005) examined 34 books published between 1999-2003 in

order to determine how characters with mental and developmental disabilities, including autism

were portrayed. Findings from both studies suggested a more positive, albeit inconsistent

movement toward portraying characters with disabilities as more realistic and multidimensional,

and books tended to de-emphasize the disability in order to focus on messages of acceptance

illustrated through positive portrayal of the characters with disabilities and the growing

relationships between the characters and their nondisabled peers.

In 2010, Leininger, et al., reviewed 131 books published from 1975-2009 that received

Newberry Awards or honors and found that only 24% of the books included characters with

disabilities. In a similar study, Dyches, et al. (2006) examined the 276 books published between

1938-2005 that received Caldecott Awards or honors, and discovered that only 4% of the books

depicted a central character with a disability. Both studies found that some award-winning

books, while high in literary quality, often did not accurately or realistically represent characters

with disabilities. Additionally, both studies indicated a disproportionate gap between the

increasing number of students with disabilities, and the number of available books containing characters with disabilities (Dyches, et al., 2006; Leininger, et al., 2010).

Ultimately, although these studies indicate that overall, books are beginning to more accurately depict characters with disabilities in realistic and positive ways, some texts still perpetuate inconsistent portrayals of characters with disabilities (Dyches & Prater, 2005; Dyches, et al., 2001). These studies also suggest that some quality books may contain unauthentic or inaccurate representations of characters with disabilities, and conversely, books containing accurate portrayals may lack quality (Dyches & Prater, 2000; Dyches, et al., 2006; Leininger, et al., 2010). Dyches & Prater (2000) therefore, suggest selecting texts for instruction based on thematic elements.

Finally, these studies reiterate the need for a content analysis of children's books that shifts from a general focus on disabilities to a more narrow emphasis on texts specifically about autism. As stated in Chapter 1, this literature gap led to the content analysis that I conducted with my colleagues, which provided the context for this study (Azano, et al., manuscript submitted for publication). Since this study focused on analyzing texts and generating salient themes, these identified books provided an exclusive collection of texts that I was able to use pragmatically according to theme, as Dyches and Prater (2000) suggested.

Conclusion

In summary, while careful and purposeful text selection is important, and research provides guidelines for selecting quality books, Galda (2013) cautions against putting too much emphasis on the text, pointing out that it is not the text that holds the possibility of power, but rather, the individual and collective student evocations to that text. Galda (2013) states: "Making connections between life and text and recognizing yourself in books is wonderful, but if the

reading experience stops there, we have stopped short if we believe that reading can be transformational" (p. 11). As such, it is important for students to be prompted to analyze their own evocations, reexamining their aesthetic responses for a more critical interpretation of the text and self (Cai, 2008). Additionally, when using texts about autism in the classroom or for discussion, non-disabled students may require sensitive guidance from the teacher to encourage more accepting, positive views toward difference. Specifically, Sigmon, et al. (2016) suggest that when using texts about autism, the focus should be on (a) teaching the defining characteristics of autism, (b) emphasizing acceptance for individuals with autism, and (c) communicating any plans for using books as learning tools to the parents of students with autism.

Conclusion

In accordance with Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978), students may be encouraged to transact with texts by first adopting a spontaneous, aesthetic stance that allows them to create their own evocations to the text (Cai, 2008). Based on prior knowledge, understandings, and experiences, this aesthetic stance may enable students to emotionally connect and interact with diverse characters within the "virtual experience" of the story (S. Langer, 1953), and by putting themselves in the shoes of characters that are different in order to gain a new perspective of difference (Galda, 1998; Galda & Liang, 2003). Ultimately, as Galda (2013) surmises:

> If we support readers as they read aesthetically, evoking their own poems, and allow them time to think, write, and talk about their experiences, reading a powerful book can become an event that just might change the world, one reader at a time. (p. 12)

Specifically for books about autism, encouraging an aesthetic response may provide students with new experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978), aimed at increasing knowledge and awareness of

autism. Through an efferent stance, students may be encouraged think critically about the text and their own, personal evocations to it (Cai, 2008) within a social context in order to co-construct meaning and understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, facing possible dissonance (Sipe & McGuire, 2006), and challenging and reshaping prior experiences and perceptions (Galda, et al., 2013) may lead to acceptance of others who express difference. Teachers may promote transactional response by carefully and purposefully selecting texts to use in the classroom (Boyd, et al., 2015; Sipe & McGuire, 2006), creating a sociocultural context for collective discussion (Galda & Liang, 2003; Villaume & Hopkins, 1995), and sensitively guiding discussion to promote change (Cai, 2008; Lehr, 1995). By critically analyzing texts and students' personal evocations and responses to the text, readers may be able to reach a point of understanding toward others who are different, which may not only create an opportunity for the reader to learn and grow, but provide transformative opportunities as well. The following chapter provides a description of my study, including the methods I used for generating and analyzing data concerning how elementary learners transact with diverse texts.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to discover the types of responses students had when transacting with diverse texts in order to explore if these transactions could provide transformative opportunities. The theoretical framework used in this study was based on Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978), which examines the different ways readers aesthetically and efferently engage with and respond to texts. This inquiry was also informed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and the belief that meaning and understanding can be co-constructed through social interaction and discussion.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions: (1) How can children's picture books about autism be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary classroom, and (2) What types of responses do primary students have when transacting with children's picture books about autism? In order to address research question 1, my goal was to provide thick description and detailed analysis of how a transactional approach to diverse read alouds was utilized in one primary, elementary classroom. In order to address research question 2, I examined the various types of student responses that occurred during whole class discussion, when students were encouraged to transact with purposefully selected, children's picture books about autism. Responses were analyzed for thematic understandings and examined to determine if they changed over time. At the completion of the intervention, discrete findings collectively informed both questions of interest. Additionally, pre-intervention interviews were used to gauge students' prior knowledge, experiences, and perceptions toward children with autism and diversity in general prior to the study. Post-intervention interviews were

also conducted and student responses were examined and compared to pre-intervention responses to determine if any change occurred. Gaining insight into the types of student responses to diverse texts and how these responses changed after transaction addressed both the types of responses students had to the texts (research question 2), and whether transacting with these books provided young learners with opportunities for transformation (research question 1).

Formative and Design Experiment

While transactional response (Rosenblatt, 1978) has gained recognition and popularity over the past few decades, and theoretical research has emphasized the value of authentic discussion (Vygotsky, 1978), practical application has been less forthcoming (Galda & Beach, 2001). This may be because existing literature does not provide a consistent, pragmatic guide for teacher use (Hoffman, 2011). Due to the flexible and often ambiguous nature of transactional response within a practical, classroom context, I chose a formative and design experiment methodology for this study. This methodology was particularly appealing because it provided the opportunity for promoting change within a practical classroom context by practically aligning Rosenblatt's theory (1978) with instructional strategies and classroom practice (Reinking & Bradley, 2008).

The formative and design experiment approach enables the researcher to "design an intervention that works to achieve a valued pedagogical goal in an authentic classroom environment" (Reinking & Bradley, 2008, p. 15). As such, the intervention is continually and practically modified according to student needs, and in accordance with feedback and input from the teacher and researcher (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). While baseline and summative data are often measured quantitatively for comparison, intervention modifications and results are often captured through qualitative methods (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Additionally, traditional

methods of data collection including formal observations and audio recordings commonly used in ethnographies help provide "thick description" of the intervention and setting in order to "*explain, describe*, and *provide insight* into human behavior in context" (Purcell-Gates, 2011, p. 136) and to seek "answers to questions that ask like *why, what is happening, what does it look like, how does it work*, and so on" (Purcell-Gates, 2011, p. 137). Such methods, Bradley and Reinking (2008) suggest, may help "identify problems, to propose possible solutions, and to document before, during, and after change" (Jacob, 1992, p. 322).

Stemming from the "long lamented gap between research and practice" (Bradley & Reinking, 2011, p. 189), researchers identified the need for a methodology that utilized practical and adaptable methods in order to improve education "through creative, innovative, instructional interventions grounded in theory and guided by systematic data collection and analysis" (Reinking & Bradley, 2008, p. 6). The formative and design experiment was established as a methodology in the 1990's (Reinking & Bradley, 2008), and was first used in Brown's (1992) seminal study and reemphasized and explained through additional exemplars (e.g. Collins, 1992; Newman, 1992) (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). In recent years, researchers in the field of literacy have adopted the more concise terminology "formative experiment" when referring to this methodology, while researchers in other content areas still retain the longer, "design experiment" title (Bradley & Reinking, 2011, p. 191). In keeping consistent with the literacy-based, updated terminology, the term "formative experiment" is used in this study from this point on.

Within the field of literacy, teachers are largely responsible for the practical application of theory and research within the classroom, and practitioner pieces are often merely regarded as a supplement to a research agenda (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). However, according to Bradley and Reinking (2011), the National Reading Panel (2000) suggested that experimental methods

are essential when conducting studies aimed at promoting change in the classroom with regard to reading and literacy, making this methodology especially appropriate for this study. While not a "pure" methodology, a formative and design experiment allows the researcher to flexibly utilize any combination of methods needed to achieve desired pedagogical goals and understandings (Bradley & Reinking, 2011). Additionally, the pragmatic nature of the methodology lends itself well to naturalistic, classroom settings, where instructional interventions can be continually adapted based on need (Bradley & Reinking, 2011).

Defining Characteristics of Formative Experiment

While a complete, systematic guide for implementing a formative experiment does not exist, Reinking and Bradley (2008, p. 17-22) describe seven defining characteristics of the methodology that provided a framework to help guide and orient my study:

1. *Intervention-centered in authentic instructional contexts*. The intervention improves instruction by providing a creative solution to an instructional need. It takes place in an authentic setting and is as naturalistic as possible.

2. *Theoretical*. A theory provides the foundation for the study, and the goal is to determine how theory and practice align by implementing and modifying interventions in order to inform pedagogical understandings.

3. *Goal oriented*. The purpose of the study is to reach a specified goal, and all data collection, analysis, and intervention procedures are designed with this goal in mind.

4. *Adaptive and iterative*. Within the study, interventions are continually adapted and modified according to student need and teacher and researcher feedback. Similarly, analysis is an iterative process, resulting in an intervention that may look significantly different from the beginning to the end of the study.

5. *Transformative*. During the study, the researcher remains open to unanticipated intervention results, all of which may inform the intervention and "transform" teaching pedagogy and educational environments.

6. *Methodologically inclusive and flexible*. Any research method can be utilized in the study as long as the researcher is able to justify how the method (a) helps foster a deeper understanding of the theory underpinning the study, (b) appropriately aligns with the intervention, and (c) can be used to analyze and interpret intervention results and data.

7. *Pragmatic*. The study utilizes a relevant theory that creates a useful context in which the intervention can be practically implemented by the teacher in order to address specific instructional needs and to improve overall instruction.

Methods

In addition to the seven guiding characteristics of a formative experiment, the following section outlines Reinking and Bradley's (2008) suggested six-phase organizational scheme that I utilized when conducting this study: (1) identifying participants, (2) compiling demographic and contextual data, (3) collecting pre-intervention baseline data, (4) conducting the intervention, (5) analyzing baseline, intervention, and post-intervention data, and (6) evaluating findings and forming conclusions. For the purpose of this study, the term "intervention" was used to refer to the teacher read aloud, student journal writing, and subsequent class discussion of the children's books about autism. All data collection for this study occurred over a three month time period from December 2015 to February 2016. The following sections give a brief overview of the timeline and data collection phases.

Phase 1: Identifying Participants

  Teacher. Mrs. Humphries (all names are pseudonyms) was a second grade, general education teacher with over 30 years of professional teaching experience, and nearly 20 years at the current school where the study took place. She was selected to participate in this study based on her interest in autism and transaction, and by the recommendation of her principal, who identified her class as one that frequently utilized writing and discussion as a primary means of examining texts. Additionally, Mrs. Humphries possessed practical experience teaching students with autism within the context of her inclusive classroom, and she also had a son that was a special education teacher. This contributed to her background knowledge about ASD. I met with Mrs. Humphries twice in December 2015, first to explain the logistics of the study and to gauge her interest in participating, and secondly, to gather pre-intervention background information demographic data to inform the intervention design.

  During these meetings, Mrs. Humphries and I formed a collaborative partnership. Using Cole and Knowles' (1993) description, our roles were based on "negotiated and mutually agreed upon" tasks and contributions, rather than "equal involvement" in the research study (p. 486). We collaboratively selected the diverse texts that were used in this study, which were chosen from the pre-selected list of children's books about autism derived from Azano, Tackett, and Sigmon's content analysis (manuscript submitted for publication). This ensured that the selected children's books were already analyzed based on the quality of their thematic content. However, Mrs. Humphries was asked for input regarding the types of texts that would be most appropriate for her class' specific needs. Mrs. Humphries and I met weekly to discuss the intervention and to plan and modify semi-structured discussion questions and prompts to be used with each text after the completion of the read aloud and during class discussion. These prompts were aimed at

encouraging transactional response. During these meetings, the intervention was continually

discussed and modified, and data from the class discussions and student literature journals were

used to inform and provide rationale for instructional decisions.

Students. Bradley and Reinking (2011) propose that researchers may increase the rigor

of a formative experiment by justifying why specific contexts and participants are appropriate for

study. As such, the selection of student participants for this study was twofold.

First, these students were selected because this particular school embraces the inclusion

model for students with disabilities, thus prepositioning the students to early exposure and

formative experiences with children who have autism. Research indicates that young students

enter school with attitudes and beliefs that are shaped by lived experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978),

but before entering school, not all students are afforded opportunities to interact with children

who have disabilities (Prater, et al., 2006). Therefore, this study used diverse texts to provide

students with purposeful experiences of diverse groups (Prater, et al., 2006), including characters

with autism. The intervention provided these students the opportunity to experience texts and to

co-construct meaning with their peers though class discussions (Vygotsky, 1978). These

transactions were created to provide students with the opportunity for growth or transformation,

in order to increase awareness, understanding, and acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000) in young

students whose experiences, attitudes, and beliefs are still being formed. Additionally, special

care was taken that the class did not contain a student with autism, as this may have propagated

tokenism. However, one student did have an older brother who was diagnosed with the disorder.

Second, a primary, second grade classroom was selected for this study because of the gap

in the existing research and previous, inconclusive studies (Applebee, 1987; Galda 1980; 1982;

1990b) concerning if and how transactional response can be used in primary level, elementary

classrooms (Villaume & Hopkins, 1995). The participants of this study included 19 elementary-aged students and an equally representative sample of 10 girls (53%) and 9 boys (47%) from a single, second grade, general education classroom in an elementary school in the south Atlantic region of the United States. The demographics of the class included three students who were identified as gifted, three students who were Title I and reading below grade level, and the rest of the students were identified as reading above grade level. Professionals were raising many of the students in the class, and grandparents were raising three students because their parents were incarcerated. The class was comprised of a sampling of n=15 (79%) white, n=3 (16%) Black, and n=1 Hispanic (5%) students. Of the 19 students in the class, nine of those students' parents consented to their participation in the pre and post-intervention interviews and my collection and reproduction of their student journal entries and class responses.

Researcher. My role as the researcher was that of a collaborative partner (Cole and Knowles, 1993) with the teacher. My responsibilities consisted of conducting pre and post-interviews with the students before and after the intervention, and conducting observations of the teacher read alouds and student interaction and discussion during the interventions. In keeping with the naturalistic nature of a formative experiment (Reinking & Bradley, 2008), the exact number and length of the interventions was co-determined with Mrs. Humphries prior to the beginning of the study. My involvement included taking copious field notes to determine the types of responses that occurred as students transacted with the texts, and noting how and if these responses changed over time. The pre and post-interviews provided insight as to how student responses and views changed over time before and after transaction. I was present for all intervention sessions and I audio recorded each intervention for later transcription and analysis.

While teacher input, student responses, and literature journals were used to inform and modify the intervention, I completed all data analysis.

Interventions were audio recorded and transcribed, and then qualitatively coded and analyzed. My field notes informed analysis, and student pre and post-interviews were also quantitatively analyzed and compared. While I worked closely with Mrs. Humphries in planning and modifying the intervention in accordance with student needs, my primary role during the intervention was that of an observer, so as to not hinder the practicality and sustainability of the study, and to ensure that the intervention could be continued or replicated with different books after my departure (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). All data and analysis was secured on a password protected, personal computer, and all documentation including consent forms were collected and stored in a locked safe.

Phase 2: Compiling Demographic and Contextual Data

Pre-intervention data regarding background information and demographic data for student participants was collected during an initial, 20 minute orienting meeting with the teacher. During this meeting, I met with Mrs. Humphries and gathered information on her perceptions of (1) classroom climate and culture, (2) student/class prior knowledge and exposure to autism, (3) student/class demographics, diversity, and background, and (4) current read aloud practices (See Appendix A for a list of the semi-structured interview questions). During this initial meeting, I discussed Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978) with her, and discussed specific teaching strategies and prompts for eliciting transactional response, using Galda, et al.'s (2000) book for suggestions.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this meeting was discussing Mrs. Humphries' read aloud practices and the length of time she usually designated for introducing and focusing on

new or difficult concepts. We also discussed how many read alouds she typically used when teaching a new concept to her class. At the completion of the meeting, we agreed upon a study comprised of 10 interventions lasting 45 minutes each, which allowed students to transact with 10 children's books over the course of four weeks. At this time, I provided Mrs. Humphries with a selection of children's books about autism taken from the previously discussed content analysis (Azano, et al., manuscript submitted for publication). As we were approaching winter break, I encouraged Mrs. Humphries to read the books over the next several weeks and to select her 10 favorite books based on her personal interest and their alignment to her perception of student and class needs. I made suggestions concerning my favorite texts by placing a post-it note inside the cover of several of the books, but I ultimately encouraged Mrs. Humphries to select the books that she deemed most appropriate for her class.

Phase 3: Collecting Pre-Intervention Baseline Data

One week prior to the beginning of the study, I conducted 5-10 minute pre-intervention interviews with the nine consenting students to gather baseline data concerning students' awareness, understanding, acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000), and overall knowledge about autism prior to the interventions (see Appendix B for a list of the semi-structured interview questions). These responses were audio recorded, transcribed, and later compared to post-intervention interviews at the end of the study in order to determine if any changes in learning or growth occurred. These pre-intervention interviews were also used to inform initial instructional decision-making and ongoing, necessary modifications to the intervention as noted during collaborative meetings with Mrs. Humphries.

Phase 4: Conducting the Intervention

  Data collection tools. Data collected during this study included (1) audio recordings of the 10 whole class intervention sessions and nine student pre and post-intervention interviews, (2) researcher field notes in the form of observational and methodological files, (3) teacher and researcher collaborative meetings, and (4) nine student pre and post-intervention student interviews.

  Audio recordings. The primary means of data collection were audio recordings of the 10 intervention sessions, each lasting 45 minutes in length. In addition, nine individual pre-intervention and post-intervention interviews were conducted with assenting students who returned parental consent forms. These interviews were approximately 5-10 minutes in length and were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis and comparison.

  Field notes. Audio recorded and subsequently transcribed intervention sessions in which the teacher read aloud a text and then provided time and support for students to transact with and discuss the story served as the primary method for qualitative data collection. However, field notes including (a) observational files and (b) methodological files provided secondary sources of information to support the auditory data collected during the interventions (Bailey, 1996).

  Observational files were field notes that described the surrounding classroom environment, and were explicitly used to note the different ways students verbally and nonverbally responded to the texts (Bailey, 1996). Observational files were used in order to give a thick description of what transactional response looked like in a primary level, elementary setting. Additionally, since students listened to and responded to the texts in a variety of ways (Sipe & McGuire, 2006), these files were particularly pertinent when comparing and contrasting the students' verbal responses from the audio transcriptions with their nonverbal body language.

Since this study followed a formative experiment methodology, researcher methodological files were of utmost importance. Methodological files recorded information on how interventions were designed and conducted. They particularly focused on explaining why certain procedures were used, and provided written rationale for instructional decisions (Bailey, 1996). Since interventions are continually and iteratively adapted over the course of a formative experiment, they may look very different at the end of a study compared to the beginning (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Therefore, these field notes were particularly useful in explaining and recording the decisions made during collaborative meetings with Mrs. Humphries.

Teacher and researcher collaborative meetings. Throughout the duration of the study, the teacher and I met weekly for one hour to discuss the intervention and to plan for the next week's read aloud sessions. The agenda for these meetings was informed by formal observations denoted through observational files, student literature journals, and by Mrs. Humphries' input and personal reflections. During this time, methodological files were used to record and document all instructional decisions and justifications for modifications to the intervention.

Student pre and post-intervention interviews. Before and after the intervention, I individually interviewed nine of the 19 total students. Pre and post-intervention interviews were aimed at determining students' prior experiences and overall knowledge of autism and diversity. Post-intervention interviews were specifically used to gauge students' perceptions toward autism after the intervention and were used to explore how the students felt their views toward autism changed as a result of those transactions. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for qualitative analysis, and then responses from pre and post-intervention interviews were compared for evidence of growth.

Instructional methods and materials. During this study, three instructional methods and materials were used: (1) children's picture books about autism, (2) individual student literature journals, and (3) whole class discussions.

Children's books about autism. One of the most important aspects of this study included the selection of appropriate, diverse children's picture books for the intervention. While many practitioners often rely on websites, book reviews, and award lists to select quality texts for classroom use (Galda, et al., 2013), as previously discussed in Chapter 2, award-winning books may ensure literary quality, but are not always authentic and accurate in their depictions of disability (Dyches & Prater, 2000). Therefore, Boyd, et al. (2015) suggest that a "cohort of critical friends who know you and your students" (p. 382) can work together to examine and select texts that accurately match either the culture or diverse group they are representing, and match the backgrounds and experiences of the students who will be interacting with them. As such, children's books for this intervention were presented to Mrs. Humphries from the list of books that had already been thematically analyzed in Azano, et al.'s content analysis (manuscript submitted for publication). These texts were then co-selected with Mrs. Humphries based on her perception of class need and interest, with a careful focus on selecting texts that depicted realistic settings (Galda, 1990b) and strong, lifelike, multidimensional characters (Dyches & Prater, 2000) that younger students would be more likely to identify with.

Student literature journals. Researchers (Galda, et al., 2000; Martinez, et al., 1992; McMahon, et al., 1997) advocate the implementation of literature journals for encouraging transactional responses to texts within the elementary grades. Journaling gives students the "chance to share and compare literary reactions" through collective discussion, while also providing "the chance to follow his own personal bent" (Rosenblatt, 2005/1956, p. 66) through

individual, written response. In this study, writing allowed the students to spontaneously and aesthetically react to the texts and to organize their thoughts before discussing the text whole-class, which (Galda, et al., 2000) suggested would increase the caliber of responses during transaction.

Student journaling was a particularly appropriate instructional strategy for this group of students, since information gathered during teacher and researcher collaborative meetings indicated that most of the students were reading and writing above grade level, and journal writing was a common practice in the classroom. Additionally, triangulating students' written entries with verbal responses during class discussion allowed for the voices of less strong writers to be heard and helped safeguard against privileging one student's response over another due differing levels of writing development and ability. Additionally, the representative sample of the nine, consenting students' journals and student responses during class discussions in general were used as context for making instructional decisions during the collaborative meetings with Mrs. Humphries.

Class discussions. After the students listened to the read aloud and were given the chance for spontaneous response with the literature journals, Mrs. Humphries facilitated a whole-class discussion of the text, which marked the final, most pivotal part of the intervention. During collaborative meetings, specific prompts and questions for each intervention were co-created based on the Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (Rosenblatt, 1978), and in accordance to the individual texts that were used. However, Mrs. Humphries also had freedom to respond to students and guide instruction according to class needs. During these discussions, students assumed more conversational responsibility as Mrs. Humphries gradually relinquished control of the classroom discourse, and became more of a facilitator than a leader of discussion.

Procedure. Ten interventions occurred over the course of five weeks (a longer time period than anticipated due to snow days), each lasting 45 minutes in length. First, the intervention consisted of Mrs. Humphries reading aloud a children's book about autism that we previously and jointly selected according to student needs and topics of interest. Second, after reading, students were asked to transact with the text through the use of literature journals, which enabled them to organize their thoughts, and write about their experiences with the text prior to class discussion (Galda, et al., 2000; Martinez, et al., 1992; McMahon, et al., 1997). Third, after students were given time to write their thoughts, the students engaged in a whole-class discussion of the text. During this time, Mrs. Humphries scaffolded (Vygotsky, 1978) instruction according to Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978), cultivating the opportunity for transaction through the use of semi-structured, collaboratively created questions and prompts specifically designed to address the themes in each unique text. During this time, Mrs. Humphries released control of the discussion by actively listening to student responses and by guiding the discourse through the careful use of prompts and questions (Galda, et al., 2000). She also encouraged aesthetic and efferent responses (Rosenblatt, 1978) and provided students the opportunity to critically examine both the text and their evocations to it (Cai, 2008).

Phase 5: Analyzing Baseline, Intervention, and Post-Intervention Data

Study data was qualitatively analyzed using the Constant Comparative method, which involved new data being continually compared to emerging categories until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This method of analysis was not linear, but focused on an iterative process that required revisiting earlier steps of the analysis in order to inform findings at different stages (Charmaz, 2006).

Analysis. First, all audio-recorded interventions and interviews were transcribed. I personally transcribed student responses verbatim, remaining sensitive to the verbal inflections, word emphasis, and tone used by the students, which I denoted through the use of italics. I then read the completed transcripts holistically, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of each intervention and students' collective responses during discussion. After several close readings, I began to analyze the collective responses for emerging themes. Excerpts ranging from several words to complete sentences were extrapolated from the transcripts and given a label or descriptive code in order to capture the explicit or implicit meaning of each response. In this open coding process, excerpted data from the transcript was examined for emerging concepts, which provided the initial steps for data analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

During this process, initial, descriptive codes were created, revised, and discarded as excerpts were examined, and I remained open to unanticipated and emerging insights that could further inform my analysis. As the study progressed, and themes and categories emerged, I used focused coding to further examine these relationships and to elaborate on the distinctions between categories, which provided a coherent framework for analysis (Charmaz, 2006). I reviewed and compared codes for similarities and differences, and then clustered comparable codes into preliminary categories. These categories allowed me to organize codes at a "higher level of abstraction," which led to the identification of "concepts that stand for phenomena" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). While refining categories, codes were continually revised, regrouped, assessed, and relabeled. These aggregated categories provided the framework for subsequent findings and discussion, and provided insight into the types of responses students had when transacting with diverse texts.

Additionally, I maintained a consistent use of embedded memos (Charmaz, 2006) to capture and record emerging ideas, questions, and insights as they arose throughout the analysis. These memos allowed me to record initial and evolving concepts that emerged during comparison and analysis, which informed my thinking, and enabled me to document understandings that were extrapolated during initial phases of data analysis, which were then readdressed and revisited during later stages (Charmaz, 2006).

Qualitative analysis of intervention. Data analysis, including transcription and coding procedures took place at the completion of the intervention period. All audio-recorded intervention sessions were transcribed, and transcripts were qualitatively analyzed, coded, and categorized using the Constant Comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Observational files were used as an additional form of information and context during this analysis. Transcripts of the intervention gave insight into the types of verbal responses of the students, while the observational files gave insight into the nonverbal responses of the students and context. First, open coding and inductive reasoning were used to create preliminary categories. These categories were then revised using focused coding. This allowed me to classify the types of responses students made and to examine how responses changed over time when students were encouraged to transact aesthetically and efferently with a text.

At the completion of the study, I aggregated qualitative codes into categories, and discussed the types of student responses elicited throughout the course of the intervention. Additionally, observational files were used to document the types of responses and to note (a) how frequently students responded during the class discussions, (b) the types of student responses, and (c) the length of those responses. This data allowed me to determine if a

transactional approach encouraged specific types of responses, and if there was an increase in the frequency and length of specific types of student responses to the text over time.

    Qualitative analysis of student interviews. Before the study began, pre-intervention interviews were conducted with nine of the students as a way to collect baseline data concerning students' prior knowledge, experiences, and understandings about autism. At the completion of the intervention, post-intervention interviews were conducted to determine if and how those responses changed after the intervention period. Pre and post-intervention interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were also qualitatively coded. Comparison of the baseline and post-intervention data was used to determine if a transactional approach to children's books influenced any levels of student learning and growth.

Phase 6: Evaluating Findings and Forming Conclusions

    In the final stages of this study, I independently worked to qualitatively analyze, code, and categorize transcribed student responses from the 10 audio recorded interventions (student verbal responses) which were informed by the 10 written observational files taken during these sessions (student nonverbal responses). Methodological files from the pre-intervention meeting and three researcher collaborative meetings were used to inform and contextualize my analysis of the intervention process. Coded and categorized transcripts of the students' audio-recorded student pre and post-intervention responses were used to gauge student's growth by examining and comparing pre and post levels of awareness, understanding, and acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000) toward others with autism. Baseline data gathered from these pre-intervention interviews was compared to post-intervention interview data. I assumed sole responsibility for analyzing all data and writing up the research findings, but then communicated results to Mrs. Humphries for member checking purposes.

Data collected through observational files, audio recordings of the class discussions, and representative, written student journals provided the data for giving a thick description of what transactional response looked like in a primary level, elementary classroom. In addition, weekly teacher and researcher collaborative meetings and instructional decisions documented through methodological files were used to answer research question 1: How can children's picture books about autism be used to create transformative opportunities student growth in an elementary classroom?

Qualitative analysis of the types of student responses (both verbal responses from audio recorded transcripts and representative, written responses from student literature journals), and qualitative analysis of the frequency and length of responses over time denoted through observational files helped answer research question 2: What types of responses do primary students have when transacting with children's picture books about autism?

In addition, qualitative analysis and comparison of the pre and post-intervention student interviews provided discrete findings which further informed both research questions: (1) How can children's picture books about autism be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary classroom, and (2) What types of responses do primary students have when transacting with children's picture books about autism? The following chapter presents findings and analysis and further explains how the data informed the research questions.

Chapter 4

Findings

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine second grade students' transactional responses to diverse texts in order to determine if transaction could provide transformative opportunities. In this chapter, data is presented in three sections, through an analysis of (1) researcher observational and methodological data, (2) student responses during class discussions, and (3) pre and post-intervention student interviews. First, data collected through researcher observational and methodological files are used concurrently in this chapter to (a) give a holistic view of the context of the study, (b) describe intervention procedures, and (c) explain decision-making processes for modifying the interventions over time. Second, qualitative analysis of the class discussion portion of the interventions describes the types of responses that occurred as students collectively responded to the texts, and how these responses changed over the course of the study. Third, students' knowledge of autism prior to the beginning of the study is presented through qualitative data excerpted from individual student pre-intervention interviews. Responses are then compared to post-intervention interviews in order to analyze if the responses changed over time and to determine if any growth occurred.

Analysis of Observational and Methodological Data

The following section serves to give a holistic view and analysis of (a) the classroom environment and context, (b) the evolving role of the teacher, (c) researcher and teacher collaboration, and (d) the changing intervention, which breaks down the read aloud, student journal, and class discussion procedures. Ongoing researcher observational files, which were used to capture details concerning the context of the study, and ongoing researcher

methodological files, which were used to explain modifications to the intervention over time, as well as some illustrative excerpts from the class discussion informed the content of this section.

Classroom Environment and Context

The study took place in a second grade classroom at a Primary K-3 school. The layout of the school was an open learning design, with grade levels separated into "pods" divided into classroom spaces defined by careful placement of filing cabinets, bookshelves, and bulletin boards. Since classrooms did not contain walls or doors, neighboring classrooms and hallways were readily accessible, which allowed students to easily move between classrooms, but provided little barrier against elevating noise levels. Within the classroom, desks were arranged in groups around a white board and overhead, and toward the back of the classroom, a kidney-shaped reading table and easel stood beside computers and bookshelves. In front of the reading table, a wall of windows created a bright, cheery area that contained a rocking chair and colorful rug for students to sit on during read alouds and whole group instruction.

The Evolving Role of the Teacher

At the beginning of the intervention, it became evident that whole class read aloud practices were commonplace in the classroom, as students were quick to join Mrs. Humphries at the carpet, and eagerly asked what book they would be reading each day. Mrs. Humphries created an inviting environment in which the students felt comfortable sharing through her pleasant and calm demeanor, the warm tone of her voice, and way she slowly and quietly gave direction and instruction. She also demonstrated respect for the students, addressing each student by name or with a "yes ma'am" or "yes sir" when students wanted to share or raised hands to ask a question. As the interventions went on, Mrs. Humphries became more comfortable in her role

as a facilitator of discussion and with minimal guidance, naturally oscillated between McGee, et al.'s (1994) roles as a leader of discussion.

First, at the beginning of each intervention, Mrs. Humphries took on the role of the "reader" (McGee, et al., 1994) as she read the selected story aloud to the class. Particularly during the first several interventions, she also embraced the role of the "facilitator" (McGee, et al., 1994), as she managed the discussion by asking students to share, called on volunteers who had raised hands, and asked students to take turns sharing their journal entries. Mrs. Humphries was quick to redirect conversations that went off track, and at the beginning of the intervention, she spoke frequently, calling on students and encouraging turn taking and listening. During these interventions, she also acted as a "responder" (McGee, et al., 1994) as she introduced new ideas through the use of the planned, semi-structured discussion prompts.

However, her role during the first several interventions seemed to be based on a desire to make sure she was "doing the right thing" in order to get me "the right kind of data" for the study. She also expressed some concern that she did not know enough about the topic of autism to accurately and/or adequately respond to student questions that would invariably arise over the course of the study. After discussing her role as a facilitator of discussion, I emphasized the importance of allowing the *students* to guide the discussion, and that her role was not to take an authoritative stance toward the topic of autism, but to allow the students to come to their own understandings by using the information about autism presented in the books to guide meaning construction. After realizing that she was not expected to be an expert on the subject but to use the books and the information in them as tools to facilitate learning, she was able to quickly modify her role, and became more comfortable with the process, responding to student questions

by replying: "Okay, that's a good question, did that get answered in the book?" (Intervention 3, 1-15-16), and with the class, she returned to the text for answers.

During the remaining interventions, Mrs. Humphries carefully listened to what students had to say, and she emerged as a "helper/nudger" (McGee, et al., 1994), consistently repeating students' statements in order to reaffirm or clarify what the students said. She also frequently provided positive affirmation and encouragement for sharing: "You guys have got some really, really good ideas, and you've listened so carefully" (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). As the intervention progressed, Mrs. Humphries also carefully nudged the students toward higher-level thinking and gave students validation for all responses, expanding upon her role as a "responder" (McGee, et al., 1994). As the intervention progressed, her role as the authority figure became less pronounced and she became adept at her role as a "literary curator" (McGee, et al., 1994), quickly identifying and capitalizing on teaching opportunities and inviting students to weigh in and respond to questions and understandings of other students. Under her direction as a literary curator in particular, students became more conversational midway through the study, and in the fifth intervention, began interjecting their interpretations instead of waiting to ask for permission to speak, which like McGee, et al. (1994) suggest, elicited the richest discourse of the entire intervention period.

Researcher and Teacher Collaboration

Throughout the course of the study, one-hour long teacher and researcher collaborative meetings were held every week on Friday mornings from 9:00-10:00 during Mrs. Humphries' planning period from January 8 to January 29, 2016 (See Table 1 for a chronological list of researcher and teacher planning dates and books discussed during those meetings).

Table 1

Chronological list of teacher and researcher collaborative meetings

Meeting	Books Discussed	Notes	Meeting Date
1	▪ *My brother Charlie* ▪ *Looking after Louis* ▪ *ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder*	Methodological File 1	Friday, January 8, 2016
2	▪ *Ian's walk: A story about autism* ▪ *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* ▪ *A friend like Simon*	Methodological File 2	Friday, January 15, 2016
3	▪ *Squirmy wormy: How I learned to help myself* ▪ *Playing by the rules: A story about autism* ▪ *The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism* ▪ *David's world: A picture book about living with autism*	Methodological File 3	Friday, January 29, 2016

*Teacher and researcher collaborative meetings were initially planned for each Friday to discuss the upcoming week's interventions. However, January 22 was a snow day, so there was no meeting, and the January 29 meeting included planning the final intervention since there was only one book used in the final week.

During these meetings, Mrs. Humphries selected the three books for each week and we discussed the stories and their perceived messages. Mrs. Humphries purposefully selected books for the study in a way that we felt would ease the students into the new, unfamiliar topic of autism. For example, the first two books, *My brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010) and *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004) both tell a traditional narrative that focuses more on character and story development than on autism, only mentioning the label until the end of each book. Two of the books selected for the middle of the intervention included *ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder* (DeMars, 2011), and *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), which were selected to be read at that time because the first offers an explanation of autism and ASD, while the second gives advice on how to treat someone with

autism. The final two books *The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism* (Coe, 2009) and *David's world: A picture book about living with autism* (Mueller, 2012) served to provide a more comprehensive review of autism, so they were selected for the end of the intervention (See table 2 for a chronological list of the books used in this study).

Table 2

Chronological list of books used in study.

Intervention	Book	Author	Intervention Date
1	*My brother Charlie*	Holly Robinson Peete & Ryan Elizabeth Peete	Monday, January 11, 2016
2	*Looking after Louis*	Lesley Ely	Wednesday, January 13, 2016
3	*ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder*	Teresa DeMars	Friday, January 15, 2016
4	*Ian's walk: A story about autism*	Laurie Lears	Wednesday, January 20, 2016
5	*Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum*	April Charisse	Wednesday, January 27, 2016
6	*A friend like Simon*	Kate Gaynor	Friday, January 29, 2016
7	*Squirmy wormy: How I learned to help myself*	Lynda Farrington Wilson	Monday, February 1, 2016
8	*Playing by the rules: A story about autism*	Dena Fox Luchsinger	Wednesday, February 3, 2016
9	*The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism*	Julie L. Coe	Friday, February 5, 2016
10	*David's world: A picture book about living with autism*	Dagmar H. Mueller	Wednesday, February 10, 2016

*Interventions were initially planned on a weekly, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday basis. However, Monday, January 18 was a holiday; January 22, 25 were snow days; February 5 the researcher had another obligation, so the intervention did not take place on those dates.

I worked with Mrs. Humphries to select two journal writing prompts for each intervention that we felt aligned well with each story, and then we created semi-structured discussion prompts for her to use during the class discussions. These prompts further explored the messages and ideologies presented through the stories and also addressed new or difficult ideas Mrs. Humphries and I anticipated would emerge while the students interacted with the texts. For example, after reading *ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder* (DeMars, 2011), during the third intervention, Mrs. Humphries and I discussed ways to clarify the difference between the terms "autism" and "ASD" since the students had shown some confusion concerning the two different labels during the previous class discussion. I suggested:

> I was thinking about a lot of their questions the last time, and how some were confused about "autism" versus "autism spectrum disorder" or ASD. One easy way to explain this (because I think it will come up again when we read *Say hello to me* in particular) is to think about it like a color spectrum. A color spectrum is basically a rainbow going from red to orange, to yellow, to green, to blue, to violet, and then back to red. Each color is a little different – for example, the blue looks different than the green. However, they are all still colors! Autism is like that. It exists on a spectrum like colors can, and some people with autism might do things or say things differently, because some might have severe autism (like some colors might be darker than others) and some might have more mild autism (like some colors might be lighter than others) but in the end, they all have some form of autism, so they can still be alike in many ways, just like even though they look different, they are all still colors. Maybe this will help?
>
> (Methodological File 2, 1-15-16)

Discussing how the interventions were progressing and collaboratively planning and making decisions to modify and strengthen the interventions enabled us both to share our expertise in different areas and to work toward higher quality learning experiences for the students.

During these meetings, we also discussed individual and whole class student responses to the different stories, and I provided feedback and suggestions for how to further elicit aesthetic responses from the students. We also discussed Mrs. Humphries' role in guiding the discussion, and different strategies for cultivating a more conversational discussion time with her slowly releasing control of the conversation over to the students. During these meetings, I took copious handwritten in the form of methodological files (Bailey, 1996) to record weekly plans for the intervention, to document modifications to the interventions, and to provide rationale for collaborative decisions. Three researcher planning meetings were held throughout the course of the study, and after each meeting, I typed the handwritten notes and emailed them to Mrs. Humphries so that she could compare my meeting summaries with her own notes and use them for lesson planning purposes.

Modifying the Intervention

Ten, 45-minute interventions were planned on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 11:15-12:00 beginning on January 11, and ending on February 10, 2016. The intervention was comprised of approximately (a) 10 minutes for the teacher read aloud, (b) 10 minutes for student journal writing, and (c) 25 minutes for whole class discussion. Mrs. Humphries facilitated the interventions while my primary role was that of an active observer. While interventions were being audio recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis, I took copious, handwritten observational files (Bailey, 1996). These observational files were recorded during every intervention and enabled me to note student body language and movement that alluded to

different aspects of student engagement during the read aloud. They also provided a means of recording supplemental details concerning the classroom context, setting, timeline, and how these influenced student responses, which ultimately helped inform later analysis.

The following three sections describe the general classroom environment and the classroom procedures for (a) read alouds, (b) student literature journals, and (c) class discussion and how these parts of the intervention changed over time.

Read aloud procedures. During the first 10 minutes of each intervention, Mrs. Humphries would invite students to come to the carpet for the read aloud. She would sit in the rocking chair in the back of the room while students settled onto the carpet facing her. Before reading, she would hold up the selected book and read the title and the name of the author(s), giving a brief introduction to the story.

For the first intervention, Mrs. Humphries introduced the book and general topic of autism by asking students to recall a discussion they had prior to the study. Every year, she asks the students to practice letter writing by sending a Christmas list to Santa Claus. However, one year, Mrs. Humphries explained to the class that she had a student with autism:

Mrs. Humphries: I have a very special book I'm going to share with you today. It is called *My brother Charlie*. Do you guys remember before Christmas when we were writing letters to Santa Claus and I had shared with you a story about a student I had a very long time ago who had written to Santa Claus asking for a brother? Do you guys remember that?

Students: Yea.

Mrs. Humphries: Do you remember – there was something special about this brother that he was asking him for, does anyone remember? He wanted a brother who has the same disability he has. Does anybody remember what the disability was? Does anybody remember what the name of it was? [Pauses] It was something called autism. And you guys had asked me before Christmas what autism was, and I don't think I did a very good job explaining it to you. So we have this story called *My brother Charlie*, and in the story, Charlie has autism, just like the boy had that I worked with a very long time ago. So what I want you to do is I just want to read you this story, and I just want you to sit back and relax and just think about it, okay? (Intervention 1, 1-11-16)

Beginning the intervention with this familiar anecdotal story allowed the students to approach the new topic with some sense of familiarity.

After this initial anecdotal introduction to the books, the intervention followed a routine procedure. Mrs. Humphries would call the students to the carpet, give a brief introduction to the new story, and then remind the students to simply enjoy the story and the overall reading experience, emphasizing that the purpose of reading was enjoyment in order to encourage aesthetic response. Then, the students would sit crisscross on the carpet and listen to her read the story aloud.

As the intervention went on, students would closely examine the new book Mrs. Humphries was holding, looking for clues for what the story would be about. One student pointed out that she knew the "A" in the title stood for "autism" when Mrs. Humphries held up the book *ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder* (DeMars, 2011) before it was read (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Similarly, one student wrote, "I noticed that on the cover of the book it read: 'this book it about autism'" (Emily's journal entry, Intervention

4, 1-20-16). Another student noted that even though the class read many books that were all very different during this time period, the books were also the same because they were all about autism (Intervention 4, 1-20-16).

Toward the beginning of the study, the students would quietly listen to the story, sitting crisscross on the carpet, staring intently at the pictures, and Mrs. Humphries would read the story word-for-word without stopping to discuss the text. However, as time went on, Mrs. Humphries would read the story and pause at certain places to pose questions or elicit student responses after important or confusing events, and students would spontaneously react to the text, taking back to characters or interjecting their thoughts, and making predictions for what would happen next. This suggests that as time went on, students became more immersed in the virtual world of the story, and similar to Sipe's (2002) study, students reacted to texts with enraptured silence and "expressive engagement."

During the first several interventions, student engagement was demonstrated through enraptured silence as students sat quietly and erectly on the carpet, staring forward intently at the book illustrations, barely moving; immersed in the stories (Sipe, 2002). Toward the second half of the interventions, student engagement became more apparent through "expressive engagement" (Sipe, 2002). Students made confused faces at each other after a character with autism exhibited idiosyncratic behaviors such as sniffing a brick wall in *Ian's walk: A story about autism* (Lears, 1998) or when Darla, the main character in *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), declared her love for pink and princess things, and two of the boys in the room rolled their eyes at each other and chuckled. Some students also tended to move closer to Mrs. Humphries while she read exciting parts in the story, and leaned in to listen, like when the Simon, the character with autism stood up to a bully in *A friend like*

Simon (Gaynor, 2009). Finally, toward the end of the intervention, many students would "talk back" (Sipe, 2002) to the books or to the characters, either admonishing them for poor behavior or showing appreciation for a character with autism's unique abilities with comments such as "how cool!" or "wow!"

As time went on, students also made verbal connections to the story or illustrations, and asked questions as they occurred. For example, before reading *David's world: A picture book about living with autism* (Mueller, 2012), one student noted that the cover of the story depicted David, the character with autism as having a pattern of bricks instead of skin, which made him look like a brick wall (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Then, after Mrs. Humphries read a part of the story that explained that David could not express himself well with words, the student excitedly interjected that the author made the character look like a brick because at first he was closed off, but then was able to break through the language barrier, effectively knocking down the metaphorical "brick wall" between himself and others (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Sharing his understanding and interpretation of the text immediately with the class again demonstrated how student engagement and understanding during the read alouds changed over the course of the intervention. Providing this safe space for visceral and spontaneous interaction and response with the texts created a viable context for students to first, aesthetically respond to the texts, and then to collectively and critically analyze the texts and their reactions from an efferent stance, providing rich opportunities for growth.

Student literature journals procedures. For the writing portion of the intervention, students were given a yellow, three-pronged journal containing a generous amount of wide ruled writing paper inside. Students' identification numbers were written on the front, upper right corner of each journal, and students were instructed to not write their names or any identifying

information inside of the journals to help ensure that student responses would remain confidential. On the first day of the study, Mrs. Humphries handed each student his or her own journal, and explained:

> I want you to just take a few minutes, and I want you to think about the book, and I want you to write the answers to these questions. Now, are there any right or wrong answers? No, because everybody is going to think something differently. So whatever you think about these questions, that's what you're going to write. (Intervention 1, 1-11-16)

After each read aloud, students were asked to go back to their desks to spontaneously respond to the story in writing. In the research, student journals are one of the preferred methods for giving students a space to aesthetically and immediately respond freely to a text (Galda, et al., 2000; Martinez, et al., 1992; McMahon, et al., 1997). The journals were a way for the students to put their ideas on paper, and then they were asked to bring the journals with them back to the carpet for sharing and discussion. This was particularly helpful for allowing students to organize their thoughts and to process the text individually before co-constructing meaning with their peers during class discussion. Students were given approximately 10 minutes to respond to the story independently before discussion.

During this time, the students were given two suggested journal prompts. These prompts were selected from Hirsch's (1997) work with eliciting aesthetic responses from third graders, and suggested by Galda, et al. (2000) after successful use with second grade students. Prompts from this list were purposefully selected at the weekly teacher and researcher collaborative meetings, and were chosen because of their perceived relevance and importance to the overall message of each text. During the first intervention, Mrs. Humphries wrote the two prompts on the overhead for the students to view. She purposely selected prompts that students would be the

most familiar with writing about in order to ease them into the written response procedure.

Beginning with the second intervention, Mrs. Humphries gave the students a copy of the

suggested journal prompts, which she instructed the students to keep in the side pocket of their

writing journals for future reference. These prompts were designed to encourage aesthetic, not

efferent response, and were open ended to promote higher order thinking. This was particularly

helpful scaffolding for students at the beginning of the study, and for less strong writers. Giving

the students specific prompts to write about was particularly important for the first several

interventions, as students were unsure of what to write or how to respond to the text, and needed

guidance.

Providing the prompts during this time gave the students the necessary structure to

become familiar with responding to the texts aesthetically, and during the first several

interventions, most students stayed very close to the suggested journal prompts. During the first

several interventions, written responses were brief and succinct, comprised of just one or two

sentences, with many students only going so far as to write the beginning words to the suggested

prompt and then never finishing their complete thought on paper. A list of the suggested prompts

from this list that were used for each book is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Suggested student journal writing prompts for each book.

Intervention	Book	Journal Prompts
1	*My brother Charlie*	1. My favorite character was… 2. I wish that…
2	*Looking after Louis*	1. This made me think of… 2. If I were in this story…
3	*ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder*	1. Now I understand… 2. I'm confused about…

4	*Ian's walk: A story about autism*	1. This reminds me of something in my own life… 2. I noticed…
5	*Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum*	1. Something I learned was… 2. I wonder why…
6	*A friend like Simon*	1. Do you have a friend like Simon? 2. Do you have a story to tell?
7	*Squirmy wormy: How I learned to help myself*	1. It reminds me of… 2. It makes me think of…
8	*Playing by the rules: A story about autism*	1. I wonder why… 2. I think…
9	*The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism*	1. I liked when…because… 2. I felt _____ when...
10	*David's world: A picture book about living with autism*	1. What have you learned about autism?

*Journal prompts selected from Hirsch, K. (1997). I can't be like Pippi 'cause I'm afraid to live alone: Third graders' response to novels. In N.J. Karolides (Ed.), *Reader response in elementary classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

As the intervention went on, Mrs. Humphries continued to provide students with two suggested writing prompts from the list after each read aloud. However, as students became more familiar with the writing process, she also encouraged the students to select their own prompts from the list or to make up their own based on their personal reactions:

If you want to write about that you can, or you can choose something else off your list, maybe something you're wondering about or something you are thinking about.

(Intervention 6, 1-29-16)

Soon, students began to deviate from the suggested prompts, selecting other prompts that interested them from the list, or coming up with their own prompts for response. Written responses also became much longer in length, ranging from half of a page to a full page of text,

and students would often utilize multiple prompts in a single journal response, exploring many different aspects of the book through their writing.

During the tenth and final intervention, Mrs. Humphries only suggested one prompt for the students to write about that was not taken from the list, and also provided space for the students to respond freely about their experiences with the texts. She explained:

> What I want you to do in your notebook today is I want you to write about what you have learned about autism. This is going to be the last lesson that we do today, and I want you to take some time and I want you to think about all the books we've read, and I want you to think about what you have learned, and what you would like to share.
>
> (Intervention 10, 2-10-16)

The open-endedness of this final prompt was meant to be a way to gauge the students' culminating knowledge about autism and to provide students with one final opportunity to ask questions, clarify information, or to make connections. It also allowed the students autonomy to explore what they felt they learned throughout the interventions and to reflect on their learning to determine if their newfound knowledge had changed them.

Class discussion procedures. After the allotted 10 minutes of journal writing time, students were asked to stop writing and to bring their journals with them back to the carpet for class discussion and sharing. At the beginning of the class discussion, students were encouraged to voluntarily share their journal writing, ask questions, and respond to the text. During the first intervention, students were apprehensive about sharing their ideas, and Mrs. Humphries relied heavily on the pre-planned, semi-structured discussion prompts to encourage discourse when the conversation lulled. A list of the prepared discussion prompts can be viewed in Table 4.

Table 4

Semi-structured class discussion prompts.

Intervention	Book	Discussion Prompts
1	*My brother Charlie*	▪ In the book, Callie tells us lots of ways she and Charlie are the same. How are *you* like Charlie? ▪ Callie says, "Charlie has autism but autism doesn't have Charlie" (Peete & Peete, 2010). What does this mean? ▪ Callie says, "Love doesn't always come from what you say, it comes from what you do. And we do right by Charlie" (Peete & Peete, 2010). What does this mean? How could you "do right" by someone who has autism?
2	*Looking after Louis*	▪ If you were one of the students outside during recess, would you ask Louis to play? ▪ What would you do if you asked him and he didn't say/do anything? Would you keep asking? ▪ The book says, "I think we break the rules for special people" (Ely, 2004). Would you break the rules? What rules should be broken? Do you think this is fair?
3	*ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder*	▪ If there was a student like Eli in our classroom, what are some things he/she might do that are different? ▪ Why do you think the author wrote this book/what did he want you to learn? ▪ This book is told from whose point of view? Does that change the story?
4	*Ian's walk: A story about autism*	▪ If you had autism, what would you want people to know about you? ▪ If you were in the shoes of someone with autism, what do you think a typical day would be like?
5	*Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum*	▪ If you had someone with autism in your class, what would they do? (e.g. stimming, lining things up, cover their ears at loud noises, etc.) ▪ If you had someone with autism in your class, what could you do to include them?
6	*A friend like Simon*	▪ What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? ▪ What do you think it feels like to have autism? ▪ How did Simon act differently from the other boys and girls? ▪ Is it okay to get annoyed with people who have autism?
7	*Squirmy wormy: How I learned to help myself*	▪ Are *you* a "squirmy wormy?" (Wilson, 2009) How are you like someone with autism? ▪ What do you think it would be like to have a friend like Tyler?
8	*Playing by the rules: A story about autism*	▪ Why are we reading these books? ▪ How can we help someone like Aunt Tilda understand someone with autism like Josh?
9	*The friendship puzzle: Helping*	▪ What are some of the activities you could do with someone like Josh? ▪ How do you think friendship is like a puzzle? How is autism like a

	kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism	puzzle?
10	*David's world: A picture book about living with autism*	▪ What have you learned? How has it changed you? ▪ Do you feel the same or different now that we have read these books? Why?

In the first several interventions, students asked if they only had to write as much as they thought they could, and asked if they *had* to share when they were done (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). Mrs. Humphries assured the students that she would never force them to share if they did not want to, but that she hoped they would share. The first several interventions contained very little dialogue among the students, containing mostly question and answer responses between Mrs. Humphries and individual students. Most responses during this time were surface level responses, and contained many seemingly irrelevant aesthetic responses to the text.

Toward the beginning of the study, Mrs. Humphries also seemed somewhat uncomfortable with her role as the facilitator of discussion, and relied heavily on the prompts and asking students to share, instead of stopping to explore the students' responses and using these to direct the conversation. As the study progressed, we discussed how Mrs. Humphries could encourage more dialogue between the students and how responsibility for the discussion could be slowly released. During one of the planning meetings, I suggested:

> Now that they [the students] are more comfortable with the discussion and writing
>
> component, let's let their journal writing create the discussion. If they have questions,
>
> open up the floor for others to provide answers. If they have a statement or something
>
> they think about the book, probe to see what makes them think that and then open the
>
> floor to see if others agree or disagree. I think the students are ready to start taking
>
> responsibility for guiding the discussion on their own. (Methodological File 2, 1-15-16)

After this discussion and as time went on, Mrs. Humphries began to feel more comfortable deviating from the prepared prompts, and actively worked toward challenging the students to explain their rationale for their responses and to explain their thinking. She also encouraged other students to respond to their peers' statements. Similarly, students became more comfortable sharing their ideas, with multiple students asking to be the first to share at the beginning of each discussion, and one student even asking if he could finish his writing during recess (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). Similarly, one student noted an increase in the amount of writing in her journal and the number of topics she wanted to write about (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). Another student noted the value of socially constructing new ideas and understandings during class discussion, stating that she always seemed to have the best ideas while talking with her peers on the carpet (Intervention 2, 1-13-16).

As the discussion progressed, students became actively engaged in the discourse, adding to or refuting their classmate's thoughts, speaking about their own experiences in relation to the text, and asking questions for clarification. This guidance, as Galda, et al. (2000) suggested, helped student differentiate between *talking* about the text versus *thinking* about it. Additionally, as the class discussions became more conversational in nature, Mrs. Humphries encouraged the students to face her during the read alouds so that they could hear her, but then to form a circle during discussions so that they could hear each other:

> Okay, boys and girls, you need to listen carefully to what your classmates are saying. As a matter a fact, let's do something a little bit different this time. Let's get in a circle like we would for morning meeting. And that way I think you all will be able to see and hear each other a little better. (Intervention 7, 2-1-16)

Simply asking students to alter their bodies in anticipation of sharing and working together helped foster communication and collaboration, as students used their eyes and ears to listen to the *teacher* during read alouds, and then used their eyes and ears to hear *each other* during discussion.

As the study progressed, students became more vocal in their reactions, and made strong connections between books and characters. They were also able to place themselves in the shoes of the characters, and to identify characteristics and similarities they shared with the characters that had autism. While the discourse increased in conversational nature, the need for planned discussion prompts became less prevalent, and as a result, during teacher and researcher collaborative meetings, fewer prompts were prepared prior to interventions as they became less vital to the facilitation of discussion (see Table 4).

Additionally, based on the suggestions of Sigmon, et al. (2016), after discussion finished and students had been offered the opportunity to aesthetically respond to the text and to their peers, Mrs. Humphries also created anchor charts to record the characteristics of autism depicted in the books, and the unique qualities of the characters. However, these were completed at the end of the discussion, since they were efferent in nature, and were only elicited after students had the opportunity for aesthetic and critical response. The anchor charts were created using two large pieces of white chart paper, and they were prominently pinned to the wall above where the students were sitting for class discussion. Mrs. Humphries would ask the students to identify the characteristic behaviors of autism that they saw in the story, and she would help guide understandings by asking clarifying statements, repeating or condensing information the students offered, and guiding them toward characteristics they may have missed. These anchor charts helped students organize the identifying characteristics of autism, and as new books were

introduced, behaviors and unique qualities were added to the charts in different colored markers, while recurring characteristics were denoted by check marks. The content of the anchor charts are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

Class anchor charts.

Characteristics of Autism	How ARE People with Autism Unique?
- Thinks slower - Bite things - Had trouble saying I love you - Didn't talk/quiet** - Liked spinning things - Didn't hug his mom - Things spinning through his head - Acted goofy*** - Had trouble going to sleep - Did dangerous things - Liked to jump - Liked to be squeezed - He acted different** - Liked merry-go-round - Copied what people said - People couldn't understand his drawings* - Sorted things - Didn't like change - He liked to play animal games - Hug too hard - Liked to be hugged - Didn't like loud noises*** - Screams - Liked sports - Talked to strangers - Didn't answer right away	- Sharing - Took care of sister - Playing the piano - Showing he cared - Talked with animals - Name all the presidents - Talented and creative* - Loved math - Good with numbers - Liked to read - Liked the color pink - Pretend she was a princess

*Asterisks denote check marks for behaviors or traits that occur more than once.

These anchor charts were particularly helpful because students would frequently reference them during discussions or while they were being introduced to a new book. While over time, students could quickly identify new characteristic behaviors of autism and could readily identify recurring behaviors during class discussion, this anchor chart was not indicative of all of the characteristic behaviors the students were able to recognize. Additionally,

identifying qualities of characters that were specifically unique to autism was more difficult for the class. Students often pointed out character traits that were not necessarily specific only to characters or individuals with autism, but often traits that they found interesting, different, or descriptive to a particular character in the book. Further explanation as to what actually constitutes a unique quality specific to autism may be merited for younger students in particular to help aid deeper understanding of the disorder. However, as Rosenblatt (1978) suggested, Mrs. Humphries validated and recorded all suggestions so long as students could provide rationale and examples from the text to support their claims.

Analysis of Student Responses During Class Discussions

Student discourse from the 10 whole-class discussions was audio recorded and transcribed, and the student journals of the nine consenting students were collected. Student responses from class discussions and representative journal entries were inductively and qualitatively analyzed and findings were aggregated into four themes: (1) developing understanding of difference, (2) defining and explaining autism, (3) journeying through the text, and (4) affirming care and responsibility. While themes were present across all 10 interventions and nine representative journal entries, categories were aggregated for each theme, with some categories appearing more or less frequently at different stages throughout the course of the intervention period. The themes and categories provide a framework for the subsequent section's findings and discussion, and are triangulated by (a) information from observational and methodological files, (b) excerpts from the class discussions, and (c) excerpted entries from individual student journals. A diagram of the themes and categories is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Diagram of themes and categories for student responses during interventions.*
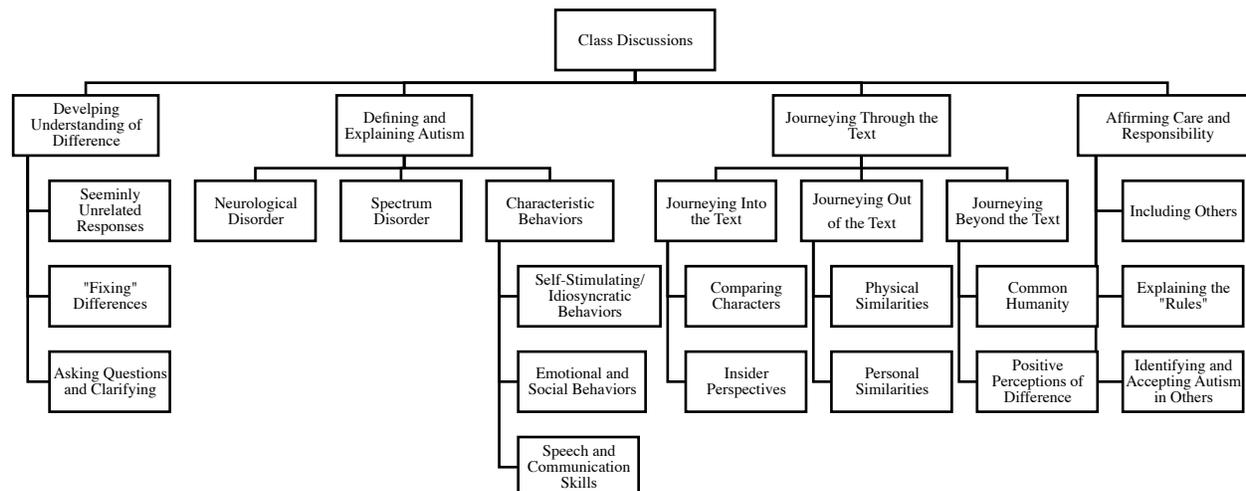
Theme 1: Developing Understanding of Difference

Since the topic of autism was a new concept, many of the students' responses throughout the course of the intervention conveyed confusion and articulated misconceptions pertaining to the new material they were learning. This was especially prevalent in the beginning of the study as student responses to the texts were based solely on the limited knowledge and information they gleaned from readings of the initial books. As such, discourse, particularly in the first three interventions was dominated by student responses that conveyed a developing awareness of autism that was characterized by questions, confusion, and misconceived ideas as students tried to make sense of the texts. A developing understanding of difference was manifested through three categories of response: (a) seemingly unrelated responses, (b) "fixing" differences, and (c) asking questions and clarifying.

Seemingly unrelated responses. Since the texts presented material that was unfamiliar to the students, and since the intervention process of reading, responding in writing, and then discussing the texts whole class was relatively new, many of the student reactions were aesthetic responses that were seemingly unrelated to the topic of autism or to the overall message of the

text. Additionally, some responses were basic, efferent statements concerning the writing or story structure of the book. During the first intervention, after reading *My brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010), one student responded that Harriet [the dog] was his favorite character (Intervention 1, 1-11-16), while another student wrote, "I wish I had a puppy" (Edith's journal entry, Intervention 1, 1-11-16). Additionally, after sharing that she liked the main character because he was kind to his sister, one student shared, "I wish my sister had a better school" (Anne's journal entry, Intervention 1, 1-11-16), while another student wrote, "I wish that I had a sister in my house" (Luke's journal entry, Intervention 1, 1-11-16). These responses indicate that students were aesthetically creating personal, emotional connections to the text, but at a more basic level and seemingly unconnected to the topic of autism.

Additionally, some students responded to the text efferently, instead focusing on the elements of story, and again, choosing not to address autism at all. Throughout the first three interventions in particular, students simply shared who their favorite character was, or identified the setting of the story (Intervention 2, 1-13-16) while others mentioned, "I like the way the author wrote the book" (Ryan's journal entry, Intervention 6, 1-29-16). Other students focused on one piece of the book that interested them, like one student who aesthetically connected to a story because the characters were teaching the boy with autism how to play soccer: "Soccer is a fun game for some people. Some people do not like soccer. Me? I like soccer the most in the world" (Karl's journal entry, Intervention 2, 1-13-16). Particularly in the first intervention, students had very little to contribute to the conversation about autism, presumably because it was a very new concept for them. Therefore, they relied on more familiar, personal aesthetic responses. However, with the start of the second intervention, students began to view autism and its associated behaviors not as an anomaly, but began to realize that autism has some

prescriptive, repetitive, and predicable patterns of behavior that were illustrated through the texts.

"Fixing" differences. As students noticed that autism was a recurring theme in the books they were reading, they began to look at the differences explained in the books not as a disability to understand and accept, but as something to be "fixed" or cured. Students particularly looked at the illustrations in the books, which often depicted characters with autism as being alone or reacting emotionally, and drew the conclusion that people with ASD must not have many friends (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). They also noted that the characters often did not smile, which made it seem like they did not like having autism (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Additionally, after reading *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004), one student wrote that he hoped his friend "does not get ASD" (Luke's journal entry, Intervention 2, 1-13-16), and later noted that the books reminded him of soccer games "and special people that have cancer" (Luke's journal entry, Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Responses suggest that students initially believed autism and its corresponding behaviors were symptoms of a kind of disease that they hoped had a cure.

Additionally, for several of the initial interventions, the characteristic behaviors of autism were seen in a negative way, with one student saying, "I wonder why people with autism act crazy" (Jason's journal entry, 1-27-16), and another student noting that the way one character behaved was "embarrassing" (Karl's response, Intervention 4, 1-20-16). These responses indicated that at first, students believed the idiosyncratic ways that some of the characters behaved were simply negative behaviors the characters needed to learn how to control, not characteristics of autism. When Mrs. Humphries asked the class why a character in *Ian's Walk: A story about autism* (Lears, 1998) was frustrated with her brother Ian who had autism, one student responded: "Because she's not trying to get embarrassed by him. I would just tell him to

stop so I wouldn't get embarrassed, and then I wouldn't get embarrassed myself" (Karl's response, Intervention 4, 1-20-16). These responses indicate that students did not yet realize autism is a disorder with characteristic behaviors that should be understood and accepted, not "fixed" and controlled.

Other student responses demonstrated how they wished the autism would simply go away. For example, after reading *The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism* (Coe, 2009), one student wrote, "I wonder what would happen if Dylan did not have autism" (Luke's journal entry, Intervention 9, 2-5-16). Student responses also indicated their hopes that in time, the characters would "feel better from ASD" (Anne's journal entry, Intervention 3, 1-15-16). After reading *My brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete), one student wrote, "My favorite character was Charlie because my brother has the same thing as Charlie. I wish that my brother and Charlie feel better" (Jason's journal entry, 1-11-16). Similarly, after reading *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), yet another student wrote, "I wish that she [Darla] did not have autism" (Luke's journal entry, Intervention 5, 1-27-16). During the interventions, Mrs. Humphries was quick to guide students to the understanding that autism is not a disease, so that students would not form a negative, deficient notion of autism, or feel that autism was something that should be feared. After reading *ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder* (DeMars, 2011), she clarified:

> *Mrs. Humphries:* So Eli – what did Eli tell us about catching autism? Is it something we can catch?
>
> *Jason:* No, you're born with it.

>*Mrs. Humphries:* Okay, you're either born with it or you're not born with it – it's not something you can catch. So if you were playing with Eli, you can't catch autism, okay? So he doesn't have anything that is contagious.
>
>(Intervention 3, 1-15-16)

While this notion of autism being some sort of sickness was most prevalent in the first several interventions, it still emerged in later interventions as individual students grappled with the difference between a *disability* and a *disease*. Interestingly, even those students with real-world experience with autism were still confused. After reading *A friend like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009), one student said:

>*Jason:* I have a brother he's like Simon. He has the same disease.
>
>*Mrs. Humphries:* Okay – the same *disability*, okay? Because when you think of a disease, you think of something being catching. Is autism catching?
>
>*Jason:* No.
>
>*Mrs. Humphries:* No. So we will call it a disability, we won't call it a disease.
>
>(Intervention 6, 1-29-16)

Conversely, when students learned autism was not a disease that could be cured, their responses changed into sympathy for the characters with autism. After reading *My brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010), one student noted that she related the most to the nurse in the story, because nurses can usually help people feel "better," even though she also recognized that the nurse couldn't help Charlie (Intervention 1-11-16). Similarly, after reading *ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder* (DeMars, 2011), another student said that she related the most with Eli's doctor, because she too wanted to help Eli (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). While these initial responses illuminated the students' collective misunderstanding

and lack of awareness for the topic of autism, they also revealed the students' desire to help the characters that had autism; they just were not sure *how* to help at that point in the study. Cultivating this desire to help characters that were different was the first step toward understanding and acceptance, and as students continued to try and make sense of autism, they began asking questions in order to clarify the new information that was being presented in the texts.

Asking questions and clarifying. As students continued reading the books, they became more vocal in their construction of meaning, voicing their confusion and ideas aloud as Mrs. Humphries answered questions or directed other students to help answer new inquiries. Once students realized autism could not be "fixed," many of their initial questions dealt with why autism even exists. One student noted that autism really seemed to influence the characters' personalities, and wondered what the purpose of having autism was (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). Similarly, after reading *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), another student wrote, "something I learned was she [Darla] had autism. I wonder why she had autism?" (Ryan's journal entry, Intervention 5, 1-27-16)

As new books were presented, students identified new characters with autism by recalling information presented in previous books. After reading *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), one student pointed out that one of the characters named Darla was born with autism, and that doctors believe individuals who have autism are either born with it or may have been "poisoned" by external factors in the environment such as pesticides, as was suggested in the book (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Another student wrote, "Autism happen(s) when you are born" (Ryan's journal entry, Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Being presented with this new information led to students understanding the origins of autism, and after

learning from the books that autism is something you are born with, students' questions shifted from wondering about the *origins* of autism to wondering about its *characteristics*. As students were introduced to new characters that exhibited different kinds of behavior, student responses showed confusion regarding the different behaviors of the characters with autism (Intervention 2, 1-13-16).

During this time, students were trying to rectify these new, currently confusing behaviors with what they already knew about themselves as individuals. For example, one student couldn't understand why someone with autism wouldn't want to interact with other classmates, and asked why the characters often sat alone when they could be playing with others outside (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). After reading *Playing by the rules: A story about autism* (Luchsinger, 2007), another student wondered why the character Josh didn't like meeting new people or doing new things, and why he became upset when his toy animals were "messed up" (Intervention 8, 2-3-16). During this time, the behaviors of characters with autism were new and confusing. The books were serving as a "window" (Bishop, 1990) into the new, unexplored world of autism, and students were unsure of what they were seeing. While student responses and their desire to ask questions to clear up misconceptions and clarify new information indicated a willingness to learn about autism, the students did not yet have the prerequisite knowledge and awareness to be understanding and accepting.

Additionally, at times, students' questions also suggested that their limited understanding of autism, particularly at the beginning and middle of the study led to the misconception that only characters with autism could understand others with autism. One of the questions that lingered throughout the entire study, but most specifically toward the middle of the intervention occurred after reading *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum*

(Charisse, 2012). One student asked if Darla, the character with autism had any friends with autism who could understand her (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). This confusion was compounded by the notion that autism occurs on a spectrum, with one student questioning, "How come kids with autism can understand people [with autism] if autism is so different?" (Luke's response, Intervention 3, 1-15-16) Similarly, another student asked if individuals with different kinds of autism could still understand each other (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). This was an interesting development, because as will be discussed further in this chapter, student responses during later portions of the study illustrated an understanding of autism, but at this point in the discussion, students had not yet realized that they were developing awareness that would help *them* as individuals understand others with autism, even though they did not have the disorder themselves. At this point, student responses indicated that they believed that having autism was a prerequisite for understanding others with autism, which again illustrated their limited understanding of the disorder and difference in general.

Toward the end of the study, this question was still present, and Mrs. Humphries tried to help the students achieve a more metacognitive stance toward what they had learned. One student still showed confusion about how individuals with autism might be able to understand others with autism if the behaviors were in fact, on a spectrum and different (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Another student added that she was still confused about how different people with various forms of autism could understand each other if they were so different (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Mrs. Humphries attempted to clear up this confusion by helping students think metacognitively about themselves as learners and how they as a class had worked together to understand autism even though they did not have the disorder:

Okay, do you think now that *you* have read these books, do you think that you maybe have a better understanding of them? Like maybe if they were in our class, *you* have a better understanding? What do you think? (Intervention 10, 2-10-16)

Late into the study, some students were still asking questions that suggested they had not yet reached conclusion that *everyone* can understand children with autism, not just those with autism themselves.

Additionally, throughout the study, questions persisted, and student responses consistently reaffirmed that children reach understandings at different paces. For example, while the idea that characters with autism have an aversion to loud noises came up frequently throughout the books and in discussion, some students were still confused by this while others had already internalized this knowledge. After reading *The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism* (Coe, 2009), Mrs. Humphries said, "All right, your classmate said he was confused about maybe why Dylan didn't like loud noises. Have we learned anything about the loud noises?" (Intervention 9, 2-5-16) Another classmate immediately identified this action as a characteristic behavior of autism, reiterating that people with autism are sensitive to loud sounds. She also showed exasperation for her peer's lack of awareness about the disorder, stating that she had already answered that question "like *ten times*" (Intervention 9, 2-5-16). Such responses suggest that students need new ideas to be continually reinforced and repeated in order to make sense of them and to commit them to memory.

Additionally, at times, the books themselves proved to be the catalyst for some questions, particularly when abstract ideas were used. For example, in *David's world: A picture book about living with autism* (Mueller, 2012), David's father provides an analogy that compares the way David communicates to learning French. He states that he is desperately trying to understand

David's "language," but is having difficulty, just like when he traveled to Paris and could not understand others who were speaking French. The abstract nature of this analogy left students confused, wondering if people with autism literally speak different languages. One student responded that the reference to speaking a different "language" made it seem like the character was from a different county instead of having autism (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). These statements of confusion suggest that some material in the texts may be too abstract for some young students, who according to Piaget, are still largely concrete thinkers (Ormrod, 2009) and should perhaps be avoided or more thoroughly explored and explained to prevent confusion.

Theme 2: Defining and Explaining Autism

Early into the study, students realized that the main characters were different. One student noted that characters "didn't do regular stuff" (Jason's response, Intervention 4, 1-20-16), and another student stated that people with autism acted differently than "regular" children (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). These generalized statements were common the first two interventions in particular, as students were being initially exposed to autism. The students knew the characters in the story were different, even if the book did not explicitly identify that the character had autism until the end of the story. However, students were unsure how to articulate or pinpoint these differences into a working definition of what autism was, and at the beginning of the study, they broadly defined autism as someone who "acted goofy" (Intervention 1, 1-11-16), was being "crazy" (Intervention 2, 1-13-16), or acted "different" when compared to other students (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). These statements did not reflect a negative viewpoint necessarily, but indicated a lack of knowledge and the absence of a working definition of autism and the differences it espoused. For example, during the first intervention, a student was trying to

describe the character with autism, but was struggling with how to define the behaviors she saw, while also making it clear that she wasn't trying to be derogative:

> *Edith:* He acted goofy.
>
> *Mrs. Humphries:* Okay, he acted goofy?
>
> *Edith:* We all act goofy sometimes.
>
> *Mrs. Humphries:* You know what, you are exactly right, and I'm probably the goofiest sometimes. (Intervention 1, 1-11-16)

Autism is a neurological disorder that lacks "obvious" physical characteristics, and individuals are diagnosed along a spectrum, with those who have autism appearing at varying points of severity along a continuum (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2014). Because the definition of autism is so abstract and outward manifestations of the disorder are not concrete, defining autism posed a particular challenge for the students, who were still in Piaget's concrete operational stage of cognitive development.

However, as the study went on, responses indicated that students were actively using the information provided in to the books to co-construct a working defining autism that defined autism as: (a) a neurological disorder, (b) a spectrum disorder, and (c) a disorder with characteristic behaviors. As students continued learning about autism from the books, Mrs. Humphries was careful to lead the discussion in such a way that students would be able to draw their own conclusions about autism from the stories, and to construct meaning *together* instead of looking to her to be the authority on the topic of autism and to simply explain what it is.

Neurological disorder. Throughout the study, students listened closely to the information presented in the books in order to understand the disorder. The idea that autism is a neurological disorder that affects how your brain "works" was a salient topic that was reinforced

throughout all of the stories. While Mrs. Humphries never explicitly taught the students that autism is a neurological disorder, students began demonstrate their understanding of this idea by echoing sentiments from the books, noting that people with autism have brains that "work differently" than other people (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Another student identified that a character's "brain processes slower than ours" (Edith's response, Intervention 5, 1-27-16). A third student explained that people with ASD have brains that are "different" from others (Intervention 6, 1-29-16). One student explained that characters with autism acted specific ways because of a brain "disorder" which affected other parts of their bodies. She was also quick to point out that having brains that were "mixed up" didn't make people "weird," just different (Intervention 6, 1-29-16). While the term "neurological disorder" was not taught to the students to prevent undue confusion and unnecessary labeling, the idea that autism has something to do with how your brain works was an understanding that was continually reinforced in the books and expressed through student responses.

Spectrum disorder. Just as students were able to use information from the texts to understand that autism is a neurological disorder, after reading the first three texts, students began to independently realize that while autism may have typical characteristic behaviors, many of the characters in the story were very different from one another. This led to the students' realization that autism is a spectrum disorder:

Luke: I've got a question.

Mrs. Humphries: Okay, what's your question?

Luke: Are there different types of autism?

Mrs. Humphries: You know what, that is a very good question. Do you think there are different types of autism?

Students: YES! (Intervention 3, 1-15-16)

After the realization that autism can vary from person to person, students were able to compare the behaviors of the characters they read about to identify that not all people with autism act the same way, noting that characters like Charlie, Louis, and Eli all had autism but were very different (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). Unlike the earlier reference to the "neurological disorder" terminology, Mrs. Humphries and I both agreed that "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (ASD) was a term students should be familiar with, since it was used frequently in the books and is commonly used interchangeably with the word "autism" in real world settings. This required the term ASD to be explicitly explained once the students had identified it. Mrs. Humphries helped scaffold this understanding by comparing the autism spectrum to a spectrum of color that students were already familiar with:

> Remember we talked about it [autism] being on a spectrum – Autism Spectrum Disorder? Okay, and what a spectrum is – is where there's kind of a wide variety of things. Think about a rainbow. A rainbow has a variety of colors – it has a dark blue and then it has a light blue, and then it becomes a lighter blue. And then it goes into another color of the rainbow. (Intervention 4, 1-20-16)

She went on to say,

> So even thought they all have autism, some of them might be able to function like their brothers and sisters a little bit more than others. And then some of them may have a little bit more trouble, okay? So it's kind of like there's a wide variety of things that you might do or that you might be able to do, okay? Does that kind of clear that up for you all? That they don't have to be *exactly* alike, that it's kind of a wide variety of what that disability is like. (Intervention 4, 1-20-16)

After this explanation, students felt more comfortable using the term ASD and defining it for others. One student noted initial confusion and subsequent understanding after being introduced to the new label: "I was confused about what autism is really called after the story, but now I understand it is called ASD" (Jason's journal entry, Intervention 3, 1-15-16), and similarly, others showcased their new knowledge by explaining that the once unknown acronym "ASD" stood for "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Another student explained the idea of a spectrum in which autism can be very serious for some people, but milder for others (Intervention 6, 1-29-16), and another student wrote, "I have learned not all kinds of autism as the same" (Anne's journal entry, Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Conversely, while some students quickly learned and defined ASD, some students were still confused by the label. One student noted that every time she heard the term, she grew more confused because she still didn't know what it meant (Intervention 6, 1-29-16). Some students' continuing confusion led Mrs. Humphries to again explain how autism acts as a spectrum to help clarify the abstract idea and make it more concrete:

> So [autism], it's very, very different. Some people may be a little it different, and some people may be a whole lot different. And remember when I gave you the example of if you think about a rainbow, you know how a rainbow is made up of lots and lots of different colors and it fades from one color to another? And each color in it is different? Some are very, very bright colors and some are colors that are not quite as bright and they're a little more dull? Okay, so just like with people with autism, some people have a very, very serious case of autism where they are very, very different, and then there are some people that are not very different at all, they may just have some of the characteristics. (Intervention 6, 1-29-16)

As the concept of ASD was continually clarified and reinforced over the course of the study and as students were exposed to multiple characters with similar and differing characteristic behaviors, students became more comfortable with the terminology and explaining their understanding. After the final intervention, one student shared that the most important thing she learned that that every kind of autism is different. She also wondered what it would have been like if the characters were real, and expressed a belief that even though they were different, they all would have been friends (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Class discussions illustrated how students were able to define autism by using information presented in the narratives with little prompting from Mrs. Humphries. While she served as a facilitator of the discussions, student responses indicated how they became critical consumers of the texts, working together to create a working definition of autism based on the various pieces of information presented to them through the stories.

Characteristic behaviors. As the books were read, students became aware of the characteristic, indicative behaviors of autism, and as the study progressed, they were able to identify new and recurring patterns of behavior that were illustrated through the characters with autism using both the pictures and the words in the text. Identifying these behaviors fell into three categories of student response: (a) self-stimulating and idiosyncratic behaviors, (b) emotional and social behaviors, and (c) speech and communication skills.

While discourse regarding these specific characteristics naturally emerged as students asked questions or discussed characters from a more aesthetic stance, the behaviors were purposefully addressed at the end of each intervention through the use of anchor charts (see Table 5), since asking students to discuss the texts for the purpose of identifying these characteristic behaviors required an efferent stance. Since foundational knowledge of autism was

necessary in order to become understanding and ultimately accepting, this was a necessary part of the study, particularly in Interventions 1-5, as students had very limited knowledge of what autism was and what it looked like. However, this piece of the intervention was not a focal point in this study. It occurred at the end of whole class discussion and sometimes was not addressed at all during an intervention, particularly during Interventions 6-10. There was less emphasis on identifying these characteristic behaviors in the second half of the intervention because students were engaged in more aesthetic topics of conversation and these identifying behaviors became naturally integrated into the discussion instead of being used as an isolated activity.

 Self-stimulating/Idiosyncratic behaviors. The books often depicted characters engaging in self-stimulatory behaviors known as "stimming," which refers to the repetitive movement of objects (e.g. spinning a Frisbee or watching a ceiling fan spin) or body movements (e.g. spinning in circles). While the term "stimming" was mentioned by name in some of the texts, Mrs. Humphries did not actually teach the students this term, as we felt it was most important for students to focus on becoming familiar with the *behaviors*, and not caught up in the *labels*, which could promote a more clinical or deficit view of autism. However, throughout the study, students consistently recognized stimming. They noted that characters with autism liked "spinning things" (Intervention 7, 2-1-16), they often liked watching things go up and down (Intervention 7, 2-1-16), and they had trouble sleeping because thoughts in their brains were spinning (Intervention 7, 2-1-16). Stimming was particularly salient during Intervention 7, when the character in the story uses the label "stimming" for the first time and notes that he likes to "SPIN, SPIN, SPIN, SPIN, SPIN" (Wilson, 2009). Following the reading of this book, Mrs. Humphries and the students discussed this newly introduced behavior using the anchor chart, discussing how some people with autism may using stimming behaviors to calm down after overstimulation.

Students also responded that characters engaged in idiosyncratic behaviors. Students noticed that the characters needed specific, predictable routines and that characters with autism didn't like change (Intervention 6, 1-29-16). Students also noted that the characters enjoyed organizing possessions and materials by sorting things on desks (Intervention 6, 1-29-16), and that characters would often fixate on playing with specific objects or items, like Josh from *Playing by the rules: A story about autism* (Luchsinger, 2007), who only wanted to play toys that were animals (Intervention 8, 2-3-16). As the study progressed, students were able identify these "crazy" or "goofy" actions as the characteristic behaviors that made the characters with autism unique. Toward the end of the study, students were able to apply knowledge of these characteristics not just to the virtual characters in the books, but also to other children in both real and hypothetical settings, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Emotional and social behaviors. As depicted through characters from the books, individuals with autism often have heightened sensitivity to their surroundings, and social anxieties, which can influence how they emotionally react in social settings. Mrs. Humphries and I took special care to select a variety of books that depicted the spectrum of autistic behaviors that exist in order to emphasize that no two people with autism may act the same way. This helped us avoid showing the students a narrow view of autism, and instead presented multifaceted descriptions and characteristics of the disorder.

Students noted that characters had heightened sensitivity to noises and overstimulation. They stated that characters with autism were "sensitive" and experienced the world in different ways, pointing out that characters with autism liked to bite into things or might smell things (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). Similarly, one student noted that people with autism often emotionally react because they are very sensitive to the world around them (Intervention 6, 1-29-16).

Students were also able to identify typical emotional responses to this overstimulation, like when characters waved their hands (Intervention 9, 2-5-16), or ran around the classroom (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Most prominently, students noted characters' aversion to loud noises and how they "didn't like big, loud sounds" (Luke's response, Intervention 2, 1-13-16). Students also noted characters' reactions to changes and overstimulation included emotional outbursts, which sometimes involved screaming (Intervention 7, 2-1-16).

Students also particularly noticed that while characters with autism had heightened senses, they had a decreased sense of danger, and often liked to do dangerous things (Intervention 1, 1-11-16), hugged too hard (Intervention 5, 1-27-16), or talked to strangers (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Socially, students immediately noticed that characters were often isolated in the story, and preferred being alone to social gatherings, noting that characters didn't always play with others (Intervention 1, 1-11-16), and didn't like meeting new people (Intervention 8, 2-3-16). They also noted that within social settings, the characters often did not know how to behave. One student pointed out that a character was looking in an opposite direction when the class was moving the other way (Intervention 5, 1-27-16), and another student noted how a character "would get upset when someone bumped into him" (Anne's response, Intervention 6, 1-29-16).

Speech and communication skills. The books also illustrated how characters with autism may have limited or no verbal and communication skills. Books for this study were purposefully selected to depict a range of speech and communication skills, which helped expose students to characters who had varying levels of speech. Students noticed that some characters with autism were nonverbal, pointing out that instead of speaking, the character "made noises" or was "humming" (Kory's response, Intervention 9, 2-5-16) in the back of the class. Students noted

that another character with autism "copied people" (Jason's response, Intervention 2, 1-13-16), repeating other character's words or phrases. Additionally, students noticed that because of limited communication skills, the characters with autism didn't answer immediately (Intervention 5, 1-27-16), and that when communicating with them, "people had to say it – the words twice so she could answer it back" (Jason's response, Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Students also realized that one character with autism had a difficult time showing emotions and feelings (Intervention 1, 1-11-16). Most commonly, however, students noted that characters with autism often didn't speak, or were quiet (Intervention 1, 1-11-16).

Theme 3: Journeying Through the Text

As the students continued reading stories, their understanding of autism began to change as they journeyed through the texts. Interestingly, these responses mirrored existing research regarding comprehension strategies students use to make connections with texts that include "text-to-text," "text-to-self," and "text-to-world" connections (Harvey, & Goudvis, 2000). Findings from student responses suggest that they were (a) journeying into the text to make connections between characters and other texts (similar to text-to-text connections), (b) journeying out of the text to look back and reflect on personal connections between characters and themselves (similar to text-to-self connections), and (c) journeying beyond the text to make connections between virtual characters and the real world (similar to text-to-world connections). This parallel finding was especially salient because it suggests implications for how common literacy strategies can be used in conjunction with transaction and diverse texts to encourage critical literacy and reading instruction in the classroom.

Journeying into the text. One of the earliest ways the students connected and journeyed through the texts was by journeying into the text, or into the virtual world of the story in order to

gain and insider's perspective of autism, much like looking through Bishop's (1990) "window" into another world. Here, student responses showcased their ability to (a) compare characters with autism through text connections, and to use the texts to (b) gain an insider's perspective into the life of characters and others with autism.

Comparing characters. Throughout the study, students would commonly respond to new texts and characters by comparing them to older, more familiar ones. For example, one student compared the new book *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004), to *My brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010) by pointing out similarities in the characters and identifying autism as a recurring theme (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). After reading *ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder* (DeMars, 2011), another student stated that Eli reminded him of Charlie because they both had autism (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Additionally, after reading *A friend like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009), one student responded was confused why the character with autism covered his ears and screamed when the bell rang. The following excerpt illustrates how Mrs. Humphries was able to help one student explain a recurring behavior and make a text-to-text connection (Harvey, & Goudvis, 2000) by comparing Simon to a previous character named Darla:

> *Luke:* How come Simon screamed so loud when nothing really happened? The bell
> had rung and he was like Ahhhh! [Covers his ears and yells].
> *Mrs. Humphries:* What have we learned about children when they have autism and
> loud sounds, do you remember? Do you remember what you learned – can you tell me?
> *Luke:* They hear it a little different and it's louder than we do.
> *Mrs. Humphries:* Okay, very good. What book was it we read the other day that the
> character said they heard all the sounds at one time?

Luke: Say hello to me.

Mrs. Humphries: Yea, it was Darla. It was the story about Darla and it said that all the sounds seemed to hit her at one time – so do you think that may be the thing that was happening to Simon?

Luke: Yea. (Intervention 3, 1-15-16)

Insider perspectives. In addition to drawing connections between the characters, student responses also indicated they drew inferences concerning the narrators of the text and how different voices provided similar or different perspectives of autism. At first, student responses were efferent in nature; with statements indicating that students enjoyed the various ways the books were written (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). Early into the study, students realized that the stories were told in different ways, and one student asked if the same author had written all of the books (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Another student wondered if a book was written by the character with autism and if the text was in fact, a reflection of the author's childhood (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Reponses suggest students began to realize that several of the books were written in first-person, and that those told from the perspective of the character with autism provided an insider's view by allowing the reader to step into the shoes of that character (Intervention 6, 1-29-16). Another student responded that the books felt like "real life" and that they helped the readers understand what it felt like to have autism (Intervention 3, 1-15-16).

Students also identified that the purpose of the authors writing these books was to show others what it felt like to live with autism. One student noted that some of the authors were telling stories about themselves to describe what it felt like to have autism (Intervention 3, 1-15-16), while another student stated that the book *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004) made her feel like she was actually in Louis' life (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). A final student moved away from the

virtual world of the story and made a connection to the real world. She believed the class was reading books about autism because years ago, they had a student in their classroom with autism, and reading the texts was giving them insight into what it felt like to be that student so that they could better understand and emphasize with him now (Intervention 8, 2-3-16). As time went on, students began to realize the value of the books as being a way to "step into the shoes" of someone with autism in order to explore what the world was like for them. However, at first, they were confused by how people without autism could understand the perspective of someone with autism and not have autism themselves.

During the fourth intervention, the students read *Ian's Walk: A story about autism* (Lears, 1998), in which the character with autism' sister, who was once embarrassed by her brother, Ian's idiosyncratic behaviors tries to understand him by joining him in some of his favorite activities during a walk in order to see the world through his eyes. This act of stepping into the shoes of someone who is different was initially very confusing for some students, who thought that because the character was joining Ian and behaving like him that she must have autism. One student had difficulty identifying which character in the story actually had autism, because at the end of the story, the sister tried to view the world through her brother's eyes by smelling the bricks, laying on the sidewalk, and watching the ceiling fan spin (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). The student's response indicated that she did not understand the idea of stepping into another person's shoes as a way to view the world from their perspective.

However, other students were able to weigh in that the character did not have autism because the she only exhibited the characteristic behaviors at the end of the story, when she was trying to show her brother that she loved him and wanted to understand him (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). This exchange indicated that some students did not yet have an understanding of what it

meant to take one another person's perspective and to try to understand the world through someone else's eyes. Through discussion and meaning construction, some students were able to clear up this confusion in order to understand the value in trying to view the world through someone else's perspective. One student pointed out, "I think she didn't have autism – she just wanted to do things all the way he did home" (Ryan's response, Intervention 4, 1-20-16), and another mentioned, "I thought she was trying to make him fit in" (Luke's response, Intervention 4, 1-20-16). While the texts allowed students to gain an insider's perspective into the lives of the characters with autism, the interventions also gave insight into how books can be used as a tool to step into the shoes of other kinds of characters as well. After reading the books for several weeks, the class read *A friend like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009), in which the character with autism stands up to a bully named Horrible Hattie. Instead of the students showing disdain for Hattie, their responses instead demonstrated that they wanted to *help* Horrible Hattie:

> *Mrs. Humphries:* Yea, do you think maybe Simon and Matthew could help Horrible Hattie? Maybe she needs some help being friends too. You never know what someone's situation is, do you?
>
> *Edith:* Maybe she just gets whooped a lot at home, and she's just trying to make everyone feel the way she feels.
>
> *Mrs. Humphries:* You know what, you're exactly right. I think that's important. So is it important that we try to be kind and friends with everybody? Because we never know what is making them act the way that they're acting. That's an important point. Yes ma'am?
>
> *Edith:* Maybe she is bullied.

Mrs. Humphries: She could be! That could be the reason she tries to bully people is that

she is bullied. Okay very good. You guys are very, very thoughtful.

(Intervention 6, 1-29-16)

While it is unclear if this stance toward stepping into the shoes of the character in order to gain

an insider's perspective was learned through the intervention, responses did suggest that the

students realized the importance of stepping into the shoes of the characters to view the world

through their eyes before judging them.

Journeying out of the text. As the students continued responding to the stories, they

began to look beyond the virtual world of the story, journeying out of the text to make

connections between the characters in the books and themselves as individuals. Most

specifically, the students began to identify similarities between themselves and the characters

with autism, using the books not as a "window," but as a "mirror" reflected back on themselves

(Bishop, 1990), with responses similar to "text-to-self" connections (Harvey, & Goudvis, 2000).

While these connections were initially exterior in nature, they refocused to internal

commonalities, as students were able to consistently identify (a) physical and (b) personal

similarities to characters and people with autism.

Physical similarities. More obvious, exterior similarities emerged first. Some of the first

similarities students pointed out dealt with external, physical characteristics, presumably because

these were the most noticeable. During the first intervention, Mrs. Humphries asked: "Now, let

me ask *you* a question. Think about this a minute: how are *you* like Charlie?" (Intervention 1, 1-

11-16) One student promptly responded, "I have legs" (Luke's response, Intervention 1, 1-11-

16). Another chimed in saying that he was a boy like Charlie, and another noted that they both

had brown eyes (Intervention 1, 1-11-16). Other responses included the fact that students shared

the same skin color as characters with autism, or wore similar clothes. All of these responses occurred during the first intervention, suggesting that initially, students had difficulty identifying *any* similarities to someone with autism beyond that of external, skin-deep comparisons.

　　Personal similarities. As students continued hearing more stories, their connections to the characters moved beyond physical to more personal, emotional and behavioral characteristics. At first, students seemed confused when they began to notice that they shared characteristic behaviors with characters that have autism. One student stated that the more she read about autism, the more she wondered if *she* had autism because she had so many similarities to the characters (Intervention 1, 1-11-16). This suggested that initially, students didn't realize that they could share similarities with someone that was different without they themselves having autism as well.

　　However, as the study progressed, under the careful guidance of Mrs. Humphries, students began to realize that they could be *similar* but *different* to the characters with autism, an assertion of the study conducted by Azano, et al. (manuscript submitted for publication). For example, after reading *Squirmy wormy: How I learned to help myself* (Wilson, 2009), which depicts a character who squeezes himself in the couch cushions to feel better after overstimulation, a student responded that the book illustrated some things she liked to do as well, like get bear hugs (Intervention 7, 2-1-16). Similarly, after reading *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), another student wrote that she sometimes has a strong, emotional reaction to being sick, and feels uncomfortable around new people, just like Darla, the character with autism (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Additionally, after discussing how Josh, the character in *Playing by the rules: A story about autism* (Luchsinger, 2007) organized his toy animals, the students identified this as a characteristic behavior of autism, but

also as a behavior they engaged in sometimes as well. One student noted that Josh liked to sort things, and other students were quick to add they also sorted things sometimes (Intervention 8, 2-3-16). While students continued to identify the characteristic emotional and social behaviors of autism, they were also able to draw comparisons between the ways the characters with autism acted and their own behaviors.

Finally, student responses indicated that they realized they had similar interests to the characters with autism. One student noted that she learned she was similar to many of the characters with autism in the books (Intervention 10, 2-10-16), and throughout the study, many of the students cited similar interests in extracurricular activities like soccer and music. Other students noted that they enjoyed playing the piano like Charlie (Intervention 1, 1-11-16) or running fast and swinging on the swing set like Dylan (Intervention 9. 2-5-16), again re-emphasizing the similarities neurotypical peers can share with others who have autism.

Journeying beyond the text. As the study progressed, responses indicated that students were moving beyond the virtual world of the story and were making connections from the books to the world around them. Prior to this, connections had been with the text or with the self, and were largely built on the virtual experiences presented in the texts. However, as time went on, students transitioned from creating connections and aesthetic responses to the text, and began transferring what they learned from the virtual world into the real world (Galda, 2013) through responses that were reminiscent of "text-to-world" connections (Harvey, & Goudvis, 2000). Such connections were manifested through student responses that identified a (a) common humanity between those with autism and others, and (b) positive perceptions of difference.

Common humanity. As the study progressed, students moved beyond using books as a window to look into the world of someone who has autism, and even beyond using the books as

a mirror to view themselves (Bishop, 1990). Instead, the books became both a mirror *and*

window (Galda, 1980), as students began to recognize that even though the characters with

autism were different, all people, those with autism and those without autism share a common

humanity. Student responses indicated that they realized characters with autism were people *first*,

with a disability *second*.

Early into the study, after reading *My brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010), one student

noted that even though Charlie was quiet because he had autism, he was still a "normal," kind

person (Intervention 1, 1-11-16). The student also pointed out that even though Charlie was

different, he was still like her in many ways (Intervention 1, 1-11-16). Students noted that even

though characters with autism may exhibit distinct characteristics or behaviors that exemplify

differences, they still share the same, innate qualities that make a human being valuable and

special. One student stated that people with autism are the same on the inside, even if they have

external differences (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). A second student noted that no one is exactly the

same because everyone has their own personality, but that individuals can also share

commonalities (Intervention 7, 2-1-16). A third student wrote, "something I learned is that you

can be special in your own way" (Anne's journal entry, Intervention 2, 1-13-16), and she later

noted that regardless of ability, people with autism are "still the same on the inside no matter

what" (Anne's response, Intervention 4, 1-20-16).

This view was reflected through the use of influential language, as students were careful

to refer to characters with autism in respectful and caring ways. One student, after reading

Squirmy wormy: How I learned to help myself (Wilson, 2009) felt that the light-hearted book

somehow diminished the seriousness of autism by presenting the character in a silly way

(Intervention 7, 2-1-16). Additionally, when one student mentioned that a character with autism

"acted crazy," another student was quick to defend the character, pointing out that people with autism aren't "crazy," just "different," and argued that calling them crazy was cruel (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Additionally, when Mrs. Humphries asked students what they could do to include others with autism, one student pointed out that you should do the things you would for other "normal" people, like showing them kindness, honesty, and respect (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). These responses suggest that students realized that even though people with autism are different, we are all innately the same, and should all be given respect, consideration, and opportunity, regardless of ability or difference.

Positive perceptions of difference. Over the course of the study, many students identified the characters with autism as their favorites, and were quick to note that even though they had autism, they were still kind and good. Students noted: "The autism didn't take his kindness" (Anne's response, Intervention 1, 1-11-16), and "He was a nice kid, even if he had autism" (Karen's journal entry, Intervention 5, 1-27-16). One particular way this perception manifested was through students' ability to identify that while characters with autism were different, those differences made them unique and special. After reading *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004), one student responded that Louis was special *because* of his differences (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). Through the use of the anchor charts, students were able to take an efferent stance to identifying some of these unique qualities, such as how some characters were talented musicians (Intervention 1, 1-11-16), or athletes (Intervention 9, 2-5-16).

Additionally, student aesthetic responses went deeper, moving beyond the virtual characters on the page in order to make positive and thoughtful generalizations about people with autism in the real world. Students noted that they believed people with autism were highly intelligent, because all of the books made the characters seem "really smart" (Intervention 3, 1-

15-16), and one student wrote, "If I had autism, I would know everything like Erick" (Karen's journal entry, Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Student also noted that people with autism may view the world in different ways due to heightened sensitivity or perceptions, which allow people with autism to see and feel thing that others can not (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). Perhaps most interestingly, students believed that people with autism had the ability to understand and enjoy the world around them in unique and powerful ways, enabling them to understand the world as it "was meant" to be understood (Intervention 4, 1-20-16).

While students realized that individuals with autism have distinct and different abilities and behavioral characteristics that set them apart, they also conveyed a positive perception toward these differences, and were able to find the beauty in the difference. For example, one student wrote: "I like everything about autism people" (Karl's journal entry, Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Similarly, in *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004), the character with autism loves to draw, but no one can understand his drawings except for his friend Sam, who understands him. One student explained that Louis' drawings were different and hard to understand because he viewed the world differently than others, but that this interpretation didn't make the drawings any less "beautiful" (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). These responses indicate that students were able to identify difference as a positive quality of the characters, and view characteristics that were once confusing as something unique and special. However, while students were quick to point out the ways individuals with autism are unique and special, they were also cognizant of the difficulties associated with having autism. One student pointed out that even though people with autism can see the world in different ways, their lives still seem a little unfair, because having the disability means they may miss out on other things in life (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). The perception that

differences can make others unique and special but can also make life harder or more difficult

led to the students to discuss ways they could understand and care for individuals with autism.

Theme 4: Affirming Care and Responsibility

As students continued to make connections between the virtual world of the text and the

real world, student responses indicated that they felt they had a responsibility to care for and be

accepting of people with autism in the world around them. At first, student responses were bound

to the text, as students showed that they cared about the characters and their wellbeing, such as

when one student expressed a desire for Eli, the character in *ASD and me: Learning about high*

functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (DeMars, 2011), to grow up and make lots of friends

(Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Similarly, after reading *David's world: A picture book about living*

with autism (Mueller, 2012), another student wrote, "I wish that everyone could understand

David's language" (Jason's journal entry, Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Students also worried about

the characters, questioning what would have happened to them if they had not met and become

friends with other characters who accepted them for who they were. After reading *Looking after*

Louis (Ely, 2004), one student worried about what would have happened if Louis had never

become friends with Sam, the only character who could understand Louis' drawings, and who

invited him to play soccer.

Additionally, as time went on, students' responses changed from sentiments of hope to

actions they would take, but that were still bound to the text. After reading *Ian's walk: A story*

about autism (Lears, 1998), one student stated that if she were writing the story, she would have

changed how the older sister acted to her brother who had autism in the beginning. She argued

that it was "rude" to treat him badly and that the character in the story should have not cared

about being embarrassed by her brother's erratic behaviors (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). Similarly,

after reading *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004), a second student stated that if he were writing the book, he would have changed story so that Louis would have had many different friends within the school (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). Finally, after reading *The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism* (Coe, 2009), another student expressed a desire to be friends with Dylan, the character with autism, and identified ways he could interact with him:

> Dylan would be a good friend. I would play soccer with him. He is a good friend. I think he wants friends. I would be his friend because I hope he makes friends. I hope everybody wants to be his friend. I hope they get to have recess every day. I hope they have fun. (Karl's journal entry, Intervention 9, 2-5-16)

These responses again changed to sentiments of hope and care for the real world and the future, moving beyond the virtual world of the text. For example, one student noted that her experiences with the books made her want to grow up to become a designer who creates things to help individuals with autism (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Similarly, another student responded that his newfound knowledge would help him understand others with autism that he may meet the next year in third grade and in the years after that (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). These responses suggest that students began to feel increasing feelings of care and responsibility for both the virtual characters with autism, and by extension, to others with autism in the real world. These sentiments were the first step toward inclusive ideals, and responses dealt with how to apply these understandings to real-world contexts by (a) including others who are different, (b) explaining the "rules" of autism to others, and (c) identifying and accepting autism in others.

Including others. As students read the books, they often remarked that their favorite parts or the times that made them happiest were when the other characters included the character

with autism in daily activities. For example, when Dylan was included in a soccer game at recess in *The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism* (Coe, 2009), one student aesthetically responded:

> *Jason:* I liked it when Dylan first kicked the ball. I felt happy.
>
> *Mrs. Humphries:* Okay, very good. Why did it make you so happy when Dylan first kicked the ball?
>
> *Jason:* Because I think he never ever kicked a ball before. (Intervention 9, 2-5-16)

The student's response suggests that he realized characters with autism may not be afforded the same opportunities as other characters, and that Dylan's inclusion in the game pleased him. Similarly, one student wrote: "I felt happy when they helped Dylan play soccer. He kicked the ball far and did not ruin the game for them" (Karen's journal entry, Intervention 9, 2-5-16). After reading *Ian's walk: A story about autism* (Lears, 1998), another student responded, "I felt happy when Ian's sister let Ian walk home *his* way. I noticed they were happy" (Ryan's response, Intervention 4, 1-20-16), suggesting that the character's movement toward inclusion and acceptance was a positive thing.

Other students moved beyond the virtual world of the story to discuss what they would have done had they been in the other characters' shoes. After reading *ASD and me: Learning about high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder* (DeMars, 2011), one student pointed out that if Eli was real, and was sitting alone at recess, that any one of them could ask him to play (Intervention 3, 1-15-16). Similarly, after reading *Squirmy wormy: How I learned to help myself* (Wilson, 2009), one student wondered what it would be like to be friends with some of the characters like Tyler, musing that Tyler would probably be a good friend (Intervention 7, 2-1-16).

During the fifth intervention, Mrs. Humphries asked the students how they may approach someone with autism and ways they could include them in everyday activities: "If we had somebody in this class that had autism, what are some things we could do to make sure we include them?" (Intervention 5, 1-27-16) Students responded that they could ask the individuals with autism if they wanted to play, but also noted that the person with autism may not answer right away, or may say "no" because they preferred to be alone (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Other students noted some additional strategies for including others with autism that included asking the student several times if they wanted to play, or trying to engage them through encouraging actions and gestures. One student said, "I would keep asking him to see if he responds. I would say it about three or four times, and if he didn't say anything I would go find someone else" (Anne's response, Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Another student pointed out that he would simply kick the ball to the individual to see if he would kick it back (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). This indicated that students realized individuals with autism may not want to play or interact in certain ways, and may not initially respond to other students' offerings, but that it is always important to include them and to keep trying to be their friend, regardless of the outcome.

Explaining the "rules." As time went on, student responses indicated they realized the value of understanding autism so that they could understand why people with autism act certain ways and in turn, explain the "rules" of autism to others in order to create a more accepting environment. As such, students became acutely aware of the characters in the story who were understanding and accepting of the characters with autism, and conversely, those that did not understand autism and did not know how to react. After reading *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), one student noted that Darla's friends seemed to truly understand her (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Likewise, after reading *The friendship puzzle:*

Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism (Coe, 2009), another student wrote, "I liked when Dylan and Mackenzie became friends because she understood him" (Anne's journal entry, Intervention 9, 2-5-16). Students were quick to identify the "good" friends of a character with autism and the positive ways they acted. One student noted that these friends showed love and patience while learning about the character with autism, and that the character with autism in turn helped teach others about the disorder so that they could all understood and care for each other (Intervention 2, 1-13-16).

At other times, students identified instances when the character with autism behaved in ways characteristic to the disorder and other characters did not know how to respond. After reading about Josh in *Playing by the rules: A story about autism* (Luchsinger, 2007), one student "talked back" (Sipe, 2002) to a character in the text, explaining that Josh had a different life that the character just didn't understand yet (Intervention 8, 2-3-16). Similarly, after reading *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), one student pointed out that people may think that Darla was mean because she did not like to respond to questions and seemed to "ignore" the other characters, but that these behaviors were a result of her autism, not meanness (Intervention 5, 1-27-16).

Students were quick to jump to the aid of the characters in the story, explaining why characters with autism didn't respond when others talked to them: "They just might not hear you that good. You might be far away and you're yelling, and they might be covering their ears because of the noise" (Edith's response, Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Another student remarked on why characters with autism chose not to play with other characters at recess, stating that maybe people with autism do not enjoy doing some of the things that others like to do (Intervention 4, 1-20-16). Similarly, after reading *Playing by the rules: A story about autism* (Luchsinger, 2007),

another student wrote, "I wonder why Josh looked sad every day. I think he loved to do everything that they do not like to do" (Karen's journal entry, Intervention 8, 2-3-16). Additionally, another student explained why Josh reacted emotionally when the animal figures he sorted were disrupted, noting that he probably spent a lot of time and energy sorting his things and was upset when they were "messed up" (Intervention 8, 2-3-16). A fourth student explained that Josh may not have wanted to interact with a new character named Aunt Tilda because meeting a new person would have been a big change, and the books explained that people with autism do not enjoy changes (Intervention 8, 2-3-16). These responses indicated a deep understanding of the disorder and the corresponding characteristics of autism. Students were able to identify why characters with autism acted certain ways and were also able to articulate why these behaviors were occurring by "talking back" (Sipe, 2002) to the characters in the story, and acting as what Mesibov and Shea (1998) referred to as a "cross-cultural interpreter" for autism.

In a similar way, students were also able to step out of the virtual world of the story and look to the future in order to discuss how they may use their knowledge of autism in real-world contexts. When Mrs. Humphries asked the class what the point of reading all the books about autism was, students identified how information from the virtual world of the text could be used in the future when encountering someone with autism in the real world. One student mused, "Probably one day we might have somebody in our class with autism and then we might – so we will know how to take care of them" (Luke's response, Intervention 7, 2-1-16). Another student added that in later grades, they might encounter someone with autism, and without the knowledge from the books, they would not know how to act toward them (Intervention 7, 2-1-16).

Additionally, *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004) also presented a unique opportunity for the class to discuss equal versus fair treatment for people with autism, and whether or not it is okay to "break the rules" for certain people. In the story, the teacher, Miss Allie allows Louis to go outside and play soccer with his friend Sam while the other students remain in the school. When Mrs. Humphries asked if it the class thought it was okay to break the rules for people with autism, the majority of the students showed understanding that treatment for students with special needs may be fair, but not equal. One student pointed out that it is okay to break the rules for special people, and that everyone has a rule broken at some point because everyone is special (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). Another student noted that maybe Louis was being rewarded for trying so hard to interact with his classmates who did not have autism, and that he deserved extra time outside for all of his hard work in trying to understand others (Intervention 2, 1-13-16). A third student replied that it was fair because maybe Louis had not been afforded the same opportunities as other students to make friends, and that going outside provided him the opportunity to interact positively with others and make new friends (Intervention 2, 1-13-16).

Toward the end of the study, students began to recognize that autism is like a puzzle, and each new piece of information and understanding enabled them to put the pieces together to form a coherent view and understanding of autism. After reading *The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism* (Coe, 2009), which presented the commonly used metaphor of a puzzle piece for autism, one student was confused by the abstract idea and Mrs. Humphries asked the class to help with clarification:

Mrs. Humphries: Okay can anyone help your classmate with how friendship can be a puzzle? How is friendship kind of like a puzzle?

Luke: Because if a friend doesn't know one thing you can help them understand.

Mrs. Humphries: Okay, good. What would you say to that?

Anne: It um, it could be uh, it's like some of your friends are different than you don't know much about them but they know a lot about you.

Mrs. Humphries: Okay, so how is that like a puzzle?

Anne: It's like you learn each – you can learn each piece of information, which means like a little puzzle every day about them. (Intervention 9, 2-5-16)

Students began to realize that autism can be like a puzzle, and that learning about autism and reading the books was like putting the pieces of autism together (Intervention 9, 2-5-16). During this time, students began to demonstrate understanding of autism by showcasing their ability to explain why characters would act certain ways. With this newly developed understanding of autism, students could not understand why other characters did not share their understandings. For example, in *The friendship puzzle: Helping kids learn about accepting and including kids with autism* (Coe, 2009), Dylan, the character with autism, runs into a soccer game and steals the ball at recess. When the other characters become angry, another character, Mackenzie tries to explain the situation, but no one will listen. After reading this part of the story, one student couldn't believe the characters wouldn't listen and try to understand Dylan's actions:

Mrs. Humphries: Do you think Dylan *was* trying to ruin the game?

Students: No!

Mrs. Humphries: No. What do you think he's – what was he trying to do?

Edith: He was trying to play.

Mrs. Humphries: Okay, so that was his way of playing. He didn't understand how to play so that was his way of playing. What do you think about Mackenzie, what she did?

Edith: She had a puzzle piece.

Mrs. Humphries: What? What did you say – that was good.

Edith: She had a puzzle piece.

Mrs. Humphries: She had a piece of the puzzle, didn't she? (Intervention 9, 2-5-16)

Ultimately, students recognized the "pieces" of the autism puzzle and began to understand the "rules" for explaining the behaviors associated with autism and how to share them with others. While understandings were initially bound to the text, they moved beyond the virtual stories on the page and into real-world application as students discussed how their knowledge and understanding of autism could not only benefit those with autism but others who may have limited understanding of autism as well.

Identifying and accepting autism in others. About midway through the study, students began making connections from the books to the real world. This included recognizing autism not just in the virtual world of the story but also in the world around them, and students began providing a rationale for why they believed certain friends or acquaintances had autism. One student pointed out that when he was in first grade, he had a classmate with autism who would cover his ears when the bell rang for them to go to the car rider line (Intervention 6, 1-29-16). Other students quickly showed excitement about also making this connection, adding that they knew the same student and that he had been in their kindergarten classroom (Intervention 6, 1-29-16). In particular, students began comparing characters from the stories to friends or acquaintances in real life, and students began to infer a diagnosis of autism. For example, after reading *A friend like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009), one student, wrote: "Yes I do have a friend like Simon. His name is Mike" (Luke's journal entry, Intervention 6, 1-29-16). One student mentioned that she thought someone from her pre-school classroom had autism because the student would begin running around and covering her ears if she heard noises she didn't like

(Intervention 5, 1-27-16). After reading *Looking after Louis* (Ely, 2004), another student stated that she had a friend that acted similar to Louis (Intervention 2, 1-13-16), while after reading *Say hello to me: A story about a little girl on the autism spectrum* (Charisse, 2012), third student responded that she knew someone who she was "pretty sure" had the same kind of autism as Darla (Intervention 5, 1-27-16). A fourth student added that Darla reminded her of someone she knew that had autism (Intervention 5, 1-27-16).

During this time, it was difficult to conclude if students were correctly using their newfound knowledge to accurately identify autism in their friends, and if their friends actually did have autism or just exhibited similar characteristics as mentioned in previous sections. For example, one student suggested that a friend had autism when in actuality, the student may struggle with a speech impediment or developmental delay: "One of my friends in my kindergarten class, she had autism, and she um, she couldn't talk as good as everybody else" (Emily's response, Intervention 5, 1-27-16). Another student claimed a diagnosis, but her response indicated that the student may not have autism but may be learning English as a native speaker: "Like she said, she has a friend, and she would say these words we didn't really understand and we'd say, 'okay'" (Anne's response, Intervention 7, 2-1-16). Additionally, at the conclusion of the fifth intervention, as students were leaving the carpet, one student pointed to another student in the class who stutters and asked Edith if she thought he had autism. Edith responded that she didn't think he did, that sometimes he just had a "hard time getting words out of his mouth" and couldn't "get his words out that good" (Intervention 5, 1-27-16).

While it is unclear if students were correctly inferring a diagnosis of autism, making these text-to-world connections (Harvey, & Goudvis, 2000) allowed students to connect their own, personal world to the virtual world of the story, and students were very excited to draw

these connections as they began to realize the value of having knowledge about autism and understanding those with the disorder:

> I had a friend, and I think that she has autism, and every time I see her she doesn't have anything to say, and I one time she actually – I think she actually one time said my name. But I play with her a lot. (Anne's response, Intervention 6, 1-29-16)

Students began to realize that this knowledge was not only useful for identifying autism in the real world, but was also useful for helping them *apply* this knowledge when interacting with others who may have autism. One student stated that the books helped her understand why her friend acts a certain way (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Another student added that now she understands what her friend from summer camp is "going through" and that she will never treat her badly again because now she knows what it feels like have autism (Intervention 10, 2-10-16). Ultimately, based solely on student response, it is unclear if these real world connections suggest that the books provided a way for students to identify autism in authentic situations, or the students were merely able to identify "difference" in their friends, and attributed these differences to autism simply because it was the only kind of diversity they were familiar with. Further exploration is needed to determine if students were able to use their knowledge and understanding to correctly identify those with autism in real-world contexts, or if they inferred diagnosis because they do not have enough experience learning about and identifying *difference* in general. However, responses do suggest that students were not only identifying diversity in others, but had learned to be accepting of those differences as well.

Analysis of Pre and Post-Intervention Student Interviews

The following section provides an analysis of individual student responses to pre and post-intervention interviews. The purpose of the pre-intervention interviews was to collect

baseline data concerning the prior knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs students held about autism in order to give a holistic view of the class' collective understanding of autism prior to the beginning of the study. This information helped inform the decision-making processes during teacher and researcher collaborative meetings. In this section (a) interview procedures are explained, (b) excerpts from pre-intervention interviews are provided, (c) excerpts from post-intervention interviews are provided, and (d) pre and post interviews are compared.

Individual Student Interview Procedures

Of the class' 19 total students, nine returned parental consent forms indicating that they could participate in pre and post-intervention interviews. Interviews were conducted with students on an individual basis, with pre-intervention interviews ranging from 2:40 to 7:44 minutes in length and post-interviews ranging from 3:22 to 7:18 minutes in length. Generally, interviews conducted after the interventions were completed were longer in length because students were able to provide more lengthy answers and explanations to the semi-structured questions from the Student Interview Protocol (Appendix B). Pre-intervention interviews were conducted from 11:15-12:00 on January 7, 2016, while post-intervention interviews were conducted from 11:15-12:00 on February 11-12, spanning two days due to students' lengthier responses. When conducting the interviews, I met with the students individually in a neighboring room, and after securing student assent, began asking questions. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Pre-Intervention Interviews

During their pre-intervention interviews, many of the students responded to questions simply by saying, "I don't know," especially Ryan, Kory, and Emily (all names are pseudonyms). Additionally, as I was a stranger at the time, many of the students were shy and

some did not interact as freely as they might if I had been a more familiar face, which may have attributed to the shorter lengths in responses. Additionally, during the pre-intervention interviews, many student responses were unrelated to the questions asked, with some students going on tangents to talk about some of their favorite hobbies and unconnected personal experiences. One student, Karen, who according to Mrs. Humphries, often does not speak, assented to the interviews but responded to the questions by either shrugging or making noises, so her responses were not included in the findings.

Prior knowledge and awareness of diversity. The students' pre-intervention interviews revealed that the students had almost no knowledge of autism prior to the study, with student responses indicating that they (a) had never heard the word "autism" before, or had heard the word before but didn't know what it meant, (b) had misconceptions about autism, or (c) had negative ideas about autism.

First, Ryan, Luke, and Karl replied that they had never heard the word "autism" before and didn't know what it meant (1-7-16). Similarly, when asked what she knew about autism, Anne replied, "Not very much, I don't really know what it means, but I've heard it" (1-7-16), and likewise, Kory replied, "maybe, I don't know" (1-7-16).

Second, Emily noted that she hadn't heard the word "autism" before, and wasn't sure what it meant, but thought that people with autism "might be mean" (1-7-16). Edith's pre-intervention interview indicated that she had some understanding of autism but also some misconceptions of the disorder. When asked if she knew what autism was, she responded: "I think autism means like, your personality" and that you can tell if someone has autism "just by looking at them" based on their "style of clothes" and their "shorter hair" or "shorter shorts" (1-7-16). During the interview, Edith told me she believed that I had autism because of my "clothes

style" and shorter haircut, again suggesting that she was unsure of what autism actually looks like and what characteristic behaviors it involves. However, Edith showed some understanding of the disorder, saying someone with autism might "not talk to anyone, they might be really shy." However, she also added that someone with autism might be "kind of mean" (1-7-16).

Third, Jason, who has an older brother with autism, responded that autism is "something where someone has some problems with some stuff and no problems with other stuff" (1-7-16). Even though he was able to identify that his brother has autism, he did not appear to have a lot of background knowledge on the subject, and he stated that he didn't know how people got autism or how they may act, apart from his personal experience of how he was treated by his brother: "This is how my brother acts. He kind of fights me. Kicking" (1-7-16).

Prior understandings of difference. Because of the students' limited prior knowledge of autism, the semi-structured interview prompts were modified so that students could answer the remaining questions based on their perception of people who are "different" in order to gauge their pre-conceived thoughts toward difference in general prior to the study. The only exception was Jason, who already had prior knowledge of autism, and was still asked questions specific to the disorder. Students' perceptions of what makes people different were vague, with students mostly noting external or physical differences such as skin color or clothing, suggesting that they had limited understanding that difference and diversity can be more than racial, ethnic, or cultural difference.

Anne noted that people are different because of exterior variances, stating that "they might have glasses," or they "might wear skinny pants instead of jeans," and she specifically mentioned that her friend "wore her hair up in a ponytail a lot, I wore mine down" (1-7-16). Ryan shared, "my friend has diabetes and no one else does. That makes her different" (1-7-16).

Karl, Emily, and Luke identified people who were different as having a different skin color like "white or black" (1-7-16), while Luke and Kory noted cultural or ethnic differences. Luke suggested people who are different may come from a different county and speak a different language, and Kory shared that he had a friend "from a different country. Mexico" (1-7-16). Edith responded that people with various levels of ability may be different: "One of my friends can't talk. They have something in their body that can't make them move right or talk. And they use things like this [signs]" (1-7-16).

Prior feelings toward acceptance and inclusion. Students' prior levels of acceptance toward others who are different were gauged by their responses to (a) how they would feel if someone who was different joined their class, (b) what they would do if that person was being mistreated, and (c) how they would interact with someone who is different.

First, when asked how they would feel if someone who was different joined their class, most of the responses were positive, noting that this would give them the opportunity to have a new friend, but several students showed apprehension and fear toward exposure to others who are different. Jason said that having a new student with autism or anyone who was different in the class would be "very strange" (1-7-16). Anne said that she would "feel kind of happy" for the new student, "because we have a good class" (1-7-16). Conversely, Edith stated that she would feel "kind of happy, but kind of not" because she liked "the way our class was before," but that having a new classmate could also be a good thing "because you might make a new friend" (1-7-16). Similarly, Kory said he would be "excited" about new student "because he could be one of my best friends," and Luke replied that he would feel "good, because we got someone who is different" (1-7-16). Contrastively, Karl expressed fear of people who are different, saying that he would hide his face with this Sponge Bob hat if someone new were added to the class because

people who are different may want to "beat you up" (1-7-16). Similarly, Jason expressed worry over having a student with autism in the classroom because that new student might want to "fight" him like his brother (1-7-16).

Second, When students were asked how they would react if they saw someone who was different being treated badly or being bullied, almost all students responded that they would come to the aid of that student, except for Ryan, who was unsure of how he would act. The students' well-versed and descriptive answers indicate that the subject of bullying is a familiar topic of conversation either in the classroom or school in general. Jason, Emily, and Luke responded that they would tell the bully to stop; Kory replied that he would tell the teacher, and Karl said he would "knock them [the bully] out" (1-7-16). Others shared how they would use their words to stop a bully. Edith replied, "I would just say 'stop that, you're being too mean, I don't like that,'" and Anne responded: "I would say 'it's mean to do that, so could you please stop'" (1-7-16).

Third, when asked if they would include someone who was different by asking them to play, responses indicated that students would try to include others who are different, but many students were unenthusiastic about asking people who were different to play because they may want to play in different or unappealing ways. Luke noted that it might be hard to play with someone who is different because they may "like different things like the slide, that's the thing that I hate. I like the swings" (1-7-16). Similarly, Jason pointed out "they may play games that you don't like. My brother likes lots of games [that I don't like]" (1-7-16). Anne noted that she would "feel good" about playing with people who were different, and also recognized they may play in different ways: "You could have some toys that you like to play with and it might be a little different than the animals [toys] they like to play with" (1-7-16). Ryan expressed positive

feelings about accepting and including people who were different, stating: "I would become their friend," but he also worried that "If other people won't be their friends and no one will, they will be left out" (1-7-16).

Summary of Findings from Pre-Interviews

Overall, student responses from the pre-intervention interviews indicated that the students had little to no knowledge of autism in general, and only some were able to identify examples of "difference" in others. For the most part, students had positive feelings toward interacting and accepting others who are different, showing enthusiasm for meeting and including new students and protecting them from others who may not be as accepting. However, some students did have preconceived worries and fears about interacting with people who are different, and worried that these differences may detract from their overall enjoyment of activities or class experiences.

Post-Intervention Interviews

During the post-interviews, most students answered every question, and responses were lengthier, and more detailed and focused. As I was no longer a stranger to the students, they also felt more comfortable interacting with me, except for Karen, who dissented to the interview, resulting in her responses not being included in the findings (as was the case in the pre-interviews). Additionally, since all students had been present during the interventions, questions were not modified under the more general terms of "difference," but specifically addressed autism and the students' feelings toward the disability at the completion of the intervention period. Furthermore, at the end of the post-intervention interviews, students were asked to reflect on how they felt about themselves now that the intervention was over.

Post knowledge and awareness of autism. Student post-intervention interviews indicated that students had developed awareness and newfound knowledge of autism at the

completion of the interventions and were able to (a) describe autism, and (b) identify characteristic behaviors of autism.

First, when students were asked what autism is, responses indicated that student awareness had altered from earlier, misconceived, and negative prior knowledge and conceptions to more knowledgeable awareness of the disorder. Anne noted, "It [autism] means there's something wrong with the person inside their brain, but it doesn't mean they're different all the time. They can have different disabilities than other people with autism" (2-11-16). She then further explained, "the way I think I can understand it is that they would do some different things that some of my other friends don't do" (2-11-16). Kory and Emily demonstrated understanding that autism is a spectrum disorder, noting that "there are different autisms" and that autism is "when people don't act the same way as other people" because "they don't talk the same language" (2-11-16). Similarly, Jason defined autism as when "you act different from other people" or "might do different things," noting: "You might do some things that other people are not good at, like math" (2-11-16). Likewise, Ryan stated, "It means different personality. You have a different type of life" (2-12-16). Finally, Luke stated, "It is something a lot of people do not have. It's not really bad" (2-11-16), indicating that the prior, more negative views and misconceptions may have been rectified through transactions with the texts.

Second, student responses from the post-intervention interviews also revealed students' knowledge of the characteristic behaviors of autism. Most predominantly, students gave the example that people with autism have an aversion to loud noises: "Every time loud noises come around, they [covers ears]" (Kory, 2-12-16). Emily added, "They usually sometimes scream or something, maybe because they don't like it, like I read this book *A friend like Simon* and he screamed" (2-11-16). Edith mentioned, "Well they would act kind of funny, like once the bell

rung they would like [covers her ears]", and "They might be really good at math or like sports a lot" (2-11-16). Emily responded: "They do some interesting things that other people don't do, like if the bell rang, they would probably cover their ears, and like, in the books we've read, like Darla, she ran around or she liked to bite things" (2-11-16). Additionally, Karl, Jason, Ryan, Kory, Luke, and Emily all stated that autism is something you are born with, and Anne and Edith took things a step further and identified that you can also possibly get autism through some kind of "poison" or "germs" in the environment, as was suggested in some of the books.

Post understandings of autism. When students were asked what someone with autism might look like in a familiar classroom setting, students were able to apply what they had learned from the books to actual classrooms, transferring knowledge from the virtual world into the real world. When asked what they thought everyone should know about autism, students were able to (a) describe what autism would look like in an authentic setting, and (b) identify what they would want others to understand about autism.

First, student responses indicated that they were able to explain what autism would look like in the real world. Anne reminded me that people with autism "have a way of hearing everything around them instead of one thing at a time, and they could start getting up and running around" (2-11-16). As we were talking, we heard the clanging of pots and pans from the cafeteria across the hallways and she added, "they'd probably get up and run around because of the loud noises from the kitchen" (2-11-16). Similarly, Jason was able to apply his knowledge to classroom-specific instances, stating that someone with autism may cover his ears when there's a fire drill" or "because of the bell. It's loud" (2-11-16). Edith mentioned that students with autism might spend time looking at "their pencils and crayons and arranging them really good" (2-11-16) and Ryan speculated that they may "make noises" or "hum at their desk" (2-12-16).

Contrastively, Karl and Luke noted more dangerous characteristic behaviors of autism that were interestingly pulled from personal, life experiences with other students. Karl identified that people with autism "might jump up and down in their chairs," while adding, "I don't do that stuff, I'm not dangerous. Jumping up and down in their chairs, they might break their necks" (2-11-16). Similarly, Luke responded that people with autism might "hurt people and bite people. Cover their ears when the bell rings. They would get up from their desk" (2-11-16).

Second, student responses indicated that students were able to identify ways they were similar to others with autism. Edith pointed out that someone with autism might like cupcakes or the color pink because "one of the characters in the – in one of the stories is kind of like me. We both like pink" (2-11-16). However, she was also able to identify that she didn't share some character's idiosyncratic behaviors, stating that she would not engage in the "same kind of arrangement" or organization of materials because " I really don't like to clean my room" (2-11-16). Emily also pointed out, "I am sometimes like people with autism. I don't like loud noises" (2-11-16), and Luke noted, "I talk normal," but "sometimes I can scream" (2-11-16). Ryan responded that like some of the characters with autism, "I'm a little bit smart. I'm good at knowing what animals say" (2-12-16), and Jason pointed out that he and his brother who has autism often enjoy the same games, but that sometimes, he "might not like things that they like to play" (2-11-16).

Third, when students were asked to identify what they wanted others to know about autism, student responses indicated their belief that even though someone may have autism, they still share a common humanity with us all and deserve to be understood and accepted. Anne noted: "We're the same on the inside," and that others with autism "could like the same things as you, and they could play with you a lot" (2-11-16). Edith said, "I'd like them to understand that I

don't like loud noises. *I* really don't like loud noises. I would want them to understand I'm really kind, my favorite color is blue…" (2-11-16). Ryan said, "I would tell them they there are also good things" (2-12-16) about being friends with someone who has autism. Finally, Anne responded that she would want others to know that it "doesn't matter about the way they talk or the way they are on the outside, it means that they're all the same on the inside" (2-11-16).

Post feelings toward acceptance and inclusion for autism. Toward the end of the interviews, students expressed (a) a desire to protect classmates with autism, (b) gladness that they now had knowledge of autism, and (c) excitement or worry over having future classmates with autism. Interestingly, these responses were tied not to experiences learned from the books, but personal, real world experiences with others they presumed had autism.

Almost all of the students' pre-intervention interviews indicated that they would intervene if someone who was different were being bullied. In comparison, students' post-intervention interviews all again indicated that they would stand up for someone with autism who was being mistreated, only this time, responses suggested that students would do so in a more active, physical way, using not their words, but their bodies to protect them. Kory and Luke indicated they would tell a teacher, but other students took on a more active, protective role, with Emily and Jason saying they would "stand up for" the person with autism, and Karl asserting, "I would try to help my friend" (2-11-16), while Edith declared that she would "step in front of them if someone was getting bullied" (2-11-16).

Additionally, many students expressed gladness for their newfound knowledge of autism. Edith said, "I've learned a lot, and autism is kind of really fun" (2-11-16), and Ryan responded, "I've changed because I get to make friends with them [people with autism]" (2-12-16). Even Jason, who during the pre-intervention interviews had expressed apprehension and fear for

meeting new people with autism said he was "a little happy" about meeting someone new with autism, but also added, "I hope he does not act like my brother, because my brother fights me sometimes" (2-11-16). Finally, Anne responded:

> I think it makes me understand more about my friend and the other kids in this school with autism. Now I understand that they might not understand what I am saying, but they are still my friends no matter what. (2-11-16)

Similarly, Kory also expressed positive anticipation for the future, saying he would be "happy" to meet someone with autism and that he would "ask them to play" (2-12-16).

Student responses indicated that they had a positive view toward interacting with someone who has autism, but that they were also cognizant of the difficulties associated with inclusion. Luke pointed out that he would enjoy having someone with autism in the classroom because that person would "get what's fair" and in return, he [Luke] could "get things too" (2-11-16). Edith said she would "feel excited" to have someone with autism in her class and that "they could both be kind to each other" and have the opportunity to "sit down and enjoy each other's company" (2-11-16). However, she also indicated that even though she would ask someone with autism to play, and that she "would just wait until they answered," she realized that interaction might be difficult, because "if they didn't answer you, that would be kind of hard," and "if they don't talk much, they won't answer many questions" (2-11-16). Similarly, Emily identified that having someone with autism in the classroom would be full of positives, like "playing with each other, helping, learning with each other," but that sometimes it would be difficult because "they will not play the same things that you want to play" (2-11-16). Additionally, Karl noted that "you could play Wii together," but that someone with autism "might pinch you in the face" like his big brother did to him (2-11-16).

Additionally, responses suggest that students may be able to use their newfound knowledge to identify autism in authentic contexts, but that prior experience with autism may have a negative impact on students' feelings toward accepting and including other students with autism in the future. During her interview, Anne claimed that she knew her friend had autism based on "The way she acts," stating, "She talks different, she has a different way of talking, but she knows a few words like us, but some of the letters get mixed up" (2-11-16). While it is unclear if this diagnosis was accurate, this friend's name was mentioned several times by various students during both the interventions and post-interviews. However, Anne's interaction with this friend was positive, leading her to happily anticipate meeting other people with autism in the future: "the way she acts to me, it feels pretty fun to have a friend with autism" (2-11-16).

Conversely, Karl identified the same student by name, and recounted his pre-school experiences with her. His experience, however, indicated that he had a negative view toward having someone with autism in a future class. He stated, "I would feel mad, because I don't want to sit there and hear them call me names," explaining that the student he knew "called me some different name that's not my name" (2-11-16). Similarly, Jason, referring to his experiences with his older brother who has autism worried that a new student with autism might act like his him, and "might fight me" (2-11-16). He added, "If they screamed at me, I might not like it" (2-11-16). In much the same way, Luke identified another student with autism that he knew from Adventure Club and summer camp, who also went to their school that "covers his ears when something happens, and he kicks, and bites, and hurts" (2-11-16). It was interesting to note that some students spoke of positive life experiences with autism, which led to more hopeful and excited views toward meeting others with the disorder in the future. Contrastively, others spoke

of experiences that were more negative in nature, which led to a worrisome outlook toward interacting with others with autism.

Confoundedly, some students seemed to be inferring an incorrect diagnosis on friends they knew who were different, but not necessarily autistic. Edith mentioned, "I think I have somebody else who has autism, she just can't walk and she can't talk. She uses signs like this [signs]" (2-11-16), suggesting that her friend was possibly deaf or had some form of communicative disorder, which could have been mistaken for autism. Additionally, Kory again mentioned his friend from Mexico, wondering if he had autism "because he did not talk very much, and did not play what I would play" (2-12-16). However, upon prompting, I found that his friend spoke another language, and may have just been learning English, which denoted limited communication skills, not necessarily autism.

While students' pre-intervention interviews indicated that they did not know what autism was and did not know anyone who had autism prior to the study, the responses in which students were able to identify autism in their friends and acquaintances suggests that perhaps the information in the books enabled the students to put a name to the behaviors and personal, life experiences they had prior to the interventions. Additionally, virtual interactions with the characters in the books seemed to reinforce already positive feelings from these real-world interactions for students like Edith and Anne. These experiences also may have worked to soften previously negative views toward autism that occurred based on these prior life experiences. While students like Karl, Jason, Luke expressed concern regarding future encounters with autism, their additional responses also indicated a more positive outlook toward autism overall.

Summary of Findings From Post-Interviews

In contrast to the pre-interviews, the post-interviews indicated that students had a strong awareness for autism, which was denoted through their ability to define and describe the disorder and its associated characteristics. In comparison to the pre-interviews, students were able to identify "difference" by providing examples of how someone with autism may act in a classroom, and they were also able to identify others in the real world that may have the disorder. Students' thoughts toward interacting with and including others with autism were again, mostly positive, with students articulating the benefits of being friends with someone who has autism while also being cognizant of the difficulties associated with the disorder. However, perhaps the most interesting finding from these interviews dealt with how students negotiated positive perceptions of autism depicted through the books with preconceived negative life experiences with autism from the real world. While holistic responses suggested a process of growth indicated through an increase in student knowledge, awareness, and understanding, acceptance was an ideal embraced by many, but not all of the students.

Conclusion

Findings described in this chapter provide supporting evidence concerning how transaction with diverse texts can encourage transformative possibilities for students in elementary settings. First, data from observational and methodological files, class discussions, and representative student journals were used to inform research question 1: How can children's picture books about autism be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary classroom? Researcher notes in the form of observational files were used to describe first-hand accounts of the 10 interventions. This included information on how creating a safe, warm, encouraging environment is essential for allowing students to freely respond to texts, and how

student engagement with texts can be manifested over time through enraptured silence and "expressive engagement" (Sipe, 2002). Methodological files recorded text selection procedures, teacher and researcher collaboration, and modifications to the interventions over time. They also provided thick description detailing how transactional response can be implemented in a second grade classroom to provide students with transformative opportunities through both aesthetic and efferent response (Cai 2008; Rosenblatt, 1978).

Combining an analysis of class discussions and journal responses with the methodological and observational data provided information regarding how transactions can increase over time through the cultivation of both aesthetic and efferent, critical response. This included the use of student journals (Galda, et al., 2000; Martinez, et al., 1992; McMahon, et al., 1997), journal prompts (Galda, et al., 2000; Hirsch, 1997), semi-structured discussion questions, and anchor charts (Sigmon, et al., 2016). Additionally, the role of the teacher and her ability to cultivate a context for transactional response also informed research question 1, as Mrs. Humphries' willingness to release control and power to the students allowed her to become a "literary curator" (McGee, et al., 1994) that facilitated discussion. This role enabled her to provide students with transformational opportunities by encouraging students to co-construct meaning and to engage in a critical analysis of both text and self.

Verbal responses during whole class discussions, representative samples of student journal entries, and researcher observational files provided triangulated data to inform research question 2: What types of responses do primary students have when transacting with children's picture books about autism? Four themes were aggregated from qualitative analysis of whole class student responses and representative journal entries that included: (1) developing understanding of difference, (2) defining and explaining autism, (3) journeying through the text,

and (4) affirming care and responsibility, and provided evidence to support how students responses changed over time as they transacted with the texts.

Additionally, the representative sample of student pre and post-intervention interviews provided supplemental data concerning the types of responses students had when encountering these diverse texts prior to the intervention and after the completion of the study, and informed both research questions. Individual responses from both pre and post interviews were compared to provide contextual information and supporting evidence for possible student growth, and denoted how responses changed over time. Student responses during both the class discussions and pre and post-interviews were used concurrently to provide evidence of students' shifting perceptions and views toward those who are different, especially for individuals with autism.

Findings suggest that encouraging students to aesthetically and efferently transact with diverse texts can provide students with transformative opportunities, and student responses indicated a process of growth in relation to difference that included increasing levels of awareness, understanding, and acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000). The following chapter provides a deeper analysis and discussion of these findings and how they relate to the research questions.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary learners transact with diverse texts, and if these transactions can present transformative opportunities. A formative design methodology (Reinking & Bradley, 2008) utilizing Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978) informed my intervention design, which allowed students to transact both aesthetically and efferently with diverse texts about autism. By triangulating and comparing the data, I inductively and holistically examined these transactions to explore how student responses to these diverse texts changed over time. Evidentiary findings provided answers to the following two research questions:

1. How can children's picture books about autism be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary classroom?

2. What types of responses do primary students have when transacting with children's picture books about autism?

Within this study, I sought to analyze students' transactions with diverse texts, which involved students' responses to books about autism. Researchers suggest that transaction can lead to transformative possibilities (Cai, 2008; Galda, et al., 2000; Galda, 2013), which occur when students aesthetically connect to a text, and then critically analyze their evocations to it in order to confirm or refute these constructs and effectively transform them (Cai, 2008). However, as I was only concerned with how diverse texts create the *opportunity* for transformation, not whether or not transformation occurred, I did not then examine the students' responses to the evocations themselves, as would have been necessary for a study focusing on transformation (Galda, 1990b). I instead focused on examining the kinds of responses and evocations that

occurred as students critically interpreted the texts, without specifically focusing on students'

critical interpretations of their evocations alone (Rosenblatt, 1978). Put simply, I wanted to know

how students responded to the texts themselves, not how they responded to their interpretations

of the texts.

Examining student responses over time indicated that transacting with diverse texts

initiated a "process of growth" (p. 67) and learning (Rosenblatt, 2005/1956) evidenced by an

increase in knowledge, understanding, and overall acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000) of

autism. Findings offered insight into how responses to *texts* can provide initial opportunities that

may later lead to explorations of *self* and transformative possibilities. In this concluding chapter,

I present a discussion of the findings in order to provide insight into how cultivating

transactional opportunities with diverse texts can provide transformative opportunities and

possibilities for student growth (research question 1), and I provide a subsequent critique of the

types of responses students had when interacting with diverse texts about autism (research

question 2). I also present a summary of insights related to the study's limitations, significance

and implications, and additional areas for exploration.

Cultivating Transactional Opportunities

For my first research question, I sought to explore how transactions with children's

picture books about autism may be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary

classroom. Analysis of the three data sources (e.g. class discussions, representative student

journal entries, and representative pre and post-interviews) and contextualized information from

both observational and methodological files provided data which led to a deeper understanding

of transactional response and how it can be used to encourage transformational opportunities.

This provided insight into how (a) increasing awareness cultivates deeper connections with

diverse texts, (b) prior perceptions and experiences influence evocation and response, and (c) diverse texts provide necessary virtual experiences with diversity. In the following sections, I discuss the significance and implications of these findings.

Increasing Awareness Cultivates Deeper Connections With Diverse Texts

In order to facilitate the kind of transaction that researchers suggest is necessary for any transformative opportunities, interventions were purposefully designed to elicit aesthetic responses first, before any form of critical or efferent response to text or self (Galda, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1995). However, initial responses suggest students had difficulty connecting to the characters and creating personal evocations to the texts beyond simple, mildly aesthetic responses that were seemingly unrelated to the topic of autism. As these texts were the first experiences most of the students had with autism, they had no prior understandings from which to draw the desired evocations from. The students' lack of knowledge and experience with autism and difference in general hindered their initial ability to create meaningful, personal reactions to the texts, and without evocations to critically reflect on and respond to, there was no opportunity for transformation. Additionally, opportunities for any form of student growth and learning could not be initiated until students were given enough "virtual experiences" with autism and diversity to then personally connect with the texts in order to begin developing a growing knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of autism.

Since prompts were designed to elicit aesthetic responses, students were essentially being forced to emotionally connect to characters they felt they could not relate to at the time. Thus, early in the study, the few aesthetic responses that emerged were disconnected from the text, and featured seemingly unrelated responses concerning the parts of the texts students felt they *could* relate to, such as having a brother or sister, or wanting a dog. Additionally, the few aesthetic

responses that did emerge about autism reinforced this lack of awareness and understanding as students tried "fix" the characters to make them more relatable and "normal" so that they could better connect with them. At the beginning of the study, students simply did not know enough about autism to be able to personally connect with the characters that expressed this difference, making initial aesthetic stance very difficult.

Because the students first needed to gain knowledge and awareness of autism in order to understand, connect with, and enjoy the texts, the first several interventions were dominated by efferent responses. It is important to note that these efferent responses emerged even though every effort was made to elicit aesthetic responses through journal and discussion prompts. The students' tendency to guide discussions toward a more efferent stance during these initial interventions suggest that while an initial aesthetic response may be appropriate for interacting with books (Cai, 2008; Galda, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1995) depicting characters that are similar or familiar to the students, a converging efferent and aesthetic stance must be taken when encountering texts illustrating unfamiliar topics like diversity.

An initial, efferent stance toward diverse books suggests that first, students may need to read with the purpose of trying to gain awareness and knowledge (Rosenblatt 1978) about autism in order to later, develop a deeper understanding of the disorder through aesthetic response. Initial responses to the texts indicated students were "developing understandings of difference" (theme 1) and "defining and explaining autism" (theme 2) and it's corresponding characteristic behaviors early into the study. However, it was not until students had developed a knowledge base for understanding autism several interventions into the study that they were able to then move beyond this "superficial awareness" (Prater, et al., 2006) of autism to connect to the characters with autism on a more meaningful level. Reaching this efferent level of understanding

then enabled students to respond more aesthetically as they identified similarities to the characters, and students were able to emotionally connect to characters by stepping into their shoes in order to develop a "better understanding of themselves, of others, and of social issues" (Prater, et al., 2006, p. 21) necessary for student learning and growth.

Therefore, while the current research advocates the importance of aesthetic response, or views the two as separate entities while discounting the importance of efferent stance (Cai, 2008), findings suggest an efferent stance should be used in conjunction with aesthetic response when introducing students to diverse texts or unfamiliar groups of characters who express "difference." Without the prerequisite knowledge and awareness of autism derived from an efferent stance, it is very unlikely that students would have been able to aesthetically connect with the texts at a deeper level as the study progressed, or to create the necessary evocations needed to develop a growing understanding and acceptance of difference. This lends insight into how efferent and aesthetic stances can intersect to create a context for transformative possibilities, as Cai (2008) suggested was lacking in the existing research.

Prior Perceptions and Experiences Influence Evocation and Response

Once students possessed the necessary, prerequisite knowledge and understanding of autism, they were able to begin "journeying through the text" (theme 3) more aesthetically. During this time, students more easily connected with the texts on a personal level, and evocations emerged that were built on (a) an emotional reaction to the virtual experiences of diversity depicted in the story, or (b) an emotional reaction to the text that was triggered by a prior, authentic experience with autism. Findings here suggest that diverse texts can in fact give students powerful "virtual experiences" that may not otherwise be afforded to them in the real

world (Galda, 1990a), which can then allow them to fill the "holes" in their "landscapes" (Greene, 1994) pertaining to diversity.

In this study, after gaining knowledge and understanding of autism, students were able to provide personal evocations to the texts that were based on prior or current interactions with friends and acquaintances they presumed had the disorder, and they were able to describe detailed experiences with autism in general. These responses made it unclear if students truly had no real world experience with autism to draw from prior to the beginning of the study as pre-intervention interview responses and the lack of evocations indicated. It also suggested that the students may in fact have had previous, formative encounters with autism and simply did not know the label for the behaviors they encountered prior to experiencing these texts. Therefore, it was difficult to determine if students' evocations to the texts reflected the virtual experiences of autism presented through the books, or if the books provided students with the necessary awareness needed to truly understand their own, real world experiences. However, regardless of whether or not students' individual evocations to the text were built on actual, real world interactions, it was evident that students' prior experiences and perceptions about autism informed and shaped their personal reactions to the texts (Rosenblatt, 1978).

As students transacted with the texts, they were asked to critically analyze both the texts and their evocations to the texts in order to affirm or refute their reactions (Cai, 2008; Rosenblatt, 2005/1956). During this time, student responses were highly individualized and reflected various levels of understanding and acceptance depending on the scope and influence of these prior, formative experiences. Students who had very positive, real world experiences with autism shared evocations to the text that were more understanding and accepting in nature. These positive perceptions were reinforced by the ideologies in the books and affirmed by the other

students during class discussion of the texts. Conversely, some students began to share evocations to the texts that were more negative in nature due to their undesirable prior life experiences with autism. Many of these responses created dissonance (Beach, 1997; Sipe & McGuire, 2006) in the group conversations, as the negative life experiences were compared to the positive virtual experiences depicted through the texts. These students expressed apprehension for future interactions with others who have autism as a result of these damaging, formative experiences. However, it is important to note that students who expressed these negative evocations also responded in positive and accepting ways during the interventions and interviews. They also questioned and asked for clarification to help explain their personal experiences. This suggests that gaining a better awareness and understanding of autism through the books, and experiencing a more positive portrayal of autism (albeit virtual) helped explain and assuage negative evocations that were formed as a result of harmful, real world experiences.

Additionally, while harmful prior experiences and misunderstandings may have caused students to create some negative evocations to the texts about autism, findings suggest that reading and discussing the books also provide positive experiences with autism, which helped students critically reflect on their past experiences and work toward rectifying these negative feelings and fears. Providing students a space to reflect on these texts and on personal evocations supported Prater, et al.'s (2006) assertion that "acceptance of those who are different and acceptance of one's own feelings and attitudes – requires a form of emotional involvement" (p. 21) that may only be achieved through a transactional response including both aesthetic, emotional, and personal evocations, and then a more critical, efferent analysis of those evocations and the self.

Ultimately, while some students did show resistance and fear at the prospect of interacting with others with autism in the future as a result of prior, negative experiences, their responses over time indicated that they also developed positive perceptions of autism constructed from the virtual experiences presented in the books. Therefore, findings suggest that reading these texts provided students the necessary levels of awareness and experience needed to explain and understand the previously perceived "negative" behaviors of autism in a more positive way, and discussion allowed them to reflect on, and reform their evocations (Rosenblatt, 1995).

This more positive perception of autism may be because the books provided students with the opportunity to virtually interact with autism and then discuss their reactions collectively, co-constructing knowledge and response in a safe space without the immediate pressure of responding to a similar situation in real life (Harding, 1937). Or, it may be that these books helped students become more aware and understanding of the disorder, which provided a sense of control over previous, difficult or unfamiliar life situations (Rosen, 1986; 1992). Regardless, findings suggest that transacting with diverse texts did provide students with new, positive, virtual experiences with autism, and presented the opportunity for students to examine their personal evocations to the texts which helped rectify previously damaging assumptions and perceptions of difference, albeit not entirely.

Diverse Texts Provide Necessary Virtual Experiences with Diversity

Findings from this study provided evidence to support the idea that diverse texts can provide students with experiences they have not yet been given in the real world (Galda, 1990a). While student responses made their prior exposure to autism unclear, pre-intervention interview data did indicate that students had a very narrowly focused definition of "difference," and were only able to note external or obvious indicators of diversity such as skin color, age, or clothing.

The initial lack of awareness that diversity is not necessarily an outward, obvious manifestation made introducing and discussing texts about autism more difficult, as it is a neurological disorder that often lacks outward indication of difference. This made describing and defining autism and its features as a spectrum disorder very abstract, and presented a very new form of difference that extended beyond the more familiar, external manifestations of diversity.

While transacting with these diverse texts, student responses suggested that they have not had enough opportunities to engage with texts that depict diverse groups, or enough life experiences interacting with others who express difference. In a similar way that student responses indicated conflicting life experiences with autism, class discussions and post-intervention interviews provided conflicting findings concerning student knowledge of "difference" in general. As stated earlier, midway through the study, student responses began to reveal that they were identifying autism in others by diagnosing friends and acquaintances with the disorder. This suggests that (a) diverse books about autism provide awareness and knowledge that can be transferred from the story world to the real world, and that (b) students need additional virtual experiences to identify and distinguish between various forms of difference.

Responses suggest that diverse books provided a viable tool for initiating student learning and growth by increasing student awareness and understanding of autism. Increasing awareness of autism enabled students to apply what they learned about the disorder and its characteristic behaviors to real world settings, effectively carrying something from the secondary story world into the real world as Galda (2013) suggests may happen after transaction. This was supported by student responses during class discussions and interviews, in which students were able to correctly identify individuals as having autism in the real world. While it was not possible to verify a diagnosis for all of the friends the students named, Mrs. Humphries was able to

corroborate the diagnosis of one name that was brought up, as he was a student that went to the school. Moreover, one additional child was identified frequently by the students, which could suggest that students were indeed correctly identifying autism based on their newfound knowledge from the books. However, these responses could also imply that at one point in the study, a single student inferred a diagnosis on a mutual acquaintance and other students simply validated that assumption. This is similar to Bleich's (1975) belief that any response is collaboratively constructed, and Mills' (1976) suggestion that students' evocations must be socially accepted by others. The students' readiness and excitement toward knowing the named student with autism during Intervention 7 may have given the students a sense of importance and ownership over their newfound knowledge, and the "correctness" of the diagnosis may have only needed to be validated by a few for others to follow suit.

Conversely, the students' inclination to diagnose their friends and acquaintances with autism may suggest that the books simply provided students with awareness of *one* kind of difference. Student responses may indicate that they have not been given enough experiences, virtual or otherwise to be able to identify "difference" accurately in the real world, thus were unable to distinguish between individuals with autism and other diverse groups that may share some common behavioral characteristics of the disorder. While this study provided students with *one* experience with *one* diverse group, students may be unaware of the additional disorders and diversity that can also exist in the real world, particularly concerning difference that may be less visible or covert, like autism. This lack of experience with diversity (Prater, et al., 2006) may have prompted a diagnosis of difference based on the limited knowledge received about autism from the books.

The notion that students may have deficits concerning diversity was manifested through

student responses in which they did not understand that (a) differences should not be "fixed" or wished away, (b) you can be similar to individuals with autism without having autism yourself, (c) everyone can understand individuals with autism, not just those who express this difference, and (d) there are many different kinds of difference that reach beyond the one disability that was illustrated through the texts. This notion was also supported by evidence from the pre-intervention interviews, in which students had difficulty defining "difference" in others beyond visible, external variances such as skin color, language, ethnicity, or dress. These pre-intervention interviews suggest that less visible differences such as variation in ability or background were not considered by most of the student prior to the study. Autism is a neurological disorder, and sometimes lacks outward manifestation of difference. These often covert, neurological differences make autism more difficult to diagnose and identify in others, and other diverse groups may also share similar defining characteristics. This could lead to misidentification and misdiagnosis of the disorder in others, especially if students lack the awareness needed to distinguish between autism and other, similar disabilities or diverse groups.

Student responses during the interventions and post-interviews suggest that the characteristics students were using to identify autism in others could be attributed to many different diverse groups, not just specifically autism. For example, students rationalized their thinking by explaining that the individual they thought had autism spoke differently, used sign language, or was very quiet. While these could be characteristic behaviors of autism, they could also be attributed to other forms of difference or diverse groups not addressed in the books. Student responses suggest far-reaching implications for difference in general, supporting the belief that students are not presented with enough virtual or life opportunities to experience and explore difference (Leininger, et al., 2010; Prater, et al., 2006) and therefore, do not know how to

respond to diversity in either context. This points to a pervasive need for continuing to utilize diverse texts in the classroom in order to provide students with virtual experiences aimed at increasing their understanding and awareness of diverse groups.

Furthermore, the notion that students may have deficits in experiences with diversity suggests that students should be afforded many more opportunities to explore difference, reaching beyond the scope of cultural diversity, which often depicts characters with more visible, external differences. These findings support the argument that "diverse texts" should include books representing less traditionally viewed diverse groups, such as characters with different religions, backgrounds, ability, and language (Boyd, et al., 2015). This would help ensure that other variances of difference are correctly identified, would help safeguard against one type of diversity being privileged over another.

Concluding Thoughts on Transaction and Transformation

Data from this study provided insight into how children's picture books about autism may be used to create transformative opportunities in an elementary classroom. Findings indicate that while transacting with diverse texts may create the beginnings of transformative opportunities, we cannot expect students to become understanding and accepting of diversity until they truly understand why this diverse concept warrants their empathy. Students who have not been afforded real world experiences with diversity (Leininger, et al., 2010; Prater, et al., 2006) may initially be unable to create evocations to the texts on an aesthetic level due to a lack of awareness and understanding of difference. Put simply, if we want students to *feel* they must first internalize the knowledge needed to *understand*. Encouraging a converging efferent and aesthetic stance toward diverse texts could allow students to gain pertinent knowledge and awareness necessary to truly understand and connect with diverse characters and individuals on a

more meaningful level. This in turn would enable students to create deeper evocations to a text, which could later be discussed and analyzed, creating the context for transformative possibilities.

Additionally, findings indicate that any level of learning and growth is highly individualized, and student evocations and responses are dependent upon the scope and influence of prior, formative experiences with autism and how they relate to the virtual experiences presented in the texts. Findings suggest that diverse texts may be powerful enough to provide students with "virtual experiences" of difference to help mitigate a lack of real world experience with diversity. However, further exploration is needed to determine the extent to which diverse books can help students critically examine their personal evocations and prior experiences with difference in order to rectify negative, prior perceptions.

Findings also suggest that while these texts can provide students with virtual experiences of diversity, students need more opportunities to transact with these kinds of books in order to gain a deeper understanding and awareness of "difference" in general. Further research, which examines students' prior feelings toward difference and their personal evocations to diverse texts is needed to determine the power books can have toward shaping students' ability to explain, appreciate, and distinguish between various kinds of difference. This would shed further light onto how transacting with diverse texts may lay a foundation for future, transformative possibilities.

Transactional Responses to Diverse Texts

The purpose of research question 2 was to uncover the types of responses that primary students had when transacting with children's picture books about autism. I examined student responses across three data sets (e.g. class discussions, representative student journal entries, and representative pre and post-interviews) in order to determine how students responded to diverse

texts, and to determine if responses indicated changes in learning or growth over time (Rosenblatt, 1978; 2005/1956). Findings suggest that specifically when transacting with texts about autism, students must be encouraged to move beyond simple awareness and superficial knowledge of the characteristics of autism toward a deeper understanding of the characters and the disability, and finally, toward levels of acceptance. For the purpose of this study, this process of growth and learning was manifested through the ways student responses exhibited positive perceptions toward diversity and developing levels of knowledge/awareness, understanding, and acceptance of autism similar to Prater and Dyches' (2000) three proposed levels of introspection.

Findings indicated that as students transacted with the texts, they were (1) developing understandings of difference, (2) defining and explaining autism, (3) journeying through the text, and (4) affirming care and responsibility. While these four themes were present throughout all interventions, specific themes occurred more and less frequently at various points in the study. Thematic understandings of student responses provided evidence of an evolving process of growth and learning (Rosenblatt, 2005/1956) that occurred while students transacted with diverse texts about autism. These thematic understandings suggest that students were (a) gaining awareness through an insightful view of diversity, (b) reflecting on similarities to gain an understanding of difference, and (c) using texts as a reflexive tool and gateway toward acceptance. In the following sections, I discuss the significance and implications of these findings.

Gaining Awareness Through an Insightful View of Diversity

Prior to the study, pre-intervention interviews indicated that as a whole, the students had very limited understanding of autism, and some students held misconceived ideas and negative perceptions of difference in general. As stated in Chapter 4, student responses indicated they did

not know the word "autism" or they claimed they had heard it before and didn't know what it meant. This lack of knowledge was also reflected during the whole class discussion portions of the interventions. At the beginning of the study, themes 1 and 2 were most prevalent across responses, as students were beginning to develop new knowledge and understandings of the disorder. During this time more than any other, students were navigating new information about autism presented to them through the texts, and the majority of their responses were efferent in nature, and reflected their attempts to ask questions in order to clarify and define what autism is. By asking questions and identifying and explaining characteristic behaviors of autism, students' responses indicated that they were "developing understanding of difference" (theme 1) and "defining and explaining autism" (theme 2) in order to increase their knowledge and awareness of the disorder.

Responses indicated that students were actively trying to construct knowledge about autism by asking questions and using clarifying statements. Statements also reflected initial confusion and misconception, including a desire to "fix" the characters with autism. Identifying autism as a disease that needed to be "cured" reinforced the lack of awareness students initially had toward autism, but also showed their attempt to aesthetically connect with the characters through their inclination to help them in some way. Furthermore, these particular responses suggest that students could not yet aesthetically and emotionally connect and relate to the "different" characters because they did not yet have the necessary knowledge and awareness needed to understand them or the disorder. Therefore, awareness was a critical first step toward possible growth and more positive perceptions toward difference.

As students began to develop knowledge of autism, they were able to move to a higher level of awareness depicted through responses that defined autism as a neurological, spectrum

disorder, with predictable, distinguishable patterns of behavior and characteristics. The students'

ability to begin identifying recurring characteristic behaviors of autism such as self-

stimulating/idiosyncratic behaviors, emotional and social behaviors, and varying levels of

communicative skills demonstrated the students' growing awareness. This increasing knowledge

suggests that a level of introspection involving a basic awareness and knowledge of difference

presented through diverse texts is the first step toward student growth and toward adopting more

understanding and accepting perceptions of difference.

Reflecting on Similarities to Gain an Understanding of Difference

Toward the middle of the study, student responses most heavily reflected theme 3.

Responses indicated that students were "journeying through the text" (theme 3) and developing

deeper connections with the characters that had autism. Emerging understandings of the

characters with autism and the disorder itself were built on the earlier foundation of awareness

that was cultivated during the first several interventions. Once students were aware of the

characteristic behaviors of autism, they were better able to understand the characters, which gave

them an insider's perspective into the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the characters with

autism in the story. Without knowledge, there is no understanding. Allowing students time to

cultivate their awareness ultimately led to deeper levels of understanding and aesthetic response

as the study progressed, as evidenced through students' continual inclination to respond more

aesthetically rather than efferently as the study went on.

Students demonstrated understanding of autism by first, "journeying into the text" and

using the books as a "window" (Bishop, 1990) to gain an insider's view of how characters with

autism may act or feel. This understanding enabled students to make connections and

comparisons across texts and across various characters that were introduced. However, this

understanding was highly contextualized and bound to the text, and still contained some efferent responses concerning story structure and character development.

As the study continued and students were introduced to more diverse texts, students began to demonstrate a deeper level of understanding by "journeying out of the text" and making connections that were less contextually driven. During this time, students were able to connect the text and characters to themselves and their lives as individuals. While initial connections reflected the recognition of external, basic, physical commonalities with characters, responses later developed into deeper, personal connections regarding the similarities shared with the characters. This suggests that the students were beginning to use the texts as a "mirror" (Bishop, 1990) to view themselves, and had begun to not only identify those who were different, but to identify themselves within those differences (Galda, et al., 2013).

Ultimately, students' responses suggest that they attained a final level of understanding, which involved "journeying out of the text" in order to effectively use the books as a point of departure to extend understandings from the text into the real world. This suggests students were able to step beyond the context of a single story or character in order to transfer their understanding of the virtual world to the real world as Galda (2013) suggests may happen after transaction. During this time, books were viewed both as "window" and a "mirror" (Bishop, 1990; Galda, 1980; 1998) as students embraced the stories and characters as a reflection of real life, effectively blurring the lines between the virtual world of the text and the real world. During this time, responses were primarily aesthetic, and indicated that students moved beyond a superficial knowledge of autism to a deeper understanding of the disorder and how it affected the characters, allowing students to more readily connect with and empathize with the characters and the texts on a personal level, which provided a gateway toward acceptance.

Using Texts as a Reflexive Tool and Gateway Toward Acceptance

Student responses during the final interventions most heavily reflected theme 4 as students were "affirming care and responsibility" (theme 4) for both the characters in the books with autism, and by extension, for others with autism in the real world. Student responses reflected a desire to "explain the rules" of autism to less knowledgeable peers, and to include others with autism. This suggests that students reached a final level of introspection by exhibiting acceptance toward difference that was built upon earlier, necessary levels of awareness and understanding.

However, while collective responses from the interventions are similar to Prater and Dyches' (2000) proposed three levels of introspection (e.g. awareness, understanding, and acceptance), individual student responses during the intervention and post-interviews support Prater, et al's (2006) caution that not all students may be able to reach the final level of acceptance:

> It is quite possible that many people can be aware of human diversity and can understand
> the nature of specific disabilities yet never come fully to accept those who are different
> from themselves in one way or another. (p. 21-22)

Collective student responses during the interventions suggest that the class was able to work together to co-construct meaning and understanding of autism under the watchful eye of the teacher and more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Such group interaction and discussion did allow students to move from their "actual" levels of cognitive ability into "potential" levels as a whole (Vygotsky, 1978) in order to initiate growth and collective understanding of autism.

However, an examination of individual responses during interventions and interviews also depicted various levels of introspection, suggesting that any process of learning and growth

is highly individualized. Individual student responses suggest that some students were able to reach differing levels of understanding and acceptance more quickly than others who were still developing an awareness of the disorder late into the study. Additionally, some students were able to embrace accepting and positive perceptions of autism early on, while others remained apprehensive and fearful toward autism even at the conclusion of the study. This supports Rosenblatt's theory (1978) that transaction with a text is highly individualized due to the prior experiences, feelings, and beliefs students bring when they interact with a text, and that a single interpretation of a text can differ depending on students' previous experiences and preconceived notions. Additionally, the presence of formative experiences with autism prior to the study may have hindered some students' ability to be accepting of difference.

Findings also suggest that students could collectively achieve the critical and abstract thought needed for introspection through appropriate scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978), but that not all individual, young learners may be cognitively capable of the quality transactional responses and evocations (Applebee, 1978; Galda, 1980; 1982) necessary for growth and learning. Therefore, any levels of awareness, understanding, and acceptance (Dyches & Prater, 2000) toward diversity may be based on both prior experiences and cognitive development. A comparison of both the individual and collective student responses support Cai's (2008) belief that transaction can promote "self change" on an individualized basis or can promote collective "social transformation" among groups of students (p. 219). Therefore, a predictive process of student growth and learning containing various levels of introspection and positive perceptions toward difference may be collaboratively achieved in a sociocultural setting (Vygotsky, 1978). However, the degree and speed to which individual students attain this understanding and acceptance is highly contingent on personal experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978), and developmental

levels of cognition (Applebee, 1978; Galda, 1980; 1982).

Concluding Thoughts on Response

As students transacted with texts about autism during the interventions, their responses aligned with Dyches and Prater's (2000) three theoretical levels of introspection, suggesting that some process of growth and learning (Rosenblatt, 2005/1956) did occur over time. Student responses included (a) gaining awareness though an insightful view of diversity (e.g. developing understanding of difference/defining and explaining autism), (b) reflecting on similarities to gain an understanding of difference (e.g. journeying through the text), and (c) using texts as a reflexive tool and gateway toward acceptance (e.g. affirming care and responsibility). Student responses suggest that these levels of introspection are a natural progression that students may experience as they transact with diverse texts. Findings also suggest that during transaction, books can serve as windows, mirrors, or both (Bishop, 1990; Galda, 1980) as students develop positive and accepting perceptions of others who are different.

When examining collective student responses during the whole class discussion component of the intervention and analyzing them holistically, responses indicated that when working together, students were able to move through all three proposed levels of introspection (Dyches, & Prater, 2000). However, when viewed independently, findings suggest that any level of student growth, denoted by understanding and acceptance of diversity is a highly individualized process dependent on students' cognitive abilities and prior life experiences. Thus, diverse books may be able to provide students with transformative opportunities, but any level of student learning and growth, such as the ability to achieve a complete level of understanding and acceptance of others who are different is ultimately dependent on the individual students.

Further Exploration

While findings from this study suggest that transacting with diverse texts can provide opportunities for growth, the study did have some limitations, which constrained the overreaching implications of the findings. The following section (a) provides a critique of the study, (b) presents the significance of the study and its implications, and (c) identifies opportunities for future iterations of this study to further explore the connection between transactional response and diverse texts.

Study Critique

Students interacted with 10 books over the course of five weeks, and the timeframe was designed to closely follow the amount of time Mrs. Humphries would spend on a new unit or topic to ensure that the study was as naturalistic as possible. Increasing the quantity of texts and the amount of time spent discussing them would have provided students with a longer and more intense focus on the topic of autism. We selected 10 books to provide a representative view of autism, and gave careful consideration to selecting books that represented characters from different genders and races, as well as characters that represented the wide spectrum of abilities (Azano, et al., manuscript submitted for publication). However, additional texts would have given students further experiences with the disorder, re-emphasizing and strengthening exposure to the specific characteristics of autism.

Furthermore, most of the books used in this study depicted characters with higher functioning autism. This was a purposeful decision, as these characters represented the kinds of individuals students in public schools would be most likely to encounter in real classrooms. However, additional books and further time spent exploring autism would have allowed for deeper examination of the full spectrum of atypical behaviors, and repeated exposure would have

enabled students to make further connections to characteristic behaviors across the texts. For example, many of the characters the students read about showed an aversion to loud noises. Because this specific characteristic behavior was consistently and continually reinforced across multiple texts, it was identified and discussed frequently by the students during interventions and interviews. Conversely, other characteristic behaviors of autism that were only mentioned once or twice in the texts were only incidentally mentioned in discussions, probably because the ideas were not reinforced as heavily. Continual discussion and exposure to autism, its characteristics, and its presence in realistic settings is needed for students to have a firm grasp of the full spectrum of behaviors. While student responses did indicate that their knowledge and understanding of autism increased after the interventions, it could have been strengthened by further, lengthier exposure to additional texts over time. Additional exposure would have also helped ensure that students did not misdiagnose others based on a limited understanding of these behaviors.

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 4, these books presented a wide variety of labels, such as "autism," "neurological disorder," "autism spectrum disorder (ASD)" and "stimming." It is important to be cognizant of the fact that using labels to describe difference immediately accentuates "otherness" which may propagate deficit thinking toward difference. In an attempt to avoid a clinical view of autism, Mrs. Humphries and I did not address many of the labels mentioned in the texts, however, even addressing the distinction between a "disability" and a "disease," as mentioned in Chapter 4, and introducing the term "autism," equipped students with a label for describing difference and "otherness" in their peers. This, in conjunction with limited exposure to diverse texts and difference in general may account for why some students were presumably misdiagnosing their friends as having autism when they actually exhibited

characteristics of other diverse groups. Therefore, educators and researchers should exercise extreme caution when presenting labels to young students, as the act of identifying and distinguishing "difference" in others may lead to deficit thinking toward disability and diversity.

Study Significance and Implications

As discussed in Chapter 1, transaction with diverse texts is often avoided in classrooms because many general educators feel unequipped to teach students with disabilities (Friedlander, 2009; Rogers, 2000), and in turn, may feel uncomfortable providing students opportunities to discuss topics of diversity and difference. As noted in Chapter 4, Mrs. Humphries similarly expressed concern that she did not have the necessary prerequisite knowledge to address the topic of autism in her classroom. However, findings from this study indicate that teachers should not allow their own expertise of diverse groups or their fear of addressing difficult topics hold them back from utilizing diverse texts to help students learn about difference. Rosenblatt (2005/1956) points out, "misguided are those who, out of a fear of such misinterpretation, seek to use only an abstract ideal of literary culture as their guide of what should be presented to the student" (p. 66). As discussed, it is not necessary for a teacher to be an "expert" on diversity in order to provide the context for conversation and the opportunity for students to form ideas about difficult or controversial topics. In fact, being an expert may actually hinder the process, as it may propagate a more authoritative stance within the classroom that should be assumed by the *students* as they extrapolate their own meanings and interpretations of the texts.

When using transactional response in the classrooms, it is vital for the students to assume responsibility for the discourse, while the teacher acts as a facilitator of the conversation, encouraging students to analyze and respond to the texts, and to co-construct meaning together, returning to the text for answers to questions that may arise. Therefore, when using transactional

response, teachers' perceived lack of knowledge on diverse topics should not hinder them from using these books in their classroom, but should be viewed as a learning opportunity to encourage students to become critical consumers of texts. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Mrs. Humphries was not familiar with transactional response (Rosenblatt, 1978) prior to the beginning of the study, yet was able to iteratively modify her instruction according to the texts and needs of the students. While her limited knowledge of autism and lack of experiences using transaction may have presented some missed opportunities during discussion, her teaching experience and expertise in reading instruction allowed her to successfully facilitate a meaningful, critical discussion of the texts which provided the space for students to create evocations and examine the text and themselves (Cai, 2008). As Rosenblatt (2005/1956) points out:

> We need to be flexible, we need to understand where our pupils are in relation to books, and we need a sufficient command of books to see their potentialities in this developmental process. Our main responsibility is to help the student to find the right book for growth. (p. 67)

Additionally, as noted in Chapter 4, the selection of appropriate texts can be used in conjunction with instructional strategies teachers are already using in the classroom, such using transaction to encourage the use of comprehension strategies like making connections (Harvey, & Goudvis, 2000), or forming coherent, critical responses to texts through student journal writing (Galda, et al., 2000; Martinez, et al., 1992; McMahon, et al., 1997). Therefore, transacting with diverse texts need not be an isolated, daunting task, but viewed as a compliment to quality literary instruction and critical thinking that grows out of a deep understanding of the students and their societal and educational needs.

Exploring Other Forms of Difference

While I recognize that this study did contain limitations, which influence the generalizability and implications of the findings, these constraints also provide a wealth of opportunities for future exploration. Future iterations of this study may include (a) exploring other forms of difference, (b) transacting with different types of texts, and (c) expanding the transformative possibilities of using diverse texts to encourage transformation.

Future iterations of this study may include first, replicating components of the intervention with diverse texts depicting both traditionally defined culturally diverse groups and less traditionally recognized diverse groups that express "difference." This may include designing a study to examine a representative sample of texts with central characters that are racially or ethnically diverse, including but not limited to traditionally marginalized populations such as African American, Native American, or Latinos. Additionally, since diversity is an evolving construct and the term "culturally diverse literature" (p. 379) is being continually re-conceptualized by researchers (Boyd, et al., 2015), another iteration of this study could further introduce students to other groups expressing "difference" in regard to ability, gender, religion, or regional background.

As the findings suggest, students are typically more familiar with more obvious, external manifestations of differences. Pre and post-intervention interviews indicate that students were able to identify diversity that was presented externally, such as skin color denoting a different race, a particular type of clothing representing a different culture, or a dialect and language signifying a different geographical location or background. However, responses also suggest that students had only been introduced to more traditionally defined "difference," and should be

provided with further opportunities to learn about and identify other diverse groups (Prater, et al., 2006) whose "difference" may be less visible but just as important.

Iterations of this study using texts that represent both traditionally defined examples of cultural diversity and more broadly conceptualized difference is warranted. However, I suggest that any teacher or researcher use the salient, societal issues that students face everyday in their classrooms as a point of departure when selecting a new focus and appropriate texts for intervention. While this study purposefully addressed autism, as noted in Chapter 1, this topic was specifically selected because it focused on a particular group of diverse individuals who are currently increasing in visibility in both schools and society (CDC, 2015). This growing instance of autism increased the likelihood that the students in this study would encounter others with this disability early into their educational experiences, particularly in an inclusive school district. Had this study been conducted in another geographical location or even at a different time in the past or future, the salient focus of this study may have been very different. Because diversity is a malleable concept (Boyd, et al., 2015), the types of individuals students encounter throughout their educational experiences will continually change. However, as this study's findings suggest, books can provide an ongoing resource for providing virtual experiences with diversity, which can help students understand various forms of difference.

This study provides a viable framework for utilizing transaction within the classroom while offering the flexibility to modify the types of texts that are explored in order to meet the individual needs of students, classrooms, and society. In the near future, some suggested areas for research might include selecting books that focus on stigmatized groups. However, I caution that if teachers and researchers desire to replicate parts of this study with different texts, that they first mine the existing scholarly research for content analyses of texts in order to ensure that the

books realistically and sensitively depict other cultures, and do not contain hidden ideologies or agendas (Boyd, et al., 2015). Utilizing books that have not been properly vetted for high quality and that incorrectly or inappropriately represent a diverse group or culture could further perpetuate misconceptions or existing stereotypes (Galda & Beach, 2001) during transaction.

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 2, high quality, diverse texts that depict strong, multidimensional characters may be difficult to find, particularly for studies focusing on less traditionally defined diverse groups (Boyd, et al., 2015). However, this gap may also provide a wealth of opportunities for researchers to conduct future content analyses of diverse texts and to disseminate them into the field for further exploration of transitional response and practice.

Transacting with Different Kinds of Texts

Additionally, perhaps fictional or fantasy stores that depict a marginalized group can be used for transaction if books depicting a desired diverse group are unavailable. Available research suggests that primary-age students transact best with books containing characters that mirror their current age, ability levels, and realistic settings (Cox & Many, 1992; Galda, 1980; 1990b; 1995; Schlager, 1978) as were used in this study. However, teachers may be able to use transaction and whole class discussion to help students draw connections between those who express "difference" in the virtual world of a text and compare them to diverse groups in the real world.

For example, While not included in Chapter 2 because it was conducted outside of the United States and did not meet my criteria for literature inclusion, a recent article entitled: "The greatest magic of Harry Potter: Reducing prejudice" (Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, & Trifiletti 2015) explored how young students responded after transacting with *Harry Potter*. Findings indicated that student perceptions toward controversial groups like immigrants and

homosexuals changed after being introduced to "the Muggles" or the non-magical outcasts in the story. This suggests that it may be possible to cultivate acceptance and more positive feelings toward diverse groups if students understand that even fantastic characters are "recognizable people with familiar problems" (Galda, 1990b, p. 274) similar to that of the reader.

However, as this study was conducted with fifth grade students, it is unclear if primary-age students would be able to make the same connections using fantasy texts which require more abstract thinking and suspension of disbelief that is usually characteristic of later developmental stages (Applebee, 1978; Galda, 1980; 1982). Still, it is of note that during intervention 7, one student was able to independently draw a connection between the character with autism in *Squirmy wormy: How I learned to help myself* (Wilson, 2009) and *The Wizard of Oz* that Mrs. Humphries was using as an after lunch read aloud. Without prompting, the student pointed out that the character with autism was different, but inherently the same as others, just like the Tin Man was missing a heart, but actually already had one because he loved and cared for Dorothy (Intervention 7, 2-1-16). While the question of whether or not primary-age students can transact with more abstract, fantasy texts was beyond the scope of this particular study, student responses from this study suggest that younger learners may be able to critically respond to abstract stories, especially if they are introduced in a collaborative setting (Vygotsky, 1978). However, future exploration is warranted to determine if these types of books can be used to help teach students about difference in the event that other texts are unavailable.

Extending the Transformative Possibilities

Future studies could explore the more individualized implications of transaction in order to determine how discrete student responses change over time in order to determine if these evocations indicate growth, which Rosenblatt (2005/1956) proposed can occur after transaction.

Within this study, triangulation of the data provided an examination of whole class student responses, which provided evidentiary findings of collective student learning and growth from a holistic standpoint, but prevented my ability to make claims concerning students' personal growth. Additionally, a complete and accurate understanding of students' prior experiences with autism would have been needed in order to examine students' evocations and reactions to them, and further, an examination of students after the intervention would have been warranted to see if transformation did in fact extend from contextual discussion to real world application.

Future research may include longitudinal studies aimed at specifically investigating the transformational possibilities of transactional response in the classroom, and may explore whether student growth in relation to understanding and acceptance of diversity can be extended to real-world interactions with others who are different. The purpose of this study was to explore how student transacted with diverse texts, and data concerning student responses suggested some level of growth and learning did occur after continual transaction. However, it was not possible to determine the lasting effects of the perceived growth that occurred during this study beyond the 10 interventions and nine post-interviews. Therefore, it is unclear if students' post-intervention thoughts and perceptions could in fact be transferred from the virtual world of the text to the real world and applied in authentic settings.

Additionally, topics of disability and diversity are often negatively portrayed in media. While student responses suggest that they adopted more positive, accepting views toward autism and difference in general, it is unclear if these young students were simply (a) exhibiting positive and accepting perceptions that they felt would please the teacher and their peers, effectively giving them the responses they wanted to hear, or (b) if these responses were merely contextualized within the virtual world of the story and within that community of learners and

could not be extended beyond the world of the text. Findings from student responses beg the question: can students carry their positive, accepting perceptions of difference out of the classroom and into the real world?

Since any suggested level of growth and learning was contextually bound to the text, it was beyond the scope of the study to determine if any levels of understanding and acceptance extended beyond what was verbally expressed during interventions and interviews. Further research would need to be conducted to examine if these initial, verbal stances toward awareness, understanding, and acceptance were contextually bound to the text, or if they could be extended into actions in the real world. Furthermore, future studies may include an opportunity to explore the extension of transformative possibilities after transaction, in which students are provided opportunities to critically analyze not only to text, but their evocations to it. Finally, future studies may examine how students physically interact with diverse individuals after reading about them in texts in order to determine if responses move beyond verbal introspection to truly reflect personal transformation in authentic settings.

Conclusion

Everyone loves a good story. Sometimes books serve as a window through which we glimpse into the lives of others. Other times, books serve as a reflection that helps us view ourselves. The best books, however, serve as a gateway to help us learn about those who are different. These are the books we get lost in. But these books also help us find ourselves – and sometimes we find ourselves in characters that are different from us, yet very much the same. This study provides some insight into how transacting with diverse texts can provide opportunities for transformation, which includes a growing understanding of both the self and those who are different.

Findings suggest that when transacting with diverse texts, first, students may need to use an efferent stance to gain an awareness of difference before they are able to aesthetically connect to diverse texts and characters on a deeper level. Second, students' personal evocations to a text are built on previous perceptions and life experiences, which can influence growth. Third, diverse books can provide virtual experiences, which may allow students to cultivate the growth of new understandings toward diversity that can be transferred to the real world (research question 1).

Findings also lend insight into how transactions with diverse texts can encourage student learning and growth, as depicted through evolving responses, which reflected collective levels of awareness and increasing knowledge of diversity, understanding of difference, and acceptance of others. This process of growth was highly individualized, and based on cognitive ability and previous life experiences. However, student transactions with these diverse texts suggest that books can serve as a window to help students gain insight and awareness of diversity, they can serve as a mirror through which young readers can begin to understand difference by seeing similarities, and they can also serve as both a gateway and a reflective tool through which we can encourage acceptance (research question 2).

However, while it is evident that transacting with books about autism can provide students with opportunities for learning and growth, is still unclear if diverse texts can provide lasting and transferrable, accepting views toward exploring difference for all students. However, findings from this study do indicate that transacting with diverse texts can increase the prerequisite awareness and knowledge needed to understand those who are different. Such understandings may lead to more positive, collective and individualized perceptions toward

diversity, which may encourage acceptance of others who are different, and may lead to transformative possibilities.

Just like a good story never ends, the findings and implications from this study provide opportunities for further research. In the future, I plan to continue exploring the types of responses students have when interacting with texts from a variety of cultures and diverse groups. I also plan to explore the longitudinal and transferrable implications of transaction in order to fully actualize the possibility of using diverse texts to encourage student growth and possible transformative possibilities in the real world. Further research will allow for continual exploration into transaction and how diverse texts can provide opportunities for engendering positive, accepting perceptions of difference for young learners.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview Protocol

(1) Classroom Climate and Culture
- Describe the classroom where you teach (e.g. what does it look like, how is it arranged)?
- How many students are in your classroom?
- How do you want kids to feel in your classroom?
- Describe a typical morning in your classroom.
- How would your students describe your classroom?
- Do your students usually engage in whole class discussions during language arts?
- Are your students comfortable speaking to and in front of each other during language arts?

(2) Student/Class Prior Knowledge/Exposure to Autism
- Do any of your students have autism?
- To the best of your knowledge, do any of your students have first-hand experiences with autism?
- How many of your students, do you think, know what autism is?
- Are there any students with autism currently in your school?
- How or when would your students have the opportunity to interact with a peer who has autism (e.g. at lunch or in class)?
- How likely do you think it is that your students will have real-world experiences with autism while in this community?
- If students do know something about autism, how do you think they learned about it (e.g. television, first-hand experiences, etc.)?

(3) Student/Class Demographics, Diversity, and Background
- What kind of community is your school situated in (e.g. rural, urban, suburban)?
- Describe the student demographics in your classroom.
- Describe the backgrounds/home lives of your students in general.
- How often do you think your students are given experiences with others who are different (e.g. racially, culturally, etc.)?
- If your students wanted to learn about a topic like autism, do you think they would have access to materials (e.g. books, Internet) outside of school?

(4) Current Read Aloud Practices
- What does a typical read-aloud look like in your classroom?
- How often do you read aloud picture books to your class?
- Do you use any strategies before, after, or during read alouds?
- What do you feel your role is during and after a read aloud?
- Do you use read alouds mostly for pleasure or for instruction?
- How do your students react to the read alouds?
- How do you select books for your read alouds?
- Can you think of an example of a time a read aloud went really well?
- Can you think of an example of a time a read aloud did not go well?

Appendix A (cont.)

- If you were to introduce a new topic using children's picture books with this class, (a) how many books would you typically read, and (b) how long would you devote to reading them (e.g. days, weeks, or months)?

Appendix B

Student Interview Protocol – Pre/Post Intervention Interview Questions

Knowledge/Awareness

1. What can you tell me about the word "autism?"
2. Do you know anyone who has autism?
3. How do you get autism?
4. How can you tell if someone has autism?

Understanding

5. If you had autism, what would you want everyone else to understand about you?
6. Do all people with autism act the same way?
7. If you had a student in your class with autism, what are some things they might do throughout the day?
8. How are you the same or different from someone with autism?

Acceptance

9. How would you feel if your class got a new student and he or she had autism?
10. Would you ask another student with autism to play with you?
11. What would you do if you saw other students at your school making fun of someone who had autism?
12. Would there be good and bad things about being friends with someone who has autism? Tell me about them.