

Walk a Mile in My Kicks: Why Diversity Matters in a Middle School Reading Curriculum
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SCHOOL CONTEXT

Walt Disney Magnet School is a Fine Arts Magnet School located on the north side of Chicago. The school was opened in the 1970s and was the first magnet school in the city of Chicago. My school is home to 1,519 students from all over the city of Chicago, ages pre-k to eighth grade. The school has been rated Level 1+ using the CPS School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP).

The SQRP is a five-tiered performance system based on a broad range of indicators of success, including, but not limited to, student test score performance, student academic growth, closing of achievement gaps, school culture and climate, attendance, graduation, and preparation for post-graduation success. (Chicago Public Schools, 2019)

My school is best known for its open-spaced learning environment, which means there are several classrooms in a large space and each class is separated by shelving and coat racks. Disney is part of Network 2, within the larger district.

According to the Chicago Public Schools website, the four largest demographic groups at my school are Black, 45.6%; Hispanic, 21.6%; White 17.4%; and Asian, 11.3%. Of those students 8% are classified as diverse learners, 13.3% have limited English, and 57.3% are low income. Part of the Disney Magnet mission statement is:

The Disney community will work as a unified team to achieve an ideal learning environment with a wide variety of experiences. We will create opportunities for students to reach their full potential in a rigorous, supportive, exciting, educationally rich, fun learning environment (Walt Disney Magnet School, 2019)

You can walk into any grade level or classroom and see that each teacher creates a warm environment for their students. I personally choose to work at Disney, because I fundamentally believe that learning should be fun. I want my students to love school and science just as much as I did as a student. I want to expose students to the history and culture of Chicago through field trips, and Disney has excellent supports in place to help with that. In the past, we have gone to the DuSable Museum for a Black History Month presentation, The Museum of Contemporary Art for a Creation Lab tour, the Shedd Aquarium for a squid dissection, and on a downtown tour with the Chicago Architecture Foundation.

My school is divided into three floors with one administrator per floor. I work on the third floor, which holds fifth through eighth grade. Each floor consists of three pods, which are essentially classrooms without walls. The pods contain five to seven classrooms, with one grade per pod. My pod is one of the exceptions; it holds all of the sixth grade classrooms and two of the seventh grade classrooms. I have 24 students in my homeroom this year, and the other three classes that I teach have 23, 24, and 25 students. My homeroom has 11 girls and 13 boys with no diverse learners. There are eight languages spoken in my classroom; the top three

languages are Spanish, Arabic, and Urdu. My classroom is 50% Black, 25% Hispanic, 17% Asian, 4% White, and 4% Multiracial. Two of my classes are inclusion classes and the other two are general education.

The sixth grade team is departmentalized, which is the first time middle schoolers experience this at Disney. This transition can be tricky, because up until this point my students stayed in the same homeroom all day. At the beginning of the year, the students stayed in their homeroom and the teachers moved to them. I typically see issues with organization when students make this transition, because they have to remember which teacher they see next and what materials they need out. This year as the Unit Leader, I have made our pod focus on organization so we can help students become more accountable for themselves. In December, we transitioned to students moving to the teacher's classrooms. I believe this will better prepare them for high school and allow for movement that middle schoolers need. Each teacher teaches their own writing class first period and then their subject matter for the remainder of the day. Although I am a science teacher, I also teach health once a week to each of my classes. Every teacher develops their own writing curriculum. Many times we share ideas and projects that we do, but there is rarely any time given to co-plan a curriculum. I am one of two teachers that teaches the sixth grade Earth Science curriculum. I use the Science Fusion texts along with projects I have created or purchased on Teachers Pay Teachers. Several years ago, I aligned the curriculum that we have to the Next Generation Science Standards and updated the lessons at the end of last year to ensure students were learning all of the standards for Earth Science. Each week, students use the Cornell note-taking method in class when new topics are introduced, they then have laboratory experiments on Wednesdays, and group projects on Thursdays. Health is very much like the writing curriculum, except only three teachers teach those classes to the students in our pod. We follow a pacing guide that was created when our school used healthteacher.com. The sixth grade teachers share the lessons I created in previous years and create projects that are relevant to the lessons being taught.

I have been at Disney for the last five years, and one of the best parts of being a teacher there is the students. I have worked in the Tuition Based After School program and coached volleyball for the last four years. These two experiences have allowed me to not only watch students grow up but also to become a part of their families. I have taught countless younger siblings over the last few years and developed relationships with their parents. I met my current students during the after school program when they were in second grade. It brings me such joy to watch them grow and become mature young adults. Walt Disney Magnet School is a wonderfully diverse school that encourages students to reach their goals in life. After students leave Disney, they apply to many schools across the city of Chicago. Some students will go to selective enrollment high schools, some will go to their neighborhood high school, and others will choose charter or magnet high schools. When students leave Disney, they know they may never see some of their classmates again, but when the opportunity arises, those students always love to come back to visit and share about their experiences at Disney and high school with my current students.

RATIONALE

Every year I am faced with the challenge of creating a writing curriculum for my sixth grade students. This is a challenge because I am a science teacher, and I rarely have enough time to focus on something other than science. I could reuse some other projects that I have taught before, and most times I do. However, I began wanting to create something more purposeful that aligned with what I had seen the English Language Arts teachers doing in the middle school I attended. At Disney, it was frowned upon for teachers to do novel studies with their students in reading class, under our former principal. The expectation is to stick with the purchased curriculum and only have students read novels on their own time. While this expectation is fine for highly motivated students, this doesn't work for every student. In fact, many of my students have complained that they don't enjoy reading inside of the classroom, so why should they do more on their own time. My students' dislike for reading bothers me because I love reading and using my imagination while I do. This lack of desire that I found in my students has given me the purpose to change their mind about reading.

Three years ago I began wondering what would be the best books to use in my writing class to engage my disinterested readers. I happened to find a book called "Dear Martin" that was about a teenage boy facing many of the social justice issues that are in today's society. My students immediately fell in love with this novel, which led me to my research question today. I wondered what would happen to students when they read about characters that look like them or share common characteristics? My goal this year was to read two novels with very different characters, but with each story allowing students to find something relatable to themselves. Despite the very broken up year that we have had, we did manage to read two novels.

My homeroom this year is predominantly students of color. The ongoing societal expectation is that students of color don't perform well in reading and that stigma has been internalized for many of them. My hope is that by exposing my students to new, socially relevant books they will feel empowered to continue reading on their own for enjoyment. I also believe reading books increases students' stamina during standardized testing, which will be beneficial as they move through middle school and high school in Chicago Public Schools. I think that reading novels will also help students become better writers, because they are exposed to different styles of writing through reading and they will be expected to write about what they are reading each week, however student identity rather than writing was the focus of my research. While I intend to continue using novels in my class, I hope other teachers will begin to consider the positive effects of reading on students' identity.

QUESTION

What happens to middle school students when they read about characters that look like them or share common characteristics?

SUB QUESTIONS

1. What happens to students' perspectives about people who are different from them?
2. What happens to students' understanding of their identity?
3. What happens to students' motivation for reading?

4. What happens to students' reading growth and achievement when they are given novels to read?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a student, I fondly remember riding my bike throughout the summer to check out books from the library. My love for reading began long before I reached middle school. My father would read to me at the park as a little girl and my mom would read me bedtime stories. When I became a teacher, I not only wanted my students to enjoy learning but I also wanted them to fall in love with books. What I have discovered in the last couple of years is that my students lack the desire to read outside of the classroom. This discovery has troubled me because I know how important reading is in education. Every year, the majority of students in my homeroom are minority students. This year, 96% of my students fall into one of the following minority categories: Black, Asian, or Hispanic. Talbert and Goode (2011) wrote about how even before students of color enter school the achievement gap shows up, and this does not get any better because of the inequities within the educational system (p. 72). One of my many goals has always been to improve my students in every way possible. Reading is an important skill for every child, but for many of my students it is not their favorite subject. I believe that one reason for this lack of interest is that my minority students have not been exposed to culturally and socially relevant materials. In order to get students to buy into believing that they should read, educators need to give students reading materials they can relate to on a deeper level. The benefits of teaching culturally diverse literature are far-reaching.

Identity

As an adult, I realize that while I loved to read as a child, there were very few books that had African American women as the main character or a character at all. However, I was still able to see myself in the girl characters from the story. In the society we live in today, we must do more to show characters that mirror the diverse society we live in and to offer a window to what we may not experience firsthand. Leahy and Foley (2018) stated that exposing children to diverse literature is beneficial to their self-image and social adjustment into society, which is inherently diverse. Many of the stories students typically read are novels that have won awards such as the Newbery Medal and Caldecott Medal. Novels that have won these awards are typically regarded at a higher level, but there is no criterion emphasizing diversity when these novels are chosen. In the last ten years, the Newbery Medal has gone to four books with diverse characters, while the Caldecott has only had one. This is important to note, especially if the goal is to expose students to diverse literature in school.

When students are able to read about diverse characters, it helps to create an inclusive classroom. If educators make efforts to read diverse novels with students, it allows them to ask questions and express curiosity for a deeper understanding of themselves and their peers (Leahy & Foley, 2018). If we want to have a future with educated and compassionate young adults, one of the first steps we need to take is helping them understand who they are in society. Sellers et al. (2003) stated, "Black adolescents and young adults who have a sense that their race and ethnicity are central to their lives have been found to have fewer psychological stress and behavioral difficulties, even when confronted with obvious stressors such as racial discrimination" (Seller et. al., 2003, as cited in Ani, 2003, p. 408-409). I believe when you are able to identify who you are and where you come from, you will have less of a struggle to find

your place within social groups. This can be especially difficult in middle school when you are faced with making friends that were not in elementary school with you.

According to Leahy and Foley the three categories of diverse children's literature include books that celebrate specific groups, books with naturally diverse characters, and books centered on differences (Leahy & Foley, 2018). In sixth grade, I focus on the latter two categories because middle schoolers often struggle with their own identities and empathizing with students who are different from themselves. I have found that with careful planning and thoughtful conversations, students can become more accepting of others.

Self-Perception Effects on Learning and Motivation

The perceptions that we have about ourselves often affect how we learn in the classroom. If I believe that I can accomplish a task and I have been encouraged by the adults in my life about my abilities, then I will apply myself and be more likely to achieve the goals I have chosen. While this is how I have experienced school, this is not the case for every child. In a study done by Pershey (2010), she found that students in sixth grade had higher self-perception of ability, compared to students in the fourth grade, but they had less confidence and were less satisfied with school. It seems as though the more time students spend in school, the more they become accustomed to testing, but they lose their confidence in themselves and their enjoyment of school. In today's society, schools are extremely focused on test scores. Paris, Roth, and Turner (2000) found that students' perceptions of self-motivation, self-competence, and self-control became more tied to their achievement on tests as their progress further in school. This connection between a test score and actual ability sometimes lowers a student's confidence level. Learners who lack confidence may have negative perceptions of their own abilities that translate into low expectations and little investment of time and effort in academic tasks (Boersma & Chapman, 1992). In order to help build positive self-perception and motivation in school, we need to show students examples of success through reading. Bishop (1990) said it best: "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (p. 1). Instead of focusing only on a test score, we must also focus on showing students positive images of themselves. No student should have to go through school feeling discouraged; it is our job to help build positive self-perceptions within each student.

Perception of Others

In school, we teach students to be accepting and welcoming of everyone, but this is not how society always functions. Students are seeing adults exclude people because of their race, religion, and ethnicity daily. While educators cannot control every aspect of their students' day, we can teach them what it means to empathize with and accept people who are not like themselves. This can be accomplished by exposing students to diverse literature in our schools. Ishizuka (2018) wrote an article questioning whether diverse books can save us. I believe that they can. Diverse literature can share variations in the way English is spoken in this country, introduce history and traditions, and offer a window into a world that is unfamiliar (Bishop, 1990, p. 1-2). I believe that if we offer students the opportunity to read about the experiences of people who are not like them, they can begin to understand each others' perspectives. Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they need to see people unlike themselves, which can also be done in books: "They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member

of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans” (Bishop 1990, p. 1). By introducing books that show all types of people to students, we can celebrate our similarities and differences and create more empathetic students.

Testing

While I may not appreciate the amount of testing students experience each year, I do know that it is used as a way to check student progress in school. I believe there should be a balance between testing and educating the whole student. Studies show making student learning and academic success contingent on high-stakes, standardized assessments lead to students’ feelings of boredom, anxiety, pessimism, and cynicism about learning in school (Enriquez, 2013). School should not be an anxiety-provoking institution, but I have seen firsthand the stress students are under when they know that their test score on the Northwest Evaluation Measure for Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) will help determine the type of high school they can go to. Some schools are so focused on teaching all the skills that will be tested, they discourage the reading of novels in their curriculum. Right now, many excellent novels are being sliced up and put on standardized tests for students to analyze. Teachers are using these small excerpts to drive their instruction and prepare students for upcoming tests, but what about reading the actual book? I believe teaching a wide range of diverse novels could positively help students in standardized testing. Reading novels as a class, small group, or individually helps students build the stamina that they will need when reading passages on their test. Novels can also introduce students to vocabulary that is not used everyday. I think it could also influence students to enjoy being at school if the novel interests them. At the end of the school year, we all want our students to grow and be able to understand complex texts; limiting their exposure to those texts is not going to improve their test scores.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

1. **Surveys:** I created surveys of about 5 questions that relate to three of my sub questions. Each survey was used to gauge how students see themselves and their motivation for reading.
2. **Student Work Samples:** The student work samples were collected during the two novels we read in class. The work included: short response answers, essays, projects, and bell ringer questions. Student responses will be recorded in a Google Sheets document.
3. **Teacher Journal:** I wrote journal entries to document student progress and discussions while we were reading. I wrote about critical points within our novel and how my students processed the information that we read.
4. **Group Discussions about novels:** During our class discussion sessions I mapped the conversation to see what types of contributions have been added (adding on, connection, question, and opinion).
5. **NWEA Reading MAP scores:** My students were to be tested twice this year, Winter 2019 and Spring 2020, using the Northwest Evaluation Measures for Academic Progress test. This was not possible due to the early closure of schools. I was able to review my students scores from the Spring of 2019 in 5th grade and the Winter of 2019 in 6th grade.

Writing Class Lessons

I decided to teach two novels, that focus on social justice issues, in my morning writing class. This meant that I would need to be particularly mindful about my use of time, because this is when students enter the school in the morning and eat breakfast. My original plan was to have students start their bell work, which would relate to the novel, no later than 7:45 and begin discussion and reading of the novel by 8:00 am. I realized very quickly that this would not be an easy task for my students. Many of them drag their feet in the morning and some do not arrive until 8:00 am. Quite a few students even thought that those 15 minutes for bell work were their social hour minutes. After two weeks, I had what I called a “morning meeting” with my class after seeing how they were not adjusting to my expectations. I shared with them what my goal was for them, how important it was for me to see if they understood what we were reading, and for us to finish the book in a timely manner. Most of my class understood what needed to be done and their work began to show that they cared.

Once we were all on the same page, I was able to follow the routine of discussing the bell work and reading aloud one to three chapters almost daily. I would read the novels to my students, because I wanted to make sure the books were actually read and also because my former students always mention how much they loved that time. There were certain days that we would discuss the bell work, because it related to what the students were reading at the time and other times I would just read it during my lunch break to see what their thoughts were. Almost every night the students had comprehension and opinion questions about what we read in class. I also did Socratic seminars throughout both books. I would wait until we had gotten through several major events before I would schedule a seminar in the class. I believe that having these seminars allowed my students to be vocal about their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas in a way that they could not by just writing. At first it was difficult for them to understand that they were the leaders of the conversation and that I was just the moderator/audience, but after they got the hang of it they had the most rich and thought provoking conversations.

LIMITATIONS

This year we experienced an 11 day strike in October, which meant students lost out on time they would have normally had. Almost immediately after we returned from the strike, we had to do our CAC Performance and Art show, which is a two week unit where students learn about a specific topic and create a 30 minute show to display their learning. This year the show was all about math and we only spent seven days working on it, but that is seven more days that students lost out on their normal instruction.

In previous years, the students would have taken a Fall NWEA MAP test in September to see what they remember from the previous year. This year our school decided not to do this, because the majority of teachers felt our students were over tested. I was one of those teachers, little did I know when I made this decision. I thought if we eliminated the Fall test we would have more time to teach and the Winter test would tell us where our students were and what we needed to work on. I was not fully aware that the MAP tests between 5th and 6th grade were different. The data the Reading teachers use in Fall of 6th grade helps them plan for the rest of the school year. I found out quite immediately that I too needed that data, but there was no way to get it. I wonder if the data from our Winter 2019 NWEA MAP test would be different had we taken the Fall 2019 test. We were in the middle of reading our first novel as a class

when the test was taken. I also wonder if there would have been an improvement in all scores because we are reading and discussing the novels together. Unfortunately, I will not be able to find out if my students' test scores will change, because Covid-19 shut our schools down for the remainder of the year.

This is starting to sound like a series of unfortunate events, but my students are resilient and with each obstacle they always find a way to persevere. Before there was standardized testing, teachers looked over their students' portfolios of work to see how they have grown. While I would have liked to have seen my students' test scores increase, they never had the chance to take the final test, but I will show growth in their work and their comments.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In this section, I will be answering my research question: What happens to middle school students when they read about characters that look like them or share common characteristics? by examining the data for the four subquestions.

1. What happens to students' perspectives about people who are different from them?

On November 4, 2019, my students and I began reading our first novel of the year. This was a little later than planned due to the strike, but the excitement to read was still there for me. The first novel we read as a class was *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang. I chose this book for several reasons. The first being that this book brings up social justice issues surrounding immigration and this is currently a hot topic in the United States. I also wanted to make sure that I read a story that would racially represent a number of students in our classroom. Finally, I wanted to give my students a window to see how people who might be different from them experience life.

Socratic Seminar 1

Throughout the reading of *Front Desk*, I hosted three Socratic Seminars to foster open discussion about important topics and issues presented in the book. As a science teacher, I had never done a Socratic Seminar, so I did not know how things would go. However, I found that these seminars allowed my students to speak openly and freely with their peers. During the November 21, 2019 seminar, I took notes and voice recorded the students' conversation that was centered around four questions relating to the first part of the book for 35 minutes. These questions focused on values, immigration, and healthcare. Through discussing these questions it became apparent that my students have opinions about a lot of issues presented in this book that also relate to real current events.

Hearing the perspectives of my students with immigrant parents was eye opening for all of us. There were two things that surprised me in this discussion. They both happened around question 3: Should we provide universal healthcare for everyone including immigrants? First, I did not expect any students to have skepticism about people using or abusing health care. I think that this discussion could also be happening at home since the democratic debates had been on. What I enjoyed hearing was the students who still wanted to give help to others in spite of the possible abuses of the system. A lot of those skeptical students listened to their classmates and seemed to talk out possible solutions and rules to prevent people from taking advantage of the healthcare system. The other surprise that came with this question was when my student Brittani had a lot to say about how to provide healthcare to immigrant families.

- Yes, they (immigrants) lack money when they arrive. We should create a clinic for

immigrants where they can go and receive services. We need to help them have a better life. - Brittani

Brittani rarely speaks in class and her writing is often very short. It was nice to hear her thoughts and see her contribute to the conversation in a meaningful way. Her comment came after a few students had voiced concerns like this one.

- Yes and no, I am scared people will take advantage of the system. We need to limit the time they can receive care free of charge. They should receive services until they are settled. - Matthew

Matthew's concern was the same as a few other students. Some students discussed how different their lives would be if they could not play sports or enjoy recreational games at school because of the fear of being injured with no insurance. After Brittani had made her point it felt like the class acknowledged that there could be negative affects, but providing healthcare was a necessity for all. I think many of my students can empathize with the main character Mia and her family, even though they are not immigrants or Chinese. Everyone who spoke could see the disadvantages her family faces and could relate to what they read about in the text whether it be discrimination or lack of resources. This conversation made me think about how I could get my students to show the same compassion and understanding for each other as they show for the characters in the book.

Socratic Seminar 2

In the next Socratic Seminar on December 12, 2019, we dove deeper into a conversation about stereotypes, discrimination, and bullying. I imagined that this conversation might be more difficult for my students to open up about, but I was pleasantly surprised again. In this short time that we have been reading my students have accepted our class discussions as a safe space for them. For this Socratic Seminar I took students to the planning area on the 3rd floor and had students sit in a circle with their chairs. My principal joined the conversation to record actual statements made by the students, while I recorded how the conversation moved amongst the students (see appendix 1). The only issue was that some students came to school late, so they missed the beginning explanation about how the Socratic Seminar would work.

Our first question was: Why do you think stereotypes exist? I felt this question was extremely important at this point in the novel and it was something that I knew my students were facing based on some of the conversations and journal prompts I had read. The discussion around this topic went on for about 10 minutes and I could tell that some of my students really did not understand what the word meant, even though I had provided them with an example. I believe they struggled to discuss stereotypes, because they have a hard time believing in them. The final comment from a student at the end of this discussion round summed up the conversation perfectly.

- I think they exist because they make people feel better about themselves. They just want to bully you. Some people want to insult you in front of other people.

While this might not fully answer what a stereotype is I knew that if we could all have a general understanding of stereotypes we could continue to discuss it as we finished reading our novel. I also needed to establish that this topic was going to continue appearing in both of our books and I wanted my students to know how to talk about difficult topics like this one. Using

this question first in our discussion allowed me to dig deeper into my student's understanding of discrimination as well.

The next question we discussed was: How did you feel when you discovered how Mr. Yao felt about Black people? How would you deal with someone like Mr. Yao, who discriminates against people because of their race? I vividly remember the day we read the chapter where Mr. Yao, the motel owner, told Mia and her family that he felt all Black people were bad people. I can recall this moment because of the strong reaction my students had when I read those words. My students had slammed down books, gasped, and became angry. I knew that this was a point we had to discuss, because I knew it had affected them deeply.

- I felt kind of mad because you can't discriminate and judge because of their color.
- Amanda
- I felt mad because you can't judge black people by the way they look. So he can't be mad. How I would deal with these people is I would show them videos and other stuff about people helping each other. - Fabian
- That day I felt a little disrespected. Just because one black person does something doesn't mean all will. Just because you don't like our skin color doesn't mean that you have to stereotype. There are black business workers that work hard for where they are.
- Brittani

During this part of our conversation, it was apparent how outraged each student was. Of these three comments I wrote, only one student is Black, but as each student spoke you could see them building solidarity with one another. Brittani even brought her point back to stereotypes leading to discrimination. I think opening the door to have this conversation allowed my students to address things that they felt were unfair and unjust. I also helped them see each other in a different light. I wanted this conversation to lead them to become allies for one another and defend each other if they ever needed to.

The last question from this Socratic Seminar was: When does joking around about someone become bullying and how can you prevent yourself from becoming a bully? I felt question was needed to be brought up considering we had just talked about stereotypes and discrimination. Middle school is notorious for bullying and from the writing prompts I had already reviewed I knew some of my students had been bullied previously. I also knew that some of their classmates had been the bully. While I realize one discussion will not put an end to bullying, I hoped that it would at least make my students more thoughtful about their actions and words.

- Joking turns to saying mean things. - Shira
- If you don't know their home life don't speak on it. Apologize for rude jokes. - Randall
- Have empathy. Think before you speak. - Amanda

Many of my students' comments showed they realized when a joke had gone too far. Some even admitted that they have been the bully in certain situations. Which is what led us to discuss what happens when you know you are in the wrong. The overall tone of the conversation was that we all need to think before we speak about someone else and show empathy. This was a big accomplishment for me, because it felt like our classroom dynamics would become better. One of my goals every year is to help my students feel like we are a family and we can depend on one another.

Socratic Seminar 3

To finish out *Front Desk* we had one final Socratic Seminar on January 15, 2020. My principal joined us again for this discussion in the 3rd Floor Planning area. There are no walls separating our classrooms in the pod, so you can always hear what is happening in the other rooms around you. I realized how important it was for us to have our seminar in a quiet space outside of our classroom and I wanted to make sure my students felt comfortable speaking freely. This seminar took place over two days, because the topics we were discussing took students longer than 15 minutes per question. This discussion did take place at the beginning of the morning just like before, so some students were late. The topics we covered in this discussion were the experiences of immigrants and racism. I was curious to know if each of them would empathize with someone who was not like themselves.

Our first question during this seminar was: Did the novel make you think differently about the experiences of immigrants? What is the American Dream? Does it really exist? In our first discussion, some of my students seemed to be leery of immigrants when we spoke about healthcare. I wondered if their opinions would be different by the time we finished our book.

- How the novel made me think differently is that they (immigrants) don't get a lot of choices in life. I think the American dream means having success in America. Not being treated differently. Having the same rights as everyone else. Immigrants are treated differently than other Americans and that should not be. - Brandon
- My parents are immigrants and they get treated unfairly just like in the book. Lots of people still do it today. How they fought is how most immigrants fight. A lot of people have the dream because they work hard. - Alan
- At first I thought immigrants coming to America would be treated fairly. They actually have a hard time achieving their goal. I think the American Dream does exist...just to be wealthy, have a roof over your head, and these are the dreams. - Josh

The comments these three students made were very similar to what their classmates stated throughout our conversation. They acknowledged that the immigrant experience is a difficult one in America. I believe that when Alan shared his family's story in our seminars it made the story more real for his classmates. My students have an appreciation for hearing real life stories, so giving Alan the opportunity to speak was crucial for all of us. I also think that my students had a change of heart about people who come to America in search of the American Dream. They are starting to realize that we all have adversities that we will need to overcome and they empathize with someone living through the immigrant experience.

Our next question jumped right into a more serious, but necessary discussion on racism: Discuss the theme of racism in the novel. Examples include the students in Mia's class slanting their eyes when learning about China, or the racial profiling of Hank by the police, accusing him of theft just because he is black. What other examples can you think of from the novel. I was hoping that by having this conversation, my students would see that racism is not something that is fake or unable to affect their lives. In a bell ringer prompt, some of my students had disclosed things that had happened to them in the past and I wanted them to share their experiences with each other in hopes of building solidarity and understanding.

- That made me feel mad. It made me upset because everyone shouldn't be treated like that. Just because your skin is that color, we are all similar people. - Jace
- I'm not surprised I was mad about it. Every day there are always people walking by. They see me and they go on the other side. I feel disrespected by that. Another thing I see in the novel is that there is a whole list of who is bad. Most of them are black people. That really is disrespectful. - Matthew

I am sharing what these two students had to say, because they are two of the nicest boys in my classroom. They are helpful and kind; to know they had already experienced racism in sixth grade breaks my heart. The first time we read a racist remark in our book, Jace had slammed his book on the table. He rarely talks in class, but this one instance made him so upset that he needed to speak about what happened in the novel, which is why I let him start the discussion. Matthew on the other hand is personable and loves to volunteer to speak. He is one of those students you enjoy being around, so to hear that someone would avoid him because of the color of his skin triggered a lot of emotions from his classmates and me. Their response to hearing someone their age share their own experience was powerful and it allowed them to trust one another a little more. Though this was the end of our discussions about *Front Desk* the effects were profound.

On January 28, 2020, I received a really fantastic story about my students. The social studies teacher on my team has students giving speeches about a topic that is important to them. He told me one of my shy students, Emerson, got up to give a speech but became too nervous to speak. He let them sit down for a bit to get their composure back. On their second attempt to get up and speak my students cheered them on and encouraged them. I can't put into words how happy this made me feel when he told me the news. This is what I was hoping to see from my students this year. I want them to always encourage each other and support each other everyday and in every class. Finding out that this happened made me feel like I was doing something right. Maybe they did learn something valuable from reading *Front Desk* together.

Socratic Seminar 4

On February 3rd, we began reading our next novel *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone. I have read this novel for the last three years with my homeroom class and I always start in February. I think I chose to start in this month, because it is Black History Month. While I do share a daily historical slide show, I also want to show current happenings and help my students realize that they are making history themselves. Some would say that I extend Black History Month to last until the end of the school year, and they would be right. My students enjoy being empowered so I give them what they need. This story was important for me to read with my students because I wanted them to understand that while being a person of color can be difficult, we are resilient and can persevere. While the main character is African American the lesson to be learned can be applied to all of my students.

The original plan was to have two Socratic Seminars for this book, but with remote learning being the new normal, we only had the chance to do one discussion. On March 9, 2020, I took my students back to the 3rd Floor Planning area, now called the Socratic Seminar

area for my students. My principal came in again to assist with taking notes on the conversation. In fact, the class wanted to make sure he was present to see their discussion. This is an important fact, because my students were never comfortable around our former principal, but they were with our new one. He had been out floor assistant principal previously and they felt safe with him. In this Socratic Seminar we discussed stereotypes, prejudice, and the effects that they have on relationships with others.

To start the conversation, I wanted my students to identify examples of stereotypes and prejudice they had seen in *Dear Martin* and *Front Desk*. My students talked about Justyce being handcuffed while helping a friend, the Halloween Stereotype Costumes gone wrong, the Jordan Davis shooting, and more. In each of the examples, they discussed how stereotyping led to prejudice against the main character Justyce. This conversation needed to be had before we could discuss this question: How do the stereotypes and prejudices we have affect the relationships we have with others? Think about the incidences that Justyce has experienced in *Dear Martin*. I would have never guessed that this one question would have opened the door to the great discussion we would have next.

At first my students talked about points in the book. They brought up the topic for Justyce dating his classmate SJ, who is Jewish, and how his mother would not approve of their interracial relationship. Then the conversation shifted, one of my students, Fabian shared that he had been called a terrorist before and he shared how that had really hurt him. This led to several other students talking about being followed in stores or treated poorly while shopping. I think it's terrible that they have had these experiences at such a young age, but it's good for them to be able to share their experiences with their classmates. Next year I want to continue conversations like this one, because I want to open my student's eyes to other people's struggles so they are able to empathize with one another.

After our Socratic Seminar, the students were asked to do a post Socratic Seminar Self-Reflection. My students will not write past an expectation that has been set, so sometimes their responses can be vague. They needed to summarize the key idea, react to something their classmates said, explain how the Seminar influenced them, and identify a personal goal. I allowed them to finish this at home, because I wanted more thought out reflections. While I could share a couple these two stood out to me the most:

- People put tags on other people. This got me mad. - Alejandro
- The seminar influenced me, to not assume other things about people, without knowing them or going off/believing what other people say. - Ilana

Alejandro's sentiments expressed how a lot of his classmates felt. His frustration with what his classmates have experienced shows an increase in awareness of the world around him. Ilana's statement is so simple, yet profound for a sixth grader. As a teacher, this is something I always remind myself of when I have to make tough decisions or meet new people, but for a sixth grader to internalize this as well I think it speaks volumes. Middle school can be harsh and unkind, because of hormones, changing friendships, and social media. However, it is possible to teach empathy without outright calling your lesson "Empathy." Other students brought up this same point and that is when I knew I had accomplished my goal. I will not say each of my students are perfect, but they can empathize with someone who is different from them. They can listen to one another, stick up for each other, and show support even when I am

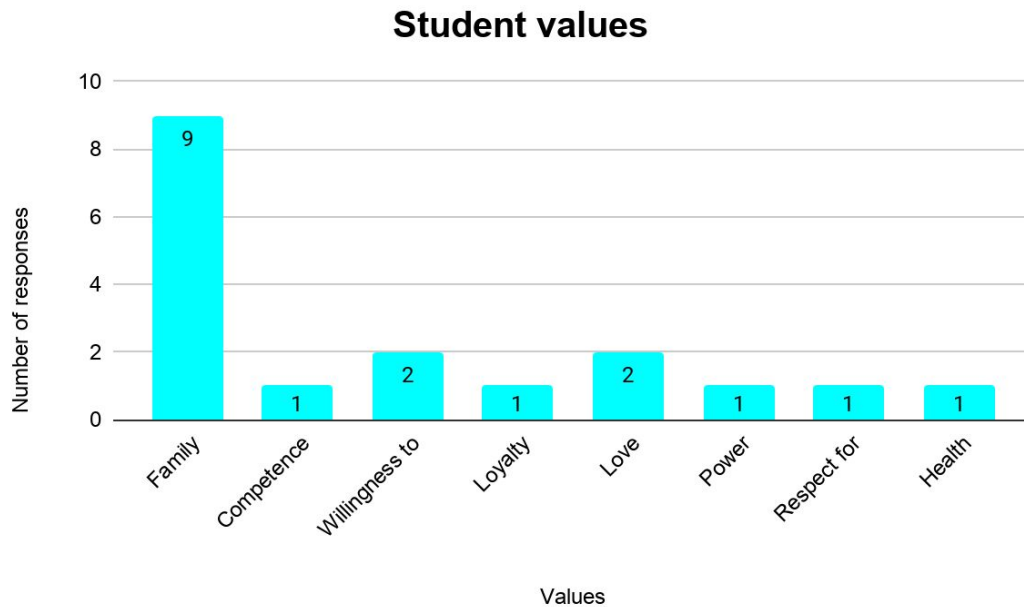
not watching. The thought of a Socratic Seminar is no longer mind boggling and I even think it would be a great strategy to bring into my science classroom.

2. What happens to students' understanding of their identity?

Values

In college I attended an event where Nikki Giovanni was the speaker and she said it best, middle school is awful. If there was a part of school that she could have taken out it would have been middle school. So you would go to school until 5th grade, homeschool for 6th-8th, and then come back to school for high school. I could not have agreed more when she made that comment. I cannot say I hated or loved middle school, it was hard trying to figure out where I belonged and what group of people I should hang out with, not to mention I was the new kid. While my experience of middle school was different from my students, because I went to a junior high school, separated from the elementary and high school students, I still experienced the normal struggles of understanding who I was. Sixth grade is such a fascinating time, you are still a little kid wanting to impress your teacher, but you're becoming a big kid who cares about what people think of you. While my students were concerned about the impressions they made on their friends, I wondered how they see themselves. Obviously, I had several big personalities in my room, sprinkled with rule followers, and shy kids, so I made a point to dig deeper and learn more.

I thought I would start off simple by learning about my students' values, which happen to be a before reading activity for our first novel *Front Desk*. On October 15, 2019, I asked my students to answer a writing response about a value they would never give up. Before the writing activity, students were given 3 values and could trade them until they received the 3 they wanted. I gave students about 8 minutes to try to trade the value cards in the third floor planning area. We had a short discussion after the trading time ended. Many students were not able to get the one card they wanted which was family. Some students were willing to trade, but could not find someone who had something they were willing to trade for. There were 3 students who did arrive late to the activity, but they were able to participate in trading and discussing their thoughts. After we discussed the values cards, we returned back to the classroom and I asked students to write about the values they had and the one they would never give up even if they didn't have it. Unfortunately 8/24 students did not respond to the prompt.



Here were some of their responses:

- **Love** - If I love someone, I would never hurt them or make them feel unwanted. - Priscilla
- **Family** - They help you in life at you(r) hardest times, They help you find your competence. - Matthew
- **Family** - They protect, support, and love me until the end of the world.- Eva

Family is a large part of my students' identity. Fifty percent of the responses I received had family as the one value they would not give up. Many of those students depend on family for love, safety, and security. When students chose willingness to help others, loyalty, and love it often had to do with familial relationships and friendships. I was surprised by the value of power appearing in the responses. I think this might be a response that came up because as a 6th grader my students rarely can control the situations they are put in, so they would like more control over their lives. While this activity gave me some insight into my students, I knew it was time to dig deeper.

First Novel Survey

My first attempt at learning about my students did not go as planned in some ways, but it was a start. In the First Novel Survey, I gave on November 5, 2019 I decided to find out what my students' opinions were about themselves. See First Novel Survey in appendix 2. They completed the survey within 15-20 minute during our first period writing class. As I mentioned before middle school can be a really difficult time for children, because they are starting to define their identity. I asked them to give me three adjectives that their former teacher would use to describe them and three adjectives to describe themselves. In reading the students short

responses, I was happy to see that the majority of students have a positive view about themselves.

- Eva's three adjectives were creative, smart, and beautiful. She said, "I chose those three adjectives that I wrote in the last question because I believe those three adjectives describe what I know I am."
- Shawn chose active, talkative, and social as his three adjectives. He stated, "I talk a lot. I'm very social and love sports."
- Brittani sees herself as fun, nice, and loud, "because when I am in a room I will make people smile and laugh out loud."
- Matthew chose brilliant, loyal, and nice and said, "because it is the truth."

There were only two students who didn't state a positive attribute. I found this to be strange, because neither of these students came off as negative people. Priscilla seemed a little disinterested at times, but what teenager isn't? In a few writing prompts and surveys, I learned that Priscilla often felt like she didn't belong and that she lacked friends. I made note of the things that upset her about previous classes and tried to pair her up with students that I thought she could become friends with or shared common interests.

- Priscilla's three adjectives were loud, nonindependent, and distracted and she chose them because, "these traits are things that I have problems with."

My other student, Randall, always appears jovial and helpful. He seems to have quite a few friends in our homeroom. He's active in after school sports and activities. He even enjoys sharing his ideas with the class, which is why his response caught me off guard. I wonder if his view of himself relates back to something an adult may have said to him in the past. I hope that this year will help him find the positive qualities that I have seen in him since he was on the 5th and 6th grade volleyball team I coached.

- Randall only wrote one description, "I think I talk too much because I get in trouble for talking."

I also had a few students relate the way they see themselves to how other people see them. Even though I saw many students use similar words between the teacher opinion question and their own opinion of themselves, Emerson's response stuck out to me. I've known Emerson since second grade and found her to be exactly as she said people describe her. She also appeared to be shy and self-conscious at times. This year however was pivotal for her, because she decided that she wanted to use the pronouns he or they, which I will use going forward when talking about them. They are discovering themselves and hoping for acceptance from their friends like most middle schoolers do.

- Emerson chose imaginative, artistic, and funny. They stated, "My mom mostly tells me the first two, I asked Priscilla about the last one."

While I enjoyed reading what the students wrote, I was somewhat disappointed in the responses that students gave when I asked them to explain why they chose the three adjectives that they did. I had wanted more details, but I realized that many of my students rarely explain

or give more than the bare minimum in written responses. Through this experience, I learned to be very detailed in future surveys and written responses about my expectations. I would explain how many sentences I expected for a response and I became more elaborative in my questioning. I think if I had more time I would have been able to teach my students what a proper response looks like. I could have shared more examples or given them a writing checklist to teach them how to respond in a way that would allow me to see what they really think.

My students are like the typical middle schooler when they have to describe how they see themselves. They define who they are by what they have been told. I wanted for them to look more deeply into their identity with less focus on what they have been told in the past. As I continued giving more surveys, I learned to be more specific in what I needed back from my students and gave them sentence stems to assist them with their responses. Next, I needed to dig deeper into helping my students understand their identity.

Race and Ethnicity Survey

While working on my literature review, I found an article “In Spite of Racism, Inequality, and School Failure: Defining Hope with Achieving Black Children” by Dr. Amanishakete Ani. This article led me to begin digging deeper into understanding how my students see themselves. Dr. Ani had mentioned how black adolescents who had an understanding of their racial identity and ethnicity were better equipped to deal with obvious stressors in life. I wanted to see how their race and ethnicity factor into how they see themselves and what they hope for the future. I used some of the same questions Ani (2013) used in this survey, see appendix 3, I gave my homeroom students this survey as morning bell work during 1st period on December 10, 2019. They were able to take the survey using their iPads. The students were given 30 minutes to complete the survey. Each student was present when the survey was given, however some did not complete the survey when time was given, so they had to complete it another day.

One of the most frustrating things about the data from this survey is that some of my students did not follow the instructions given, so their responses don't make sense at times.

Two things stood out to me regarding question 1: What does it mean for you to be your race, ethnicity, and religion? Example: African American, Catholic (Write no less than 3 complete sentences).

1. Seven students had positive views on who they were based on race, ethnicity, and religion. I expected to see more responses like this because my students are still fairly young.

Eva said, “How it feels to be Hispanic is an honor. It is a very fun ethnicity to be a part of. I love its history and family from all over the world.”

Randall's response was, “African American, to me it means a brave, smart, fierce, intelligent man or woman.”

Eva has maintained a positive view of herself since the beginning of the school year. She has pride in who she is and is able to speak confidently about where she comes from. Randall's responses for this survey are very different from what I saw in the first survey. His response is positive and he seems proud of his heritage. I wonder if he was having a bad morning the day he took our first survey. This response seems more like the student I have come to know. It is also possible that our talks in class and Socratic Seminar have made him more comfortable with who he is.

2. The other interesting point I saw was the students who showed an advanced awareness of society because of their race and/or ethnicity. Two of the students who wrote their concerns were African American boys and one Indian (Asian) boy.

Aaron stated, "African American, Christian. What it means to be my race is that it makes me different and how people look at me different. Some people think all African Americans are dangerous. Most African Americans can't get a good paying job most of the time because most owners are still racist, not all though."

Josh's response was, "My race is black, ethnicity is islander, and religion is Christian. The way I look gives people mixed reactions. Also the way I act gives people reactions b/c I don't act a certain way."

The way Aaron responded to this question reminds me of how older African Americans talk. It was almost like he repeated something that an adult might have said to him in the past. His concerns are the concerns that many African Americans have because of the systemic inequality that we have faced throughout the history of the United States. I did a follow up interview with Josh to better understand his response. In our talk he stated that as a young black man people label him as though he is growing up to be a thug. When he interacts with people of a different race he tries to do the opposite of what is expected, like showing manners and using proper grammar. What is clear about both of these students responses to this question is that they are aware of the world around them. I wonder if their parents have had a talk with them before about how society will perceive them and how they may need to act in order to survive. This is not uncommon in many African American households, my parents did this with all of my siblings and me. While this might be surprising, it is most certainly necessary in today's society and it does affect your identity.

For question 2: How does your race, ethnicity, and religion influence you? (Write no less than 3 complete sentences). Some students voiced their concerns about other's negative views of them because of their race.

Matthew stated, "Since I'm black most people see me as a bad influence. But If I've known you for a long time you'll become less and less scared of me and other black people. When someone is scared of me I feel weird."

Matthew is one of my students who is very vocal about his opinions. He's willing to talk about the uncomfortable issues and debate when necessary. His response shows he realizes that people who aren't black might not see him for who he actually is. I appreciate that he knows that he can prove the stereotypes he faces to be wrong.

Quite a few of my students talked about the desire to learn about their history and their love for the culture.

Priscilla said, "It influences me to know more about my roots and to be the kind of religious person my parents want me to become."

Priscilla's responses in this survey are quite thoughtful in comparison to the previous

survey. I can see that her family's opinion means a lot to her and the values her family has taught her are apparent. I think many of my students can relate to what she has written here. I wonder how this might or might not change for her as she goes through middle school and high school.

For question 3: How does being your race, ethnicity, and religion affect what you hope for? (Write no less than 3 complete sentences). This was the question that was the most frustrating to review. I don't think that my students really understood what I expected in their answer. I should have framed the questions this way: if there were no limits and nothing preventing you from achieving your goals, what do you want to accomplish in life/or what would your career be? I had 6 students who did give answers that were valid. After reflecting on this question, I realized that I should have given an example to help guide my students.

Eva responded, "My race, ethnicity, and religion affect me. What I hope for in the future is more justice for my family and many more families and people like me all over the world hoping for a change. I think only a little change can have a huge impact on my country. An impact that will probably save my culture from its struggles etc."

Eva's response shows me that she is aware of the disadvantages she could face because of her Hispanic heritage, but she has hope for the future. I also saw a lot of discouraging answers regarding hope. A lot of my students worried about judgement from others, historical disadvantages because of race, and deportation.

Emerson stated, "It doesn't really change anything in my opinion, just cause I'm half Peruvian doesn't mean I can't become a teacher... unless Trump sends all the Mexicans away... then we have a problem."

Randall said, "Sometimes it's hard, because in the 1800's Black people were treated wrong, and were forced to work for white people, so it can be hard to just hope that the next day it can all go away."

Both Emerson and Randall are keenly aware of the inequalities they could face because of their identity, but they have different outlooks. Emerson is able to continue their dream of one day being a teacher. They don't see their race or ethnicity having any effect on their ability to achieve their dream. Their only fear is our current president taking that dream away from them. It pains me to see them have to worry about one person having that kind of power over them. Randall on the other hand is so overcome with worry that he cannot state what he hopes for. His response broke my heart, because I want all of my students to have hope for something. My immediate reaction to this response was how do I fix this? I realized I cannot fix or change history, but I can inspire change. I can show him and all of my students the wonderful things they can hope for. I can teach them how to achieve their goals and give them the tools to write a better future.

This survey was eye opening because many of my students voiced their fears and concerns about life. It is very apparent that my students are aware of historical inequalities and the injustices that are still happening today. I think it's good for them to talk about that, but I also want them to have a growth mindset and know that they can overcome any obstacle that they face. My students who do have a strong sense of identity seem to have been taught to have

pride for who they are through their family. While I cannot prove these two things are correlated, I wonder how I can foster more positive identity conversations with my students.

Front Desk Final Test Short Response

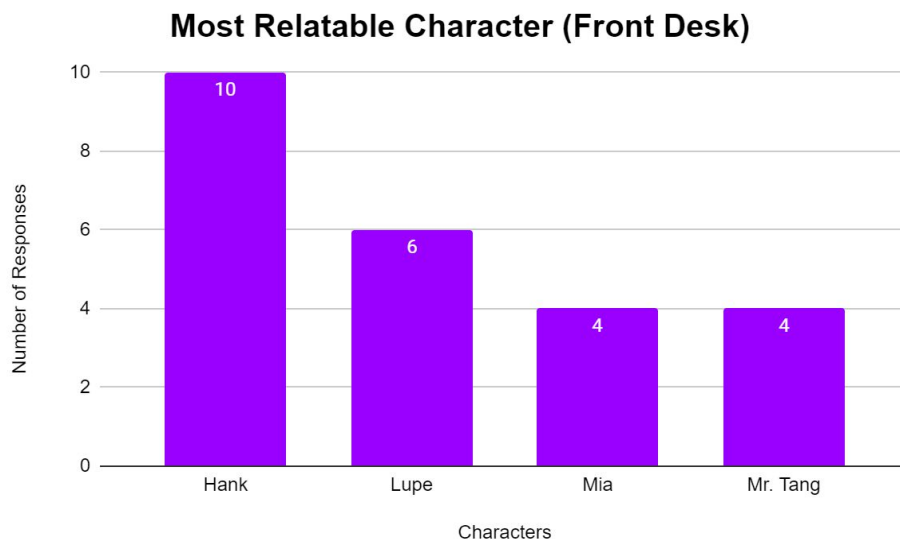
After students finished reading the *Front Desk* novel in class I gave them two short response questions based on the text. Those two questions were:

1. Which character do you think you relate to the most in *Front Desk*? In your explanation please give 3 reasons why you and the character are alike and use textual evidence to support your reasoning. **(8 or more sentences)**
2. Now that you have finished *Front Desk*, what is **one** value that you would never give up. Has this value changed since the beginning of the book? What makes this value important to you? **(8 or more sentences)**

On January 14, 2020, the students were given one writing period in class, 45 minutes, to respond to both responses. Most students finished in class. The eight students who did not finish or were absent were allowed to come in during recess and lunch to finish their responses. Each student was given the opportunity to write a response to the prompts.

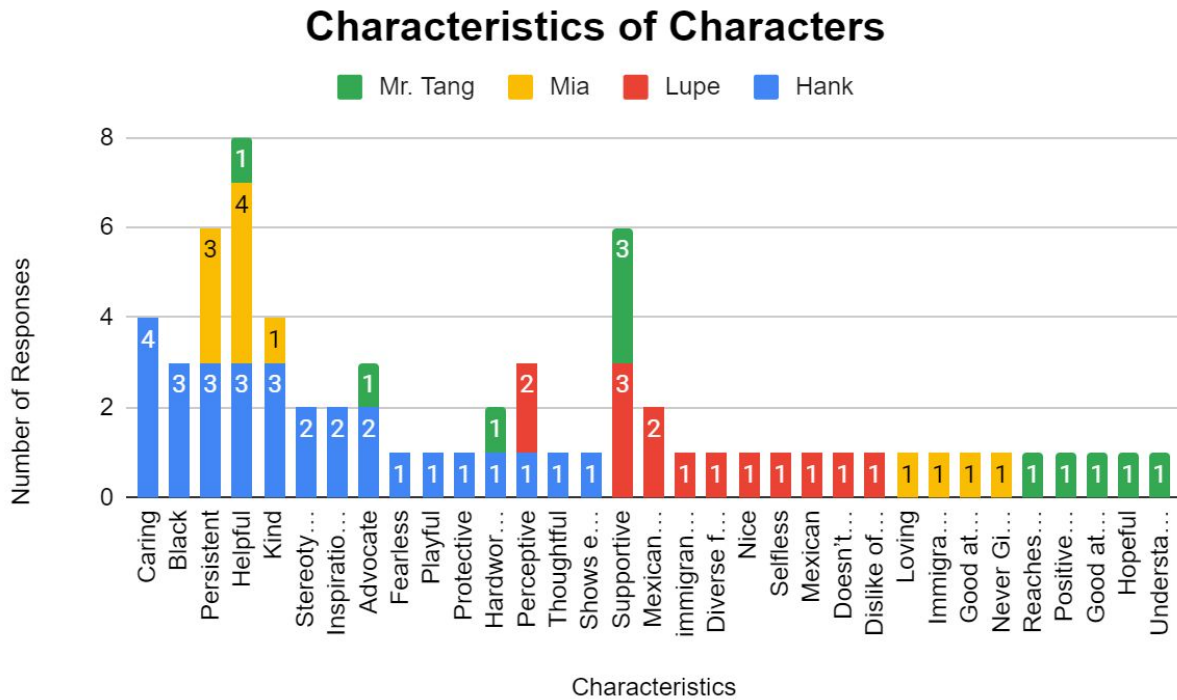
I gave students a graphic organizer to respond to the first prompt the week before they had to write the short response (see appendix 4). I did this to help students organize their thoughts before writing. The graphic organizer was completed in class and at home, so I did not receive all of them back. The ones I did not receive back did not actually complete the graphic organizer, which happened to only be three students.

The second question I am using to see if students' values changed from the beginning to the end of the novel. The big issue with the comparison is that nine students did not complete the original response the first time it was given for question two, so there was nothing to compare. I also had one student not complete the prompt both times.



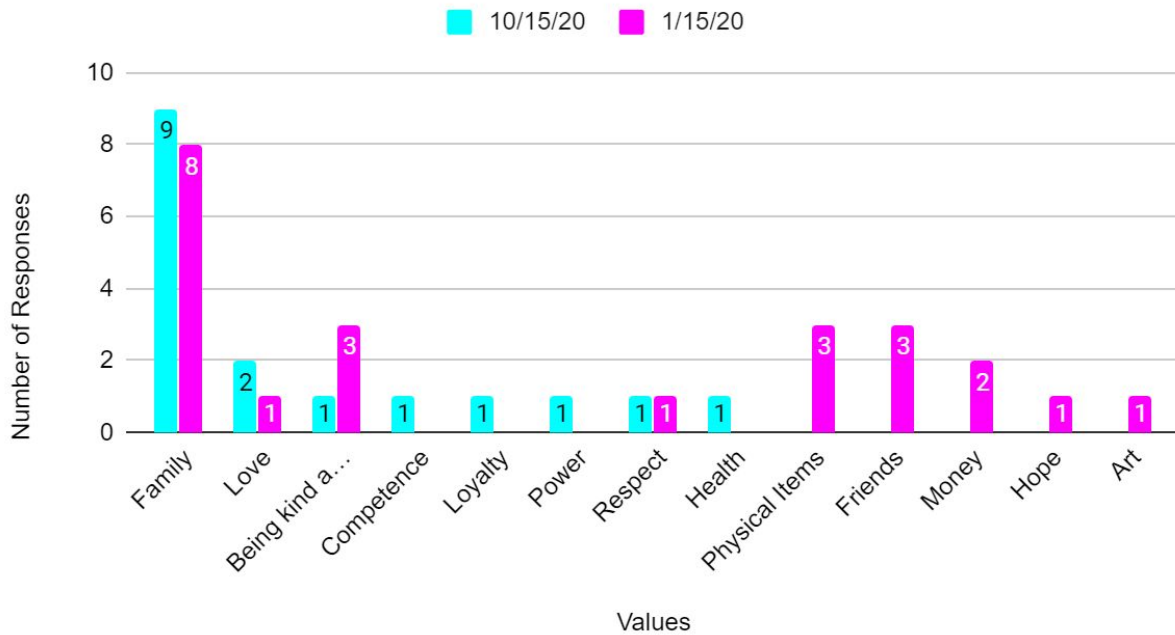
In my first attempt to learn more about my student's view of themselves, I did not get enough information, so I decided to have the students compare themselves to a character in *Front Desk*. In the graph above, I have shared who my students relate to the most in the novel. In the graphs below, I wanted students to share what characteristics they see in themselves by

using the characteristics they see in the novel characters.



The responses to the first question, Which character do you think you relate to the most in *Front Desk*? In your explanation please give 3 reasons why you and the character are alike and use textual evidence to support your reasoning., shows me that my students generally see themselves in a positive light. Many of them identify that they are supportive, helpful, and persistent among other things. The characters that the students chose were not always the person that shared the same racial identity as themselves. Only 13 of my 24 students selected a character of the same race, with just six identifying race being something they had in common with the character. Seventeen of the students chose a character with the same gender as themselves. No students identified gender being a characteristic that was shared, this does surprise me a little bit. I guess gender is not necessarily what my students look at when they are thinking about what they have in common with book characters. I had two students identify negative experiences as a common factor between themselves and their character, both students are African American. I wonder if this will come up again when my students read the next novel *Dear Martin*, specifically with my African American students.

Values: 10/15/19 vs. 1/15/20



The responses to my second question were somewhat expected. A lot of my students chose values based on issues they saw the main character experienced. I think reading the novel puts certain things into perspective for my students. They learned to appreciate the people and things in their lives because of what Mia Tang experienced as an immigrant. Learning what my students value also allows me to learn what's important to them and that can show me the type of person they are too. I wish that I would have had previous data to look at for those students who did not complete the first writing response.

These two writing responses allowed me to learn more about my students. When I first asked them to use three adjectives to describe themselves, they could not describe why they chose them. Allowing them to compare who they are to a book character helped me see how they see themselves. Reading about what they valued also taught me what they saw as important in their lives. I wonder if being quarantined would change their values at all, I suspect that the students who chose family still would.

Just Because Poem

In one of our class discussions we began talking about how my students hate being compared to anyone in their family. It seemed like the biggest problem was that their parents would never see the positive qualities they had, they only could see what they lacked. As we began reading *Dear Martin*, my students learned about stereotypes and how they can affect the way you live. I wanted to use this part of the book to allow my students to address the stereotypes they face and share with the class who they actually are.

On February 14, 2020, I assigned my students a Just Because poem. They were to write a three stanza poem addressing the stereotypes the main character, Justyce, was facing in *Dear Martin* (see appendix 5). In each stanza you list a stereotype as the first line, then in the

following three lines you negate the stereotype, and in the final line you write something positive. I asked the students to do one for the book before they did their own, so we could talk through it and they could have practice. Here was my favorite one out of the class:

Just Because Poem

By: Eva

Just because I am Mexican,
I am not a criminal,
I am not illegal,
I am not involved in drugs.
I am a nice person.

Just because I am Tall,
I am not super strong,
I am not a bully/mean,
I am not better than anyone.
I am human.

Just because I am a girl,
I am not weak,
I am not an object,
I am not an easy target.
I am mature.

I remember reading the poems to my coworkers at lunch after students had turned them in. This one stuck out to me the most, because it was well written and honest. After lunch, I picked up my students and went directly to Eva to share how much I loved her poem and asked if I could share it with the class when we entered the classroom. She calmly said she did not mind at all and she was happy I liked it. Later, after school Eva emailed me and thanked me for complimenting her poem and told me it had made her day.

What I realized from this interaction and in giving feedback about the poems was that my students just want to be loved for who they are. They do not want to be stereotyped or compared to someone else. They are in constant need of positive reinforcement and positive interactions. I think as adults we forget that about middle schoolers, because they are big and hormonal. However, they are big kids that still need love and kindness even when they are not at their best, especially then. They are still forming their identities and as teachers we have to remind them of how special and unique they are.

3. What happens to students' motivation for reading?

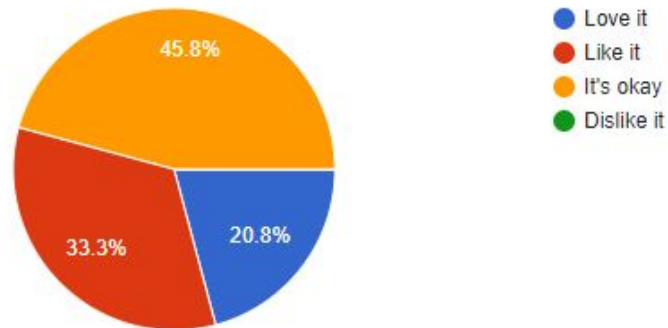
First Novel Survey Revisited

I created a survey to find out more about my students' opinion of reading and their

opinion about themselves. They took this survey two days after we returned to school from the strike, November 5, 2019. This was also right around the beginning of us reading our first novel together. Each student completed the survey during their writing period that morning. It took most students 15-20 minutes to complete.

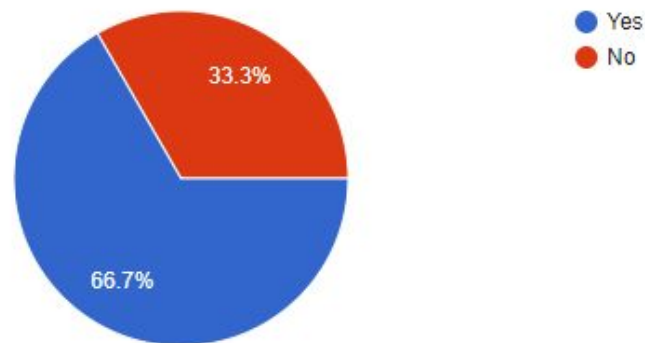
Do you enjoy reading?

24 responses



Do you read at home?

24 responses



In reviewing the data, it was good to see that none of my students dislike reading. However, 45.8% describe reading as "it's okay." While we had been in school for a couple of months together, I wondered if every student was honest in their response. At this point in the year, my students were aware of my excitement to read with them and my feelings could have deterred them from being honest about their opinion. As we were going through our first novel, I continuously wondered if students were engaged or enjoying the book. I was somewhat surprised about the number of students who don't read at home, $\frac{1}{3}$ of students. I wondered if there was a lack of interest, a lack of time, or both. As students transition into sixth grade, their workload changes. Subjects like science and social studies become more important than in previous grades, which means there is a potential for more homework and less time for casual reading.

Another point I wanted to learn in this survey was related to the type of books my students preferred reading. I knew what I would have time to cover within this school year, but I wanted to make sure there were other books available in my classroom library that students could check out on their own.

Type of book	Number of Students that preferred this type of book
Graphic novels	10
Historical fiction	5
History/autobiography/biography/non-fiction	5
Chapter books	4
Action books	3
Comedy/comic books	3
Mystery	2
Romance	1
Science Fiction	1
Sports books	1

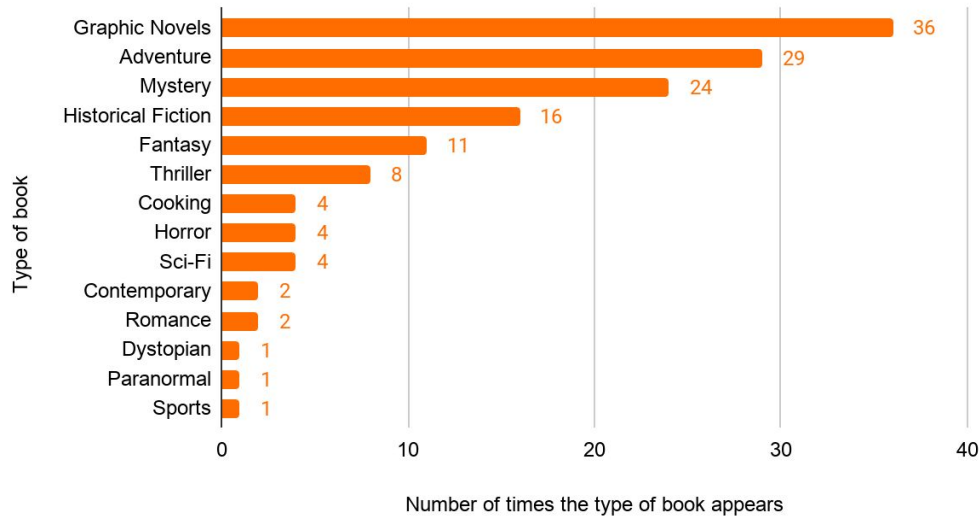
What was most evident was how many students enjoy graphic novels. I don't really know much about graphic novels, but I will definitely be adding more of them to my classroom library. There were a couple of points that stuck with me after this survey. First, my students don't hate reading, but it may not be the subject they enjoy the most. Which meant that I needed to be thoughtful about what material I brought to them, so they wouldn't lose interest quickly. The second point was that while there is some variety in what my students like to read, most students clearly favor graphic novels and historical fiction and non-fiction. I built a stronger relationship with my students by knowing what they liked and I brought it into our class as much as possible. As I continued giving more surveys, I learned to be more specific in what I needed back from my students and gave them sentence stems to assist them with their responses.

Are You Reading Survey

After returning to school from winter break, I decided to collect data on what type of books my students were reading. We were in between reading the two books I selected for the year, so I was curious to know what types of books my students were reading. Every Thursday my students go to the Library for their Exploratory course. They have class with Ms. Albarran, for 1 hour each week. I gave the "Are You Reading" survey the Friday or Monday after the students had gone to the library to check out books. My students took this survey from January

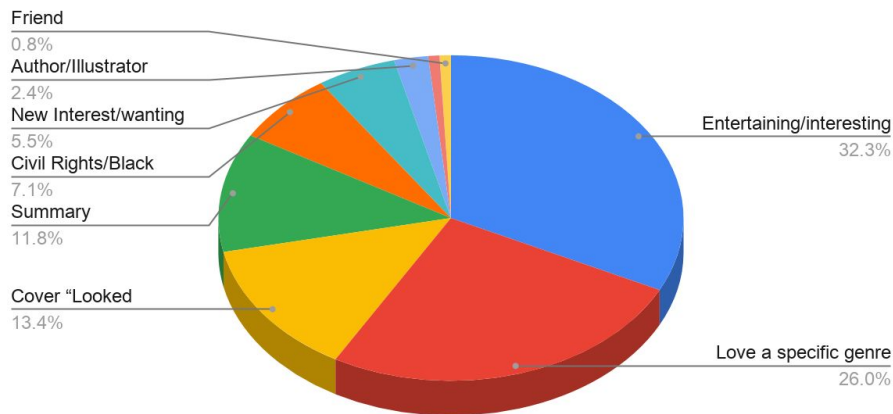
10, 2020 to March 10, 2020. Most students took the survey 8 times. The survey can take anywhere between 10-15 minutes to complete. Some students did not take the survey every week because they were absent on Library day.

Type of book vs. Number of times the type of book appears



Graphic novels, adventure, and mystery books were their favorite types of books to read. This is not a surprise considering how they responded in the first novel survey. I wonder what sparked their interest in adventure and mystery, perhaps it is their love for entertainment.

Reasons for reading a book

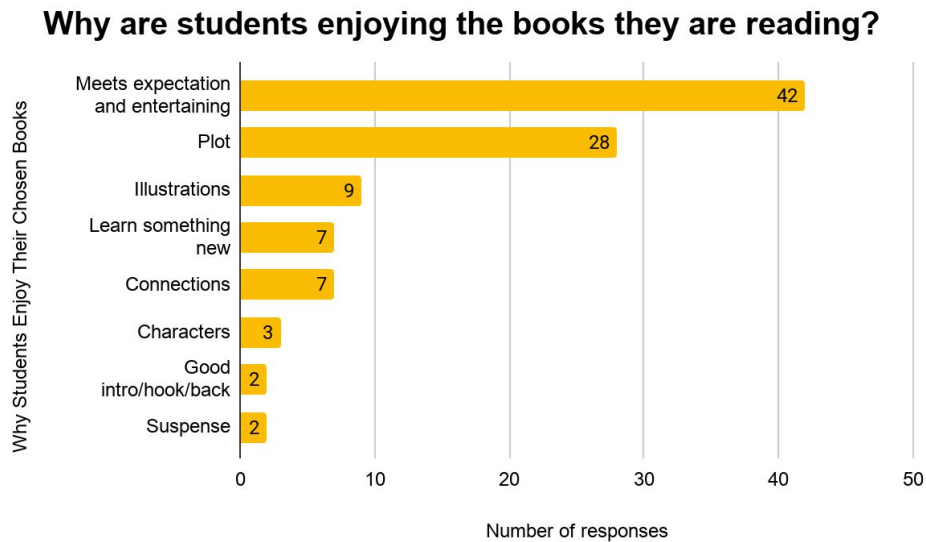


My students primary reason for reading is entertainment. Many of my students are drawn to books that fit into a specific genre. Sam, Gino, and Priscilla did not venture out to new types of novels they stuck to Graphic Novels, which they all love. I think it is great that they know what they enjoy, but I do not want it to limit them in the future when they have to read other types of books. Going forward I want to make sure I continue to expose these students to new genres, so they are not overwhelmed by them in future classes.

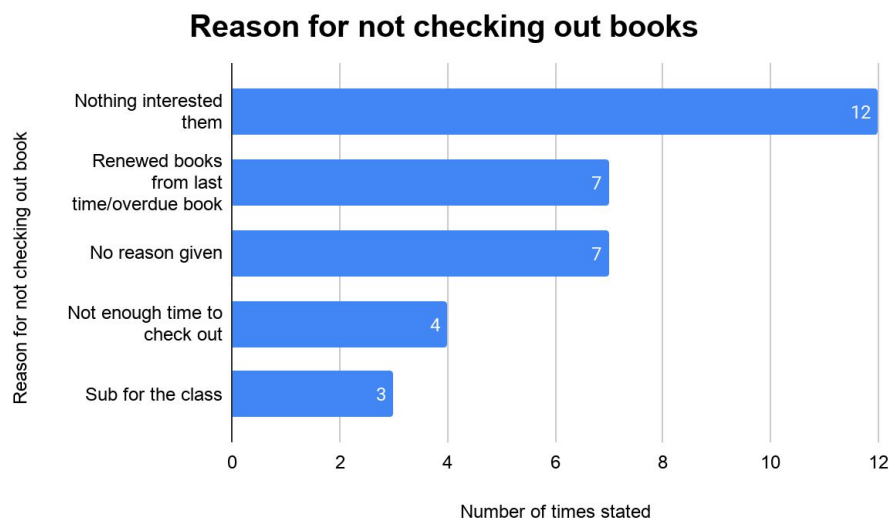
Eva, Brittani, Taylor, Brandon, and Randall checked out books relating to curriculum on Black History Month and the Civil Rights Movement in order to further their knowledge. I am ecstatic that my mini lessons prior to and during Black History Month inspired my students to want to read more about history. I wonder if this is a new found interest or something that they have always enjoyed reading.

Another student, Amanda, mentioned checking out books with characters she had something in common with, relating to race. Amanda also checked out books that were “new” for her. She stated she wanted to try something new three times. I appreciate her desire to seek a variety of books. I wonder if her interest in finding something new relates to our class reading Front Desk together.

If there was more time in the school year, I would have updated the survey and asked more specific questions about why students choose their books to avoid the answer “it interested me.” I found that response to be vague, because I do not actually know why it interested them.



I used two follow up questions about what the students expected from the book to gain more insight, but some students did not answer those questions properly. I wonder if any of the characters in the books chosen looked like or shared characteristics with the students who chose them.



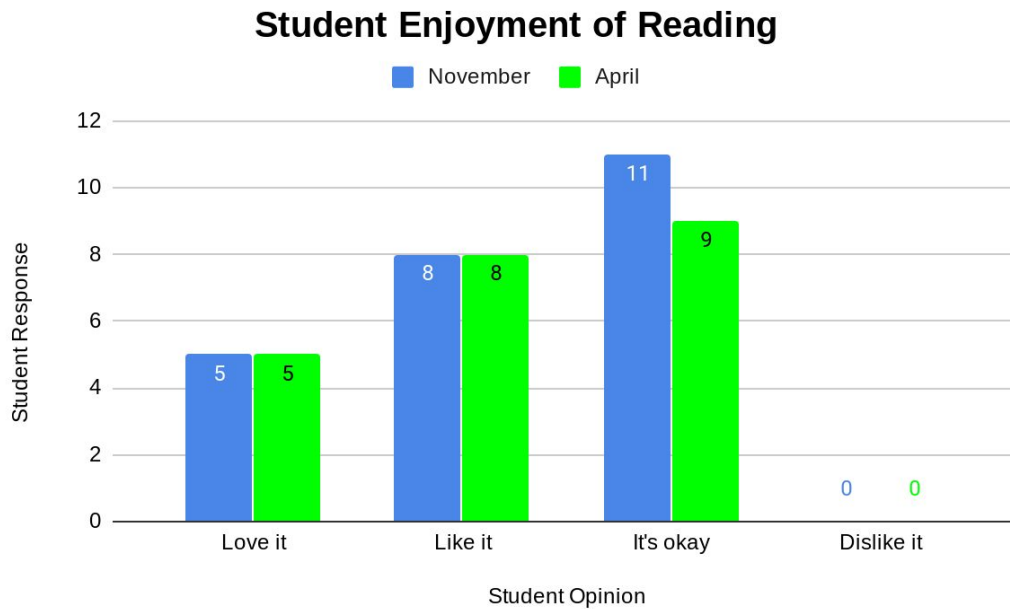
There were 18 total students who at some point did not check out books, of those students eight stated reading is “Just okay” in the first novel survey given in November. It is strange to see how many times a student wrote they did not find something to read, because our school library has a vast selection of books. I would be interested to know if those students just did not care to find a book or if they were waiting on a book that was not returned yet.

I was shocked to see how certain students, Josh and Aaron, did not take the survey seriously and did not give a response to some of the questions. These two students are typically on board to complete the assignments that I give, so maybe they felt rushed or just did not have enough time to reflect. Another surprise on the last survey was from Sam, he said he doesn’t like reading. This was odd because in November he did like reading according to his survey response. A part of me thinks he was just fed up with taking the same survey.

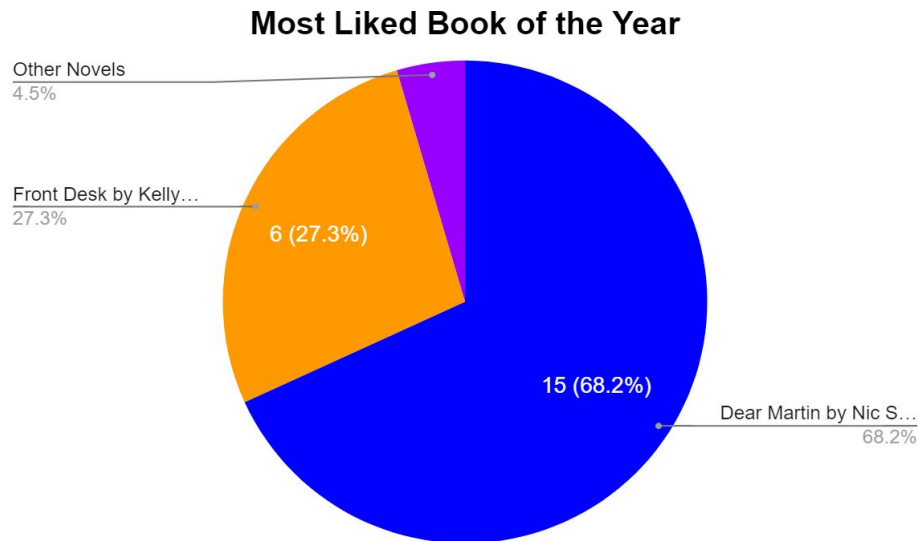
Upon reflecting on this survey I realized that some students are focused in the morning when I ask them to complete a response and some of them are not. I wonder if I had asked them to respond later in the day or at home, would I have been given better or more detailed information. Understanding how the middle school brain is motivated can be difficult depending on the day of the week. Since we have finished reading my selected novels, I think a final novel survey would be helpful to see if students’ opinion of reading has changed and learn more about the books they choose.

Final Novel Survey

When I realized that we would not resume school, I figured it would be important to get my students final thoughts about the books they have read this school year. We finished reading *Front Desk* right after winter break and *Dear Martin* the week before spring break. Both of these novels may still be in the front of my student’s mind when taking the survey, but it is quite alright if they are not. I gave my students this survey on April 24th via Google Classroom with a video explaining my expectations. The students were given a week to complete it. I only had two students not complete the survey by Friday, which was expected since one has not been responsive to assignments since remote learning began. See survey in appendix 6.



In the first survey, given in November 2019, I had all 24 students participate in the survey and I saw the “it’s okay” response was chosen the most. In the April 2020 survey, I had 22 students respond, and the “it’s okay” response had decreased. While I cannot be sure how the two missing students would have responded it is exciting to see that no one chose the “dislike it” option. I had wondered if my students were afraid to say they disliked reading on the first survey, because of a fear of disappointing me. I would like to believe they were honest in this survey, because they did the survey on their own time and at home, instead of in the classroom with me. I am also excited to see that certain students' enjoyment of reading has increased, which could have to do with reading books they can relate to. Brandon described reading as “okay” in the Fall, but now “loves it”. Gino loved reading in the Fall, now he likes it. Aaron and Randall originally describe reading as okay in the Fall, but now they like it. Sam and Brittani liked reading in the Fall, but now describe it as okay. I am okay with my students' change in feeling about reading, it is good for them to be honest and as their teacher I will continue to search for books that interest them. Next year I will give this survey at the beginning of the year, so I can be more thoughtful in choosing books to read. I will also utilize the librarian for more ideas on engaging my students who are not as fond of reading.



Dear Martin by Nic Stone was my student's favorite book this school year, which is not a huge surprise. Every group that I have read this novel to really connects with the events and message in this book regardless of their race or background. An interesting point here is that we had to finish the novel outside of school, because schools were closed. I knew that there would be students who forgot their book at school, so I did live readings for them. Front Desk by Kelly Yang was the second most liked book, which we read in the first part of the school year. I think this book also shares the message of perseverance through difficult times just as Dear Martin does. The one student who chose another book did not follow the instructions of the survey and chose a book from outside of this school year. When students filled out this survey I did not expect them to choose between the two books we read together, they could have stated any book they read this school year. I did not know my students preferences in novels when I chose these two books, but I am grateful that the book meant something to them.

I asked my students the question: Did the book change how you thought about things? What did you learn?

Dear Martin:

- Not really, I learned that sometimes when it's people being racist, you can show them who you are, and how black people are as equal as them. - Randall
- Yes, from what I have read, this book has changed how I thought about things because I realized how cruel some people can be to others just because of the color of their skin or what they wear. (when Justyce was in a hoodie, they assumed it was a criminal). What I have learned is how much you can be affected by one or two people always assuming your life and what's in it. - Eva

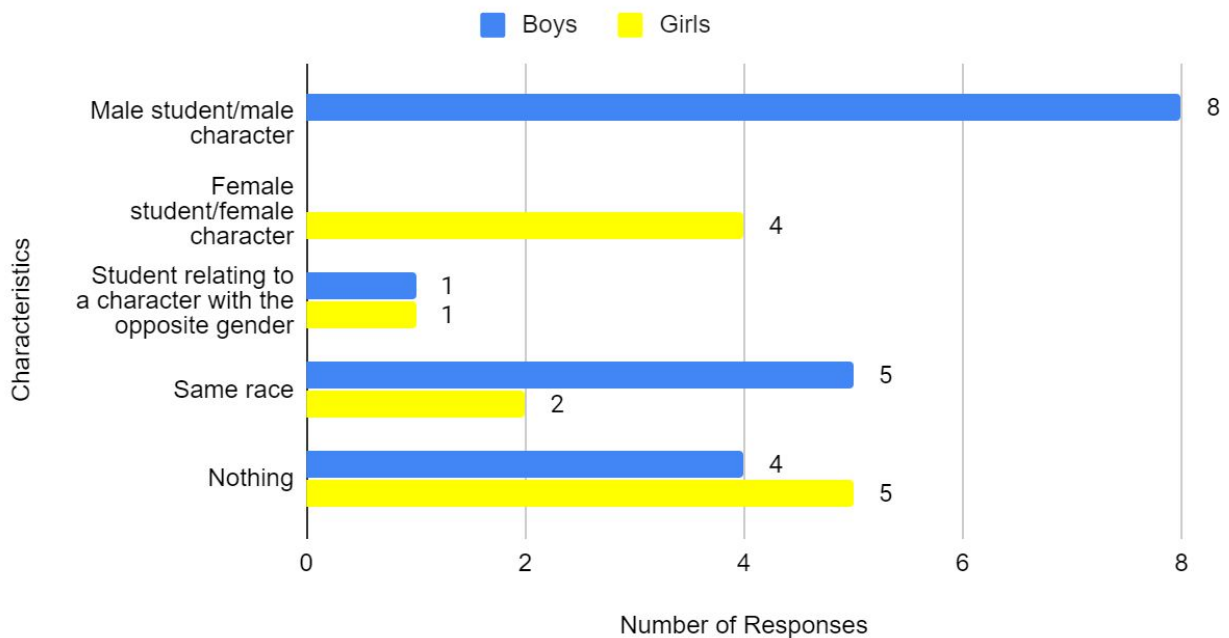
Front Desk

- Yes, I have always been aware that it is not easy to immigrate from one country to another with barely any money but this book showed me the exact thing that my family went through such as working multiple jobs. - Amanda
- Yes I learned that if you work hard and never give up you can achieve your dreams. -

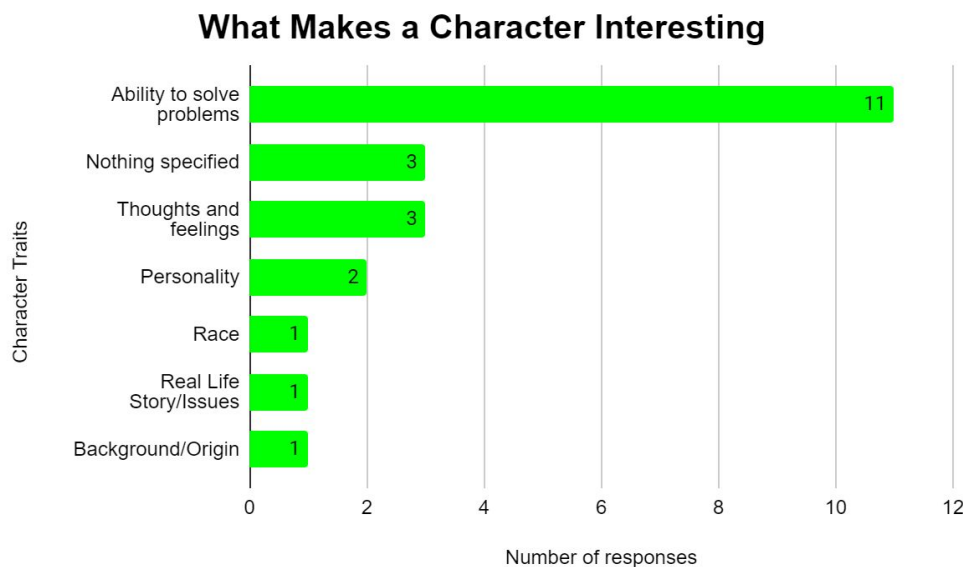
Shira

Reading what all of my students learned from these novels was eye opening. Many of them were aware of the inequalities that people of color face, but some were not. By giving them a window to see how people who are different from them face daily struggles they were able to empathize with them. It was also important for my students to see how people in their age group deal with and overcome traumatic or difficult events.

Characters that Seem Like You



Another question I had was what type of characters my students enjoy reading about. At first, I asked them: Did any of the characters seem like you? What were the names of the characters and explain your reasoning. I was curious to see if there were any connections between race and/or gender. It seems as though my boys prefer to read about boy character, whereas my girls do not seem to mind as much. It is possible that gender in characters matters more to the boys than the girls. I wonder if gender mattered more when my students were younger. Five of my male students chose a character with the same race and only two of my girls chose a character of the same race. It seems like reading about characters with a similar race may not be as important in choosing a book for these students. For the nine students who did not seem to have anything in common with any character, I wonder how I could have reached them better.



What does seem to resonant with my students is reading about the problems a character faces and how they solve their problems. Middle school is filled with drama and maybe my students are looking for ways to figure out the problems they face on a daily basis. I wonder if this will change as they get older and have more life experiences. The other characteristic some students looked at was if the character shared the same thoughts and feelings that they had. I believe that we all want our feelings to be validated about certain issues, so I was not surprised to see this come up.

This final survey was important for me to do because I needed to know if I am increasing my students' motivation to read. I did not see a large increase in students wanting to read and I realize now that I might have missed an opportunity with certain kids. I wonder if I added a third book, perhaps a graphic novel, would I have engaged more students, specifically the ones who could not relate to any character. My school is more diverse than many schools in the city of Chicago, so right now race does not appear to be a determining factor in how my students choose books, but maybe that will change as the move out of my school. What did appear to be most important in choosing a book is learning about social justice issues and how to handle uncomfortable situations and problems. I will continue adding books like these to the curriculum next year.

4. What happens to students' reading growth and achievement when they are given novels to read?

NWEA Testing

Before the school year begins, we look at our incoming students NWEA MAP testing data. As a science teacher I can appreciate reviewing data, but usually we only look at reading and math scores. I could say that this has nothing to do with me, but it does because in science I teach math and reading skills and in writing class I read novels. This year I looked at my students data and decided to take on more ownership. My students for the 2019-2020 school year took the Spring 2019 NWEA MAP Reading test at the end of the school year in 5th grade. I

printed their data at the beginning of the school year to see what areas my students would need help in this year. Students typically take this test in the computer lab within their pod or the large computer lab on the 3rd floor. Their 5th grade homeroom teacher was the proctor for the test. The test can range between 1-3 hours, my students testing range time was between 50-178 minutes. I was not present during this test, so I do not know if there were any issues present on the day of the test.

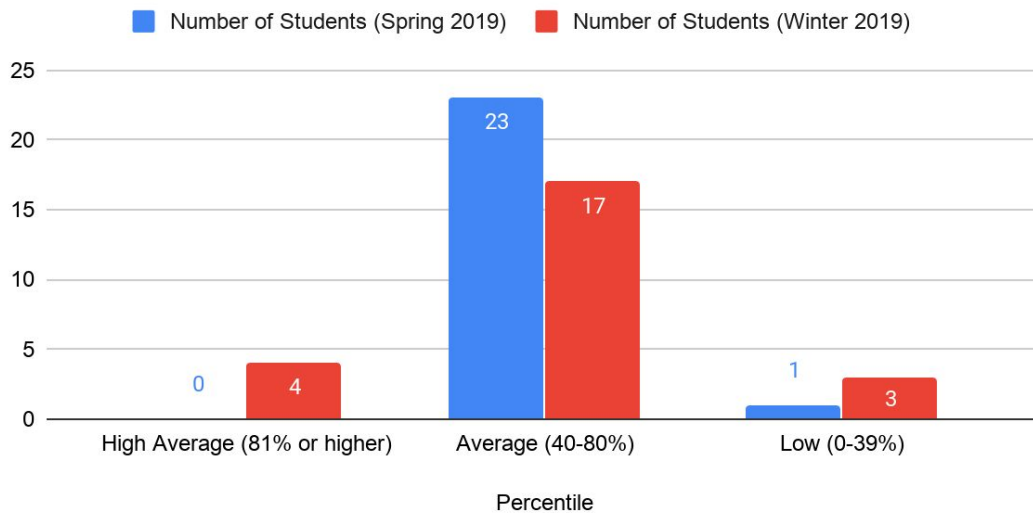
My students took the Winter 2019 NWEA MAP Reading test in December in the 3rd floor computer lab with me. They took between 71-178 minutes to complete the test. The majority of the students finished within the 2 hour testing block that I had reserved in the lab. There were about 5 students who needed more time to finish. There was one student absent the day of the test, but made it up upon his return.

Here's what I gathered from the data sheet during both tests:

Data	Spring 2019	Winter 2019
Mean RIT	218	218.4
District Grade Level Mean RIT	211.2	213
Norm Grade Level Mean RIT	212.2	213.5

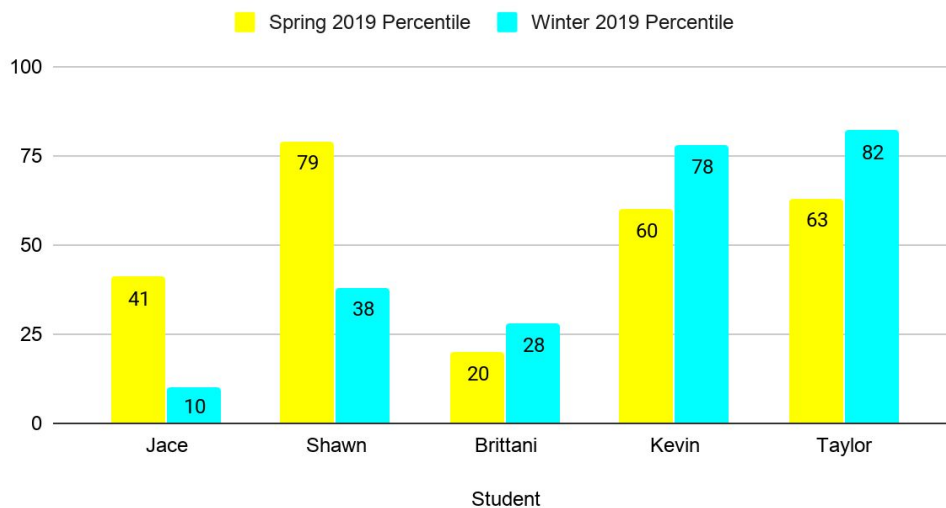
Between the Spring 2019 and the Winter 2019 the students mean RIT score only increased by 0.4. This table only shows how the students did on average. The next graph will show how students performed using their percentile.

Performance of Students Spring 2019 vs. Winter 2019 (Percentile)



What is evident in this chart is that I had 4 students who scored in the Average percentile range in the Spring 2019 test move up to the High Average percentile range in the Winter 2019 test. I wonder if this increase in percentile had anything to do with the novel we were reading in class at the time. This graph also shows that I had two additional students move into the Low percentile range. In the graph, below I have illustrated the changes amongst some of the group outliers.

Spring 2019 Percentile vs. Winter 2019 Percentile

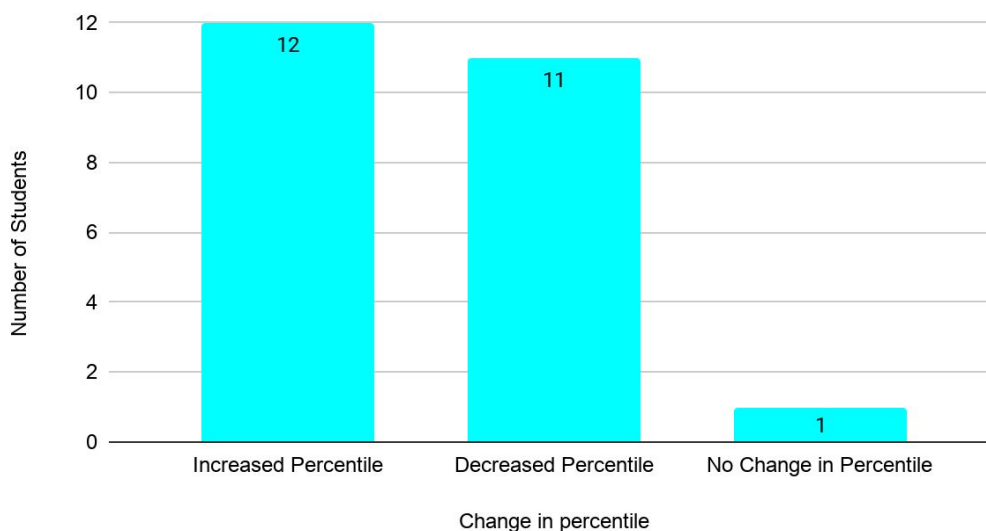


Jace and Shawn were the two students who moved into the Low range for the Winter test. Jace's percentile moved down by 31 percentile and Shawn's score went down 41 percentile. These two students have been struggling academically this year and the second student has been absent frequently. In my interactions with their families, I have found that both

students lack the necessary academic support at home, which might also have caused their scores to drop. I had other students drop in scores, but nothing as dramatically as those two students.

Brittani was the student who was in the Low range in the Spring, she stayed in this category, but increased her percentile by 8. Kevin and Taylor were my two students who increased their scores by 18 and 19 points, respectively. These three students' increase in score could be attributed to their increased interest in discussing our novel in writing class or their consistent presence in class.

Students Percentile Change (Spring 2019 to Winter 2019)



I noticed that my class is basically split between increasing and decreasing their percentile score. I wonder if this dip in scores in the winter could be due to the difference between the fifth grade and sixth grade Reading tests. Thirteen students increased their score or stayed the same, which is surprising considering all of the events that had taken place prior to completing our test.

Break Down of Strengths and Target Areas (Spring and Winter 2019)

Goal Performance	Strength Spring 2019 (# of students)	Strength Winter 2019 (# of students)	Target Spring 2019 (# of students)	Target Winter 2019 (# of students)
Literary Text: Key Ideas and Details	5	6	4	6
Literary Text: Language, Craft, and Structure	6	6	5	4
Informational	5	3	6	4

Text: Key Ideas and Details				
Informational Text: Language, Craft, and Structure	7	6	4	6
Vocabulary: Acquisition and Use	2	4	5	4

At Disney, we like to identify our student's areas of strength and targets (areas for growth) in order to help us tailor future instruction. Informational Text: Language, Craft, and Structure was the highest strength area and Vocabulary: Acquisition and Use was the lowest strength area in the Spring 2019 Test. Informational Text Key Ideas and Details was the highest target area and Literary Text: Key Ideas and Ideas and Informational Text: Language, Craft, and Structure were the lowest target areas in Spring 2019. There isn't a large change in strength and target data in the Winter 2019 Test. However, a few more students did better with Vocabulary: Acquisition and Use.

Sixth grade is a benchmark year and I wanted to ensure that all of my students did well and passed. There isn't one specific area where students are really doing well, it is somewhat spread out. While I am not the reading teacher on my team, I knew exactly how I could improve certain areas for my students. Reading novels in writing would most definitely assist students in particular areas, but I knew I could do more. In science, we read informational text every week, so I would make an effort to ask students questions relating to the main idea or details in the chapter. I also decided to bring news articles into my writing class that related to situations in our novels. Finally, any time new vocabulary was introduced I would create a quizlet to help my students become more familiar with the new words. While I won't have a Spring NWEA MAP test to show me if my efforts were effective, I do have writing samples and final projects that show my students' growth.

CONCLUSION

When I began this project I did not know what to expect. I was not sure if what I learned would actually make a difference. I'm a science teacher, so my background in teaching reading is limited. Here's what I can say without a doubt in my mind. Our students need to read novels with diverse characters. The novels also need to be current and relevant to their situation. I originally thought my students needed to see themselves in the novels they read, and maybe that is true for some students, but the value in reading diverse novels came from giving my students a window into the world of someone else. My sixth graders needed to hear stories that had problems they could relate to or had heard about. They needed to know that regardless of the problems they are having, there is always a way to persevere. It is also important to teach them to empathize with one another by giving them a window into each other's world. Middle schoolers often feel like all eyes are on them, so they forget to think about what someone else may be experiencing. Reminding them and showing them how to care is one of the first ways

we can create kinder society. In the upcoming school year, I will continue to add new and relevant novels to my curriculum because I can see the value that is added to my students' lives.

I also learned that it takes a lot of planning to execute a well done novel study unit, so thank you to all of the Reading and English teachers who do this on the normal basis. While reading the novel is important, the discussions around the themes and topics are what really opened my eyes to who my students are. If I had not tried to do a Socratic Seminar, I would have never known that my students are capable of having open discussions. Allowing them to tackle the difficult topics helped me understand what my students are experiencing in their everyday life. I realized that these middle schoolers are facing more than I ever had to deal with in 6th grade. I often forget that my students are still little people that need love, kindness, and understanding, because they are so big. They are still deciding who they want to be and in order to help them we have to allow them to talk through what they are experiencing, without judgement. Next year, I plan on keeping Socratic Seminars in my writing class, but I also will be using it in science. Socratic Seminars can be used in any class at almost any age as long as you take the time to teach students how to do it.

Finally, teachers have to stop teaching to the test. I have always fundamentally believed that testing only benefits a certain subset of students. I was one of those students who could perform on the test, but the anxiety of the test was overwhelming. As a teacher, I see the negative effects it has on my students every year. We are in a time where testing does not exist or matter. Our students still have to learn and move on to the next steps of life, without a test score. Testing will eventually come back, but it should no longer be a determining factor in a student's future. We should be looking at their writing, speaking, and artistic expression to see growth over time. I want to continue teaching novels, without worrying that it will interfere with test prep time in the Spring. If we do not know where to start we should try listening to our students sometimes, middle schoolers are still young and want to tell you what they like and what motivates them. If you ask the right questions, you may just end up on the right path to a great school year.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Read Diverse Novels - All students need to read diverse novels at every grade level as a part of the curriculum. Students need to see themselves in the literature they read early on. It is especially important in middle school as students are learning more about their identity. Being able to identify with the struggle of a character helps students to problem solve in their own lives. While it is essential to offer our students mirrors to themselves in books, it is equally important to give them a window to view people who are not like themselves. A committee should be formed that reviews diverse literature twice a year. These committees should be formed at the school level and within school districts. These committees should have teachers connecting with a school librarian or a public library librarian to get recommendations. Teachers can also go to the Association for Library Service to Children to review award winning books. The Coretta Scott King Book Award primarily focuses on African American authors and illustrators and the Schneider Family Book Award focuses on books that show the disability experience for children and adolescents, just to name a few. Funds will also need to be made available so schools can purchase class sets of novels. New books will need to be purchased yearly, so schools should budget for expense.

Safe Space Discussions - Teachers need to foster a safe environment to have real discussions about race and identity in middle school. Middle school students struggle to understand themselves and people who are different from them. If they were able to have structured time for those difficult conversations, perhaps it would foster a more understanding and empathetic society. One way to start these conversations is peace circles which are used in the Restorative Justice model. In order for peace circles to be done correctly, every teacher needs to be trained in restorative justice. This training should happen before a teacher starts their first day in the classroom because it will help build community and relationships.

Diverse Literature Professional Development - As teachers, we often struggle to find the time to do the research to find books that are diverse and socially relevant. There needs to be yearly professional development on implementing diverse novel study into the classroom. This training should focus on providing resources to use during a novel study and lists of diverse novels that are updated yearly.

Librarians - Every school needs a library and librarians. If we want our students to be exposed to diverse literature they need a place to go to find it. They also need someone who is well-versed in books for children. If we want to continue seeing diverse literature created we have to expose children to books early on so they can be the future writers of those diverse stories.

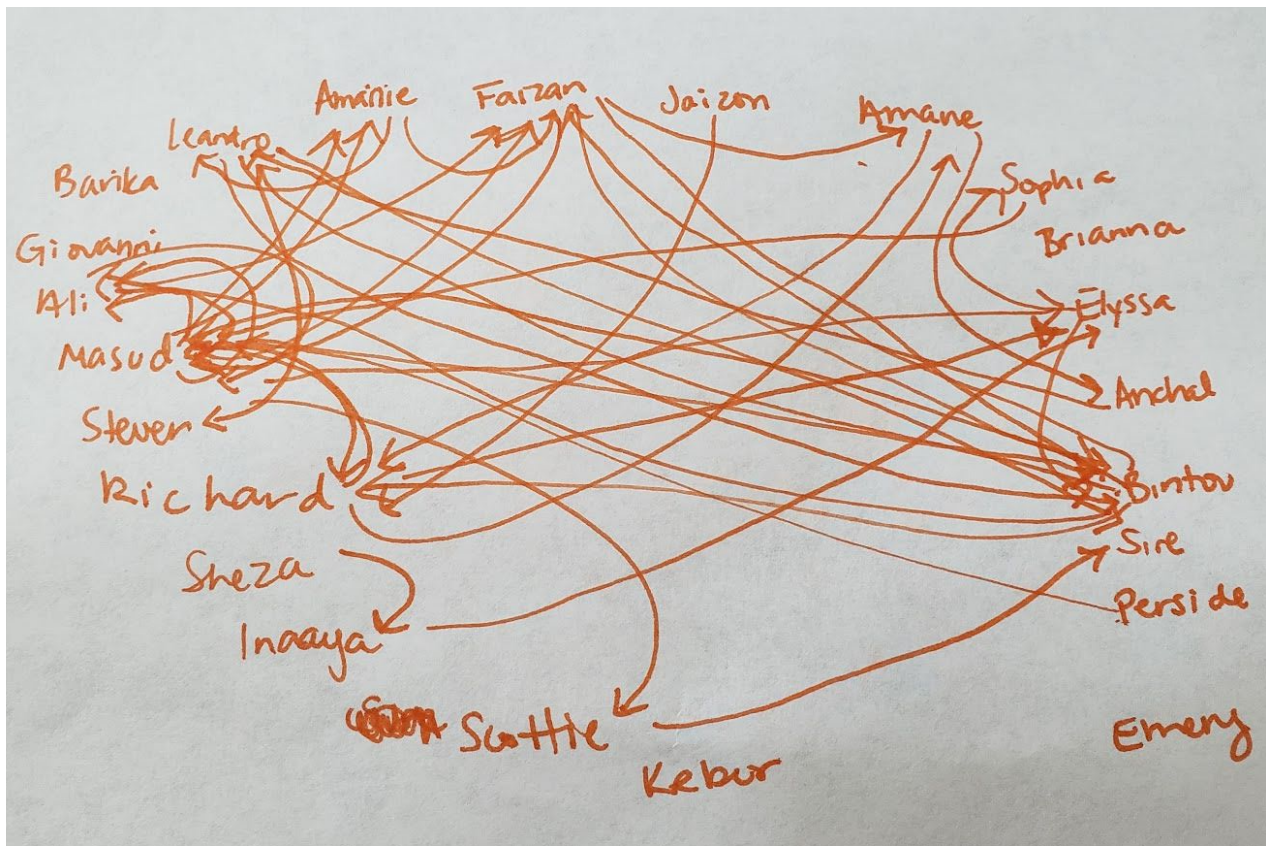
Socratic Seminar Professional Development - Teachers should be encouraged to use more student led conversations in the classroom, which will require training. While it is difficult to release the reins of being in charge of the conversation, students often are more than capable of leading a discussion on their own when proper tools are given. I believe holding Socratic Seminars while reading novels allows students to have real conversations where they can express their thoughts and ideas. Socratic Seminars also gives students time to discuss real life issues in a constructive way. It should be mandatory for every teacher to attend a professional development class on Socratic Seminar or student-led conversations if this is to be done successfully.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Socratic Seminar Conversation Map



Appendix 2: First Novel Survey

- 1) What is your first and last name?
- 2) Do you enjoy reading?
 - a) Love it
 - b) Like it
 - c) Just okay
 - d) Dislike it
- 3) Do you read at home?
- 4) What type of books do you like to read?
- 5) Three adjectives that my last teacher may describe me with are... (For example: Ms. Gills's teacher thinks she is quiet)
- 6) Three adjectives that I would describe myself with are... (For example: I think I'm artistic)
- 7) Why did you choose the three adjectives you wrote in the last question?

Appendix 3: Race and Ethnicity Survey

Race and Ethnicity Survey

What is your first and last name?

Your answer _____

What does it mean for you to be your race, ethnicity, and religion? Example: African American, Catholic (Write no less than 3 complete sentences).

Your answer _____

How does your race, ethnicity, and religion influence you? (Write no less than 3 complete sentences).

Your answer _____

How does being your race, ethnicity, and religion affect what you hope for? (Write no less than 3 complete sentences).

Your answer _____

Submit

Appendix 4: Front Desk Graphic Organizer

Front Desk Graphic Organizer

Who are you most like in the book?

HANK

List three reasons why you are alike.

1. Black
2. care for people
3. both encourage people

Write three pieces of textual evidence (quotes from the text) that show how you and the character are alike.

1. On pg. 96 Mr. Yao and mia said, "You said bad people, not black people," mia said, "Any idiot knows that black people like hank are dangerous," said Mr. Yao.
2. On pg. 262, hank said, "See, that's what I used to think, but now you know what I think? I think if it were mia, she wouldn't have quit, she wouldn't have let no one take away her dream."
3. On pg. 268 hank emptied every pocket of every jacket, he dug everywhere to find money to give to mia, to help buy the motel.

Appendix 5: Just Because Poem Graphic Organizer

Just Because

Just because I am _____,

I am not _____

I am not _____

I am not _____

I am _____.

Just because I am _____,

I am not _____

I am not _____

I am not _____

I am _____.

Appendix 6: Final Novel Survey

Final Novel Survey

We've done a lot of work this year growing as readers--each of you has learned about yourself, those around you, and the world in which we live through the books you selected to read and the two we read together. I want us to take some time to reflect.

- 1) What is your first and last name?
- 2) Do you enjoy reading?
 - a) Love it
 - b) Like it
 - c) Just okay
 - d) Dislike it
- 3) Think about the books you have read this year. Of the books you read which one did you like best? Write the title of the book and the author.
- 4) Did any of the characters seem like you? What were the names of the characters and explain your reasoning.
- 5) Did the book change how you thought about things? What did you learn?
- 6) What makes the characters you read about interesting to you?