

Reading as a Political Act:
Reading for Ourselves, Our Communities, and Our Liberation

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Abstract

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Standardization has been part of teaching and learning in the United States since the late 19th century. This technocratic approach has gained more traction in the past two decades beginning with the passage of the landmark No Child Left Behind law in 2001 and continuing through the recent standardization movement to restrict content and pedagogical autonomy. These efforts have one thing in common: The knowledge and expertise of teachers are not considered.

In contrast, this study positioned teachers as experts. The purpose of this study was to demonstrate how middle school teachers conceptualize themselves as readers, engage in reading for justice, and envision these concepts in their own classrooms as they participate in a young adult (YA) literature book club. This work brings together two often separate scholarly approaches to reading: reading lives (reading as pleasure) and social justice literature (reading as political) to see how teachers inform or reimagine literacy (reading as pedagogical) in their classrooms. This study was grounded on the notion that theory and practice are not separate endeavors. Critical sociocultural theory undergirds this collaborative teacher inquiry group. Teachers take a critical stance as they read YA titles that center social justice issues. Through semi-structured interviews, teachers reflected on their own reading histories and lives as well as their ideas about literacy in their classrooms.

This study adds to the existing scholarship on literacy and teacher learning.

Methodologically, the researcher utilized a practice (book clubs) that is used academically in school settings and socially among friends. The book club exists in a liminal space between the academic and the social, suggesting it is an alternative space for teacher learning. This study has the potential to contribute to a greater emphasis on the value and importance of teacher-centered learning communities.

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C. L.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Several years ago, I sat with the eighth-grade team at my school during their grade-level meeting. As their instructional coach, I had facilitated yearlong planning for this team months earlier. We spent a lot of time planning a book club unit to build more reading choice and community into their teaching. When I asked the teachers about book clubs, they all sheepishly said they had not started. As I tried to determine what was holding them back, I sensed there was something bigger at play. I looked back at the big question from our planning day, “Why do book clubs matter?” The teachers’ responses during planning talked about building personal relationships with reading as well as being part of a reading community that discusses compelling books. I switched my approach and asked everyone to list the books that impacted them the most as adolescents and the books that impacted them the most in the last year. We listed the results on chart paper and came to the startling conclusion: Collectively, we were not reading books. Given their roles as teachers of English language arts (ELA), we decided this was problematic. One teacher confessed she had not read a novel since a college English course. Another teacher said, “I don’t think I know how to get the deeper meaning from books. I mean, I understand what happens, but am I really ‘getting it’?” Other teachers nodded in agreement. Their responses resonated with me, and it made me wonder what made reading novels so intimidating that we all had lingering feelings about reading books “correctly.” As our conversation continued, it was clear that some of our frustrations were linked back to our own experiences in English classes. It was also evident that some of the current trends in literacy had reduced reading to a set of skills to perform rather than an experience to enjoy.

I left the meeting heartbroken for these teachers and their students. I thought about a quote from Kylene Beers, “Nonfiction lets us *learn* more; fiction lets us *be* more” (Beers &

Probst, 2012, p. 17). As an ELA department, we had been using books as a way for students to learn standards. Students were missing the opportunity to reflect on the human experience through literature. We decided we needed to return some of the joy to reading for ourselves. I thought about when I enjoyed reading novels the most and realized it was often through a shared experience. I proposed a young adult (YA) book club to the team. We chose YA to increase our collective knowledge of YA literature and because YA books are often quicker reads than other novels. We were all a little trepidatious, but with the lure of snacks, we began our book club. Since I was the instructional coach, I was afforded the time to plan the book club for the team. I structured the book club with several meetings per book instead of the usual end-of-book meeting. This was an intentional decision to build our understanding of the novel together as we read. At each meeting, I modeled strategies teachers might use for book clubs in their classrooms. While I took the lead to plan these meetings, the book clubs were collective learning spaces filled with lively and dynamic discussions.

The book club meetings were spaces of joy and reading. Word spread among other teachers, and soon we had requests to join. I launched a second book club for the seventh-grade team and weeks later a third for a mixed-grade, mixed-subject group of teachers. Teachers were reading more and talking about the books with their students. Anecdotally, teachers mentioned their students seemed more excited to talk about what they were reading. The teacher librarian showed me the increase in circulation numbers after the book clubs started. Together, an eighth-grade teacher and I planned a social justice book club unit. We wrote a small grant and ordered books for her classroom library. Another teacher restructured a unit with a whole-class novel into book clubs. The school library planned a big reorganization project. Instead of using the Dewey Decimal System, the library would be organized by genres, mirroring bookstores. This would

make it easier for students to find books they might like. The schoolwide energy around reading was palpable.

When I reflect on this time, I think about why that book club was so powerful for us. It provided the intersection of three separate areas related to reading and education: reading identity, powerful literature, and teacher learning. The book club provided a space for us to figure out how to *be readers* rather than just read. It pushed us to think about the relationship between literature and social justice issues. It also allowed us to think about our own learning through a shared inquiry group.

When I say we figured out how to *be* readers, I am positioning reading as social act connected to historical, social, cultural, and emotional contexts. My work does not treat reading as a set of skills or abilities for reading. I position reading as an experience (Rosenblatt, 1978; Weinstein, 2021). When we were reading, we were developing relationships with books and ourselves, but we were also using books to grow and develop as people. Books were a way to engage more with the world rather than escape from it. While there is a place for escapism in reading, this was not the purpose of our book club. When we developed as readers, we saw books as a way to work toward justice, for ourselves and our students. It was less important that we could discuss the characters' traits and motivations and more important that we could discuss how those characters helped us examine social systems of power and oppression. I saw our book club as a place to harness the power of literature to make change in the world. We demonstrated this through the books we chose and the way we talked about those books. Our discussions frequently connected events in the school, community, nation, and world to the novels we read.

Background of the Problem

“If I want my students to just read, what standard should I put on the board?” During my time as an instructional coach, this question was so prevalent that I had memorized the exact wording of the standard I used as an answer: “By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range” (National Governors Association, 2010).

This study is situated in the broader historical context of standardization in education. The emphasis on standardization of teaching and learning has a long tradition in the United States, with roots that go back to the late 19th century (Kliebard, 2004). Prior to that point, children were largely raised and taught by family. School was a privilege for the few. As school attendance grew, so did the need to standardize education, both for teacher training and curriculum. This gave way to “social efficiency” as the driving force in education reform (Kliebard, 2004). It relied on “a science of exact measurement and precise standards” as education was standardized as a system designed to maintain social stability (p. 76). In addition, standardization served to support industrialism. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that as wealth accumulation grew in some parts of the economy, so did the need to increase training for new workers, which pushed education reform. This technocratic process emphasized capitalistic values and served to prepare students for the workforce (Kliebard, 2004). In addition, it adhered to a meritocratic view of schooling—the notion that education provides an opportunity for all children to succeed (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kliebard, 2004).

This technocratic approach manifested in recent education reforms. Standardization took hold with the passage of the landmark 2001 law No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). Since the

law's passing, further standardization has been imposed on teaching and learning. The teacher certification process includes required courses and standardized tests. Attempts have been made to standardize curriculum through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts and math and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). The momentum toward standardization in the United States is a bi-partisan endeavor. While NCLB was enacted under a Republican administration, a similarly harsh competitive grant, Race to the Top (RTTT), was championed by a Democratic president and his Department of Education in 2009. Two decades after NCLB, from a policy standpoint, there is little evidence of a move away from standardization for teaching or learning. "The hallmark of the meritocratic perspective is its reduction of a complex web of social relationships in production to a few rules of technological efficiency" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 104). Testing removes the complexity of the relationships in the classroom. It overlooks students as individual learners and teachers as experts of their craft. It marginalizes the interplay of the space of the classroom and the humans within it in favor of an "objective" assessment of productivity. It emphasizes the rule of "benchmark" to make teaching and learning more efficient. As Bowles and Gintis argued, this "hierarchically controlled and class-stratified production system" (p. 20) limits the efficacy of reform. Testing purports to offer a way to standardize education for the betterment of all students, when in practice, it furthers a class-stratified approach to ranking teachers and students.

Within the context of reading, the emphasis on standardization resulted in 10 CCSS standards for reading literature and 10 standards for reading informational texts. Readers' relationships with text are absent from these standards. This approach positions readers as passive; they "remain in the shadow, taken for granted, to all intents and purposes, invisible" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 1). In addition, CCSS renewed the push for publishing companies to

promote standardized curricular materials for English language arts. CCSS also ushered in a new pair of standardized tests, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), that were initially adopted by most states in the United States. While some states have moved away from CCSS and these specific assessments, the legacy of this standardization remains. New York State adopted the *Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards* (2015), Texas has maintained and updated the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills* since 1997, and the three states on the West Coast have continued with CCSS and added more content standards. These moves toward standardization in literacy have created an environment that “disempowers and deskills teachers” (Au, 2011, p. 30). Teachers spend time teaching skills to perform rather than constructing knowledge with students.

In literacy, standardization is about creating an “ideal” reader and *the* way to read. Phrases like “good readers make predictions” and “good readers choose ‘just right’ books” proliferate (Narter, 2013). The term “just right books” grew from the standardization practice of book leveling. Students are expected to read books that align with their reading level as determined by standardized assessments. The practice of book leveling often translates to identifying students by letters corresponding to text complexity of books. During my work as a consultant, I visited many elementary schools in a major urban area. I heard teachers say things like “Q & R readers meet me at the back table” and “I shouldn’t see K readers in M baskets.” When we talked, these same teachers thought about who their students were as readers in complex and holistic ways, but it was clear the language of standardization often reduced those same readers to letters. Standardization of who is a “good reader” has resulted in the reduction of the complexity of literacy teaching and learning.

In my work as an instructional coach, I supported teachers through the adoption of a new literacy curriculum. One feature of the instructional method was to begin each class with a short vignette that draws students into the lesson. During a classroom visit, a veteran teacher began the lesson with a story about riding the subway on the way to school that morning. After the lesson, I asked about that story because there were no subways in the area. She responded, “I know, but that’s what the curriculum said.” This normally confident and creative teacher had been caught in the middle of the push to standardize the curriculum and her own expertise as a teacher. This is the crux of the issue: When teachers are required to use standardized curricular materials, their ability to make decisions in their classrooms is diminished or removed.

Educators’ autonomy and knowledge are currently at the center of a cultural and legislative movement to restrict topics and texts from school classrooms. In October 2021, Jerry Craft, author of the Newbery-winning graphic novel *New Kid* (2019), was scheduled to visit an elementary school near Houston, Texas (Vermes, 2022). Days before his appearance, the visit was postponed, and the book was removed for district review. Ultimately, the book was reinstated and Craft’s visit was rescheduled, but this challenge is part of a larger trend of book challenges in the United States. Again, teachers are caught in the middle. Teachers’ ability to select books and other curricular materials is at the heart of these challenges.

Standardization extends beyond curricular materials, content standards, and assessments. Following current trends in educational research, some states and districts are now standardizing the ways instruction is delivered. For example, in New York State, teachers are expected to follow the *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework* (New York State Education Department, 2018) to “create student-centered learning environments that affirm cultural identities...” (p. 7) and five other stated objectives. In Washington State, where the teachers in

my study work, culturally sustaining practices are included in the *Washington State Social Emotional Learning Implementation Guide* (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2019), part of a 700+-page document with the guiding principles of “Equity, Cultural Responsiveness, Universal Design, and Trauma-Informed Practice” (p. C-15). As an educator, I support and align with culturally sustaining pedagogy, but teachers are ensnared in an unending cycle of mandates that seek to “fix” the problems in education through standardization and position teachers not as experts in their classrooms but as technicians who require guidelines.

To disrupt the technocratic shift in education, teachers need opportunities to explore their own relationships with teaching and learning.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore how middle school teachers conceptualize themselves as readers, engage in reading for justice, and envision these concepts in their own classrooms as they participate in a young adult (YA) literature book club. Through this teacher inquiry group and individual interviews with teachers, I documented teachers’ notions of how their relationships to reading have developed throughout their lives. This reflective practice provided teachers with an opportunity to consider the ways they felt supported and efficacious as readers and the ways they did not. This process was intended to nurture their own work with readers in their classrooms. I also engaged teachers in diverse YA literature, so the book club was orientated to social justice issues. For the purposes of clarity, I am using the word *diverse* to describe literature that centers people from historically marginalized groups. Finally, I wanted to understand how teachers reported taking up this work in their classrooms with their students. I engaged with teachers in reflective dialogue where they identified connections to their students’

reading identities and habits and the power of literature for justice work. I saw teachers as agents of action and power for the culture of reading in their classrooms and schools.

My project centered the expertise of teachers as they work toward educational flourishing for themselves and their students. “Educational flourishing occurs within the life worlds of particular classrooms, in the alchemy among teachers and students, and within broader social and historical contexts” (Ghiso & Burdick-Shepherd, 2020, p. 13). While my study did not directly study classrooms, the book club itself is its own life world.

This work was developed in response to two often separate scholarly approaches to reading: reading lives (reading as pleasure) and diverse literature (reading as political). Teachers’ reading lives matter. However, much of the existing work in this area positions reading as a personal endeavor. Diverse literature matters. Although, without intentional pedagogical work oriented around justice, these rich texts are not used to disrupt systems of oppression. I positioned reading as a political act and saw the teacher book club as a means for teachers to engage in critical pedagogical work.

I am not suggesting that book clubs like this should serve as a solution or strategy to implement in all schools. Just as Vasudevan (2014) cautioned against “pedagogy that supplants one canon for another” (p. 237), my goal in exploring these book clubs is not to market book clubs as a professional development solution; rather, I sought to explore how book clubs might build a community of reading and justice work for teachers. In addition, book clubs can create spaces that center reading for pleasure. This counteracts a decline in reading for pleasure as discussed by Cremin et al. (2009). While the authors acknowledged it was likely a complex mix of factors, they cited the emphasis on reading as a set of skills as highly problematic. They referenced the local literacy framework that included “71 verbs connected to the act of reading...

‘enjoy’ was not one of them” (p. 11). I intended to support teachers as we *enjoy* reading together. However, my project did not forward enjoyment as the main goal, but rather enjoyment as a means to deeper learning and, ultimately, action. This project drew from the work of Leland et al. (2018), whose three components for reading “Enjoy! Dig Deeply! Take Action!” argue that reading is not a set of skills but an approach to texts.

This project was centered on teacher book clubs because I positioned reading as a social process. “All reading events involve a social context: Social interaction surrounds and influences interaction with a written text” (Bloome, 1985, p. 134). In my experience as an instructional coach, I noticed many middle school teachers did not have reading lives of their own, and even fewer engaged in the social process of reading. This gap in their own practice as readers seemed to impact the culture of reading in their classrooms. Rosenblatt (1978) argued that reading is simultaneously a solitary and a communal practice. “This quality of language—essentially social yet always individually internalized—makes the literary experience something both shared and uniquely personal” (p. 53). The connection between self and others and literature is a core component of book clubs. There is a long tradition of scholarly work on the importance of reading in community (Allington, 2012; Atwell, 1987; Beers, 2003; Daniels, 1994; Roberts, 2018).

In the tradition of Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) and the more recent scholarship of Love (2019), my work positions teaching as a political act. As hooks emphatically stated, “no education is politically neutral” (p. 37). Although many teachers approach teaching as a political neutral act, my intention was to unpack the ways teaching is part of what Gramsci called the “hegemonic ideology.” “Gramsci emphasized the degree to which ideology is embedded at every level in society, in its art and literature, in its education system and mass media, in its everyday

language and culture” (Heywood, 2003, p. 8). I engaged teachers in Freire’s notion of “conscientization” through a YA book club focused on social justice. I used the argument that hooks (2003) made that it is “possible to learn liberating ideas in a context that was established to socialize us to accept domination” (p. 2). I wanted to engage in reading as a part of a critical consciousness of systems of oppression and the ways these systems manifest in schools.

Research Questions

For this study, I invited seven middle school teachers in the Pacific Northwest to engage in a YA teacher book club. Through this study, I sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do teachers critically explore their own relationships with reading, both through their reading histories and reading lives?
- How do teachers critically engage with texts through a young adult literature social justice book club?
- How do teachers use their own experiences in a young adult social justice book club to inform or reimagine their classrooms?

Theoretical Framework

This study design used critical sociocultural theory (Moje & Lewis, 2007). To understand this theoretical framework, I first discuss sociocultural theory and critical theory separately. Sociocultural theory argues for human learning as situated, and that context is always in play (Cole, 1999; Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1995). Learning is connected to historical, cultural, social, and emotional contexts. Woven through those contexts are systems of organization and power. Following Vygotsky, I position reading as a social process embedded within systems of power and ideology. In my work, I attended to the social, historical, cultural,

and emotional constructs that are at work as teachers read. I used the lens of sociocultural theory to attend to the broader educational and social system in which reading happens. When people read, they bring their histories with them. They use these histories to make meaning with the text.

I approached this study through the tradition of critical theory. My research existed within political and social contexts, and I sought to use my research to identify how “the current way society is organized is unjust” in the context of readers’ identities and histories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 22). In particular, critical literacies framed my work. At the heart of this approach is an attention to “social inequalities, social structures, power, and human agency” (Mills, 2015, p. 41). I used this approach at the convergence of three separate areas of education research: reading identities, diverse literature, and teacher learning. Undergirding the critical literacy theoretical framework was the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed (Wang et al., 2011). In addition, I drew from critical race theory and feminist scholarship.

Moje and Lewis (2007) recognized the limitations of sociocultural theory and argued for an approach that “would better address the issues of power, identity, and agency” called “critical sociocultural theory” (p. 2). With this approach, I sought to examine the role of power in the context of learning. I used the lens of critical sociocultural theory to attend to the broader educational and social system in which reading happens. This aligns with Gerson and Damaske’s (2021) position that interviews “can provide insight into the inner life of individuals and place these insights in a social and historical context” (p. 6). Histories and cultural positioning are not only with us as we read, but our backgrounds also help us understand and make sense of texts.

In my pilot study, I intentionally selected the text *New Kid* by Jerry Craft because it presented opportunities to examine issues of race and class. In this way, I did not position myself

or the book club as neutral; rather, it was my intention to interrogate systems of power through literature. I took up the position of Fine and Weis (1996), who saw a relationship between oppression and resistance. I “recognize the endurance of structures of injustice and the powerful acts of agency, that appreciates the courage and limits of individual acts of resistance” (p. 270). This work continued through the text selection and orientation of the book club. Furthermore, my work acknowledged the deeply human aspects of literature and reading in community. I attended not only to teachers’ emotional states as individual readers, but also to how these emotional states impact their teaching lives.

Emotional Geographies

Teaching and learning are often studied as purely cognitive activities, but Hargreaves (2001) offered “emotional geographies” as a lens for examining how “teachers’ emotions are embedded in the conditions and interactions of their work” (p. 1058). Teaching and learning are tied to emotional closeness or distance, which can be impacted by sociocultural, moral, professional, physical, and political factors. Since many of the teachers in the book club do not share racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic characteristics with their students, it was crucial that we reflect on our histories and orientations so we can engage in critical literacy work. Recognizing how our own understandings of systems of oppression impact our ability to take up social justice work in our classrooms is crucial (Mentor & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). If literacy development is connected to identity, then the emotional geographies of teaching are rooted in teachers’ experiences as readers themselves. The lens of emotional geographies can be used to examine how teachers’ reading identities are impacted. How do the teachers’ past reading experiences create an emotional geography of confidence or self-doubt or something in between? How do teachers see themselves as readers as they engage in a book club with colleagues? How are

teachers' understandings of social justice issues in novels connected to their histories?

“Teaching, learning, and leading all draw upon emotional understanding as people reach into the past store of their own emotional experience to interpret and unravel, instantaneously, at-a-glance, the emotional experiences and responses of others” (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1059). This suggests that in addition to thinking about the emotional geographies of participants in their classrooms, we must consider the book club as an emotional site of learning as well.

Spirit Murdering

“Teaching, learning, and leading all draw upon emotional understanding as people reach into the past store of their own emotional experience to interpret and unravel, instantaneously, at-a-glance, the emotional experiences and responses to others” (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1059).

When people begin teaching, they bring with them their past experiences in schools. Since schools function as a microcosm of American society, teachers of color have years of experience with educational institutionalized racism, first as students and then again as teachers. Bettina Love (2019) argued that racism in schools murders the spirits of students. Racism is a trauma to students because “it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance” (p. 38). As some of the teachers in my pilot study discussed their own experiences in English classes, they began to speak of the ways their spirits were murdered. They talked about how they were implicitly and explicitly marginalized by their teachers or classmates. Through text selection, individual interviews, and the community space of the book club, I made space for the teacher of color to discuss her own experiences of spirit murdering. In addition, we all used this lens as we thought about our own work with book clubs in our classrooms.

In my pilot study, the teachers of color recognized themselves and their experiences through the novel, *New Kid*. The book also helped white teachers explore the ways school can be

a site of spirit murdering for students of color. The main character spends much of the book navigating an educational space that was not designed with him in mind. This mirrors the experience for many students in schools that are “training site[s] for a life of exhaustion” (p. 27). How do teachers’ experiences as students in a racist educational system impact their own understanding of themselves as learners? This study was organized as a social justice book club for this reason. The book club is a space to discuss and, ultimately, disrupt systems of oppression in classrooms.

Affect

What does it mean to have a culture of reading at school? In the opening narrative in this chapter, I discussed how the book club and the resulting pedagogical choices created an energy around reading in our middle school. This energy or affect “is as material and impactful to teaching and learning as books, paper, or the melamine of desks. Affect moves knowledge” (Niccollini, 2016, p. 230). I was interested in how my study might help “move knowledge” for my participants and their students. Building on Love’s (2019) notion of spirit murdering, I was interested in how schools are problematic sites, or “troubled lifeworlds” (Haraway, as cited in Niccollini et al., 2018) for my participants. The book club exists in the context of schooling, which has a history of marginalizing and dehumanizing historically oppressed students and teachers. “As sites of historical trauma and inequities, particularly for raced, gendered, classed, disabled, queer, and non-normative bodies, the university [or any school] is an unevenly (never fully) safe space that impinges on bodies in ‘vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy’” (Niccollini et al., 2018, p. 328). However, I examined how teachers built new relationships with reading, regardless of their prior experiences. How might book clubs create a new energy around reading for participants and their students?

Throughout this study, I drew on tools from other theoretical frameworks and research methodologies. I used ethnographic tools to understand and know my participants. I employed immersive participant observation during book club meetings. I also used semi-structured and unstructured interviews and narrative inquiry to uncover the stories of my participants' reading histories and lives. I grounded my work in the belief that theory and practice are not separate endeavors. I believe teachers engage in inquiry through their practice. This project was developed through authentic practice, and my intention was to maintain its connection to teaching and learning. I stand on the shoulders of scholars (Clandinin et al., 2018; Clandinin & Connelly, 1988; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009), who prioritized teacher inquiry and recognized the power of stories in research. In their book *Inquiry as Stance* (2009), Cochran-Smith and Lytle discussed the connection between practice and research:

...practitioners are deliberative intellectuals who constantly theorize practice as part of practice itself and that the goal of teacher learning initiatives is the joint construction of local knowledge, the questioning of common assumptions, and thoughtful critique of the usefulness of research generated by others both inside and outside the contexts of practice. (p. 2)

My work positioned teachers as experts of their lives and their work.

Positionality

I participated in the book club project at the start of this paper not only as a colleague but also as an instructional coach. In my former district, instructional coaches were not used for supervisory roles and received teachers' contracts. However, in my role, I was also perceived to be an "expert." Balancing the role of co-learner and expert is challenging, and I benefited from my time as a teacher in that school and my years as an instructional coach. I had a rapport with teachers who supported the book club project described at the beginning of the chapter. In addition, I am a white, femme-presenting person in a female-dominated field.

During this study, I balanced the role of co-learner and expert again. While I did not claim to be an expert, I knew that I entered the space as a researcher from a prestigious university. By acknowledging this reality before I began the study, I was able to plan to disrupt this imbalance of power as much as possible. I actively positioned myself as a co-learner. I used post-meeting field notes to limit the need to take detailed notes during the book club meetings. I audio-recorded interviews and took limited notes focused mainly on participants' body language and nonverbal cues. This helped me maintain full presence in the process without needing to focus on documentation. I made time for us to engage in the social aspects of book clubs, with casual time at the beginning and end to catch up with each other. In this way, I aligned myself with Emerson et al.'s (2011) description of field researchers who "are deeply concerned about the quality of the relationships they develop with the people they seek to know and understand" (p. 23). I focused on the experience of the book clubs as a place to co-construct knowledge with my participants, so I centered our humanity.

Significance of the Study

This study sought to explore teachers' reading histories and lives, a teacher book club, and teachers' conceptions of reading for justice in their own classrooms through a critical sociocultural approach. Through a teacher inquiry group via a book club, I engaged in co-learning and collaboration with teachers. In addition, I conducted focused interviews that asked teachers to explore their relationships with reading through their reading histories and lives. This study positioned teachers as experts in their work. I sought to draw from their rich knowledge and experiences to explore this key literary practice with them. The study has implications for various stakeholders: the academy, teachers, students, policymakers, and school leaders.

While existing research supports aspects of this study, the design and approach of my study presented an opportunity to merge these often-separate areas of literacy research. In addition, my study centered teachers' voices and positioned them as experts of their own lives and their classrooms. The study adds to the existing scholarship on teacher learning communities and has the potential to contribute to a greater emphasis on the value and importance of teacher-directed learning. Furthermore, my study centered powerful YA literature as an essential part of middle-school ELA teachers' learning. Positioning these texts as relevant to teacher learning is a unique attribute of my study.

My research investigated teachers' reading histories and lives to add to the existing scholarship on teachers as readers. However, my research used interviews to help teachers explore and analyze their reading histories and lives, so they were able to reflect on their own teaching practices. This aspect of my study is unique and offers an opportunity to connect teachers' relationships with reading to pedagogical practice. I do not argue a causal outcome but, rather, the exploration of the connection.

Methodologically, my study employed a practice (book clubs) that is used both academically in school settings and socially among friends. The book club in my study exists in a liminal space between the academic and the social. Together, the teachers and I crossed between our own connections to the novels and how we might consider these books for the classroom. This unique perspective revealed new insights into the relationship readers have with books when they read for pleasure and read for "purpose." Furthermore, my study aimed to explore how teachers use these experiences of reading social justice novels in community to think about their classroom instruction in new ways. Through this process, my research sought to contribute to the development of teacher-centered learning communities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

When I met Sarah, she was a young new teacher who was very excited to start teaching eighth-grade humanities (English language arts and social studies). As her instructional coach, I spent a lot of time helping her prepare for the start of school. We connected over our mutual love of young adult (YA) literature. I asked her what she had read recently, and we exchanged book suggestions. She frequently stopped by my office to share book recommendations or find out what I was reading. During our coaching cycles, we had a good rapport and planned and co-taught lessons. She was reflective and thoughtful about teaching, and we frequently connected outside of coaching cycles.

In 2017, a Black teenager was murdered by police in a nearby city. Sarah was upset by the event but also struggling to respond to many of her family and friends who were furthering the narrative that police murders like these were justified. We talked about how she might engage her family and friends, but she finally said, “I’m just not going to talk about it with them. I’m not going to change their minds.” Earlier that year, *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) was published. This groundbreaking debut novel directly addressed a police murder and the Black Lives Matter movement. One Friday afternoon, I left my copy on her desk with a note asking her to read it. In the note, I explained that her students needed her to read this book. On Saturday afternoon, she texted me. “How can I get copies of this for my classroom?! I can’t put it down!”

Sarah and I wrote a grant to expand her classroom library featuring books like *The Hate U Give*, *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (Albertalli, 2015), *Little Brother* (Doctorow, 2010), and others. She began to shift her approach to teaching from a place of neutrality to a place of activism. While the school was close to a progressive city in the Pacific Northwest, our district was located in a very conservative and

religious area. Sarah’s shift in her approach was not without risk. While students were writing “soapbox speeches,” she brought in a local activist to present his own speech that had been featured at a local TEDx event. One parent was angry and reached out to Joey Gibson, the leader of Patriot Prayer, a far-right militant group that holds rallies with the Proud Boys. Mr. Gibson contacted the media and sued to have access to photos and videos on Sarah’s camera from the event. In just a few months, Sarah went from a person who did not want to talk about police killings with her friends to finding herself the target of a far-right leader. During this time, the principal and I provided Sarah with extra support and protection. One afternoon while we were crafting another email response to the angry parent who contacted Mr. Gibson, my principal joked, “I bet you wish you could go back in time and do this differently.” Sarah looked up very seriously and said, “No, not at all. This has been the best few months of my teaching career. I love what’s happening in my classroom.... I don’t love Joey Gibson having my email, but I love everything else. I wouldn’t change any of it.”

The change that happened for Sarah is complicated and many factors are involved, but her identity as a reader was foundational to this shift. Also at the heart of the change is *The Hate U Give*. The novel, which is a compelling narrative, helped Sarah connect a social justice issue to her teaching. In addition, Sarah’s understanding of reading communities played a role. When I left the copy of *The Hate U Give* for her, she trusted my recommendation. Finally, she viewed reflection and learning as key components of her work as a teacher, so she was able to take up the call to action she felt after reading the book. These three components—reading for pleasure, social justice books, and teacher learning—worked hand in hand to transform Sarah’s approach to her classroom. Reading *The Hate U Give* was a political act for Sarah.

The premise of this book is that a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work—sometimes, even, a literary work of art. (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. ix)

Louise M. Rosenblatt's notion of a two-way "transactional" relationship with texts is at the heart of my work. Her foundational approach positions the reader at the center of the relationship. The reader is not passive or responding to a text without context. The reader brings their "past experiences and present personality" to create a new experience with the text. Rosenblatt called this new experience the poem.

As I developed my literature review, I kept finding myself referencing Rosenblatt's (1978) work. I pulled out my tattered copy of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* and read the first four chapters again. Rosenblatt's repeated insistence that the reader matters reminded me of how I position myself as a scholar. I choose to align myself with an epistemological approach that understands there are multiple ways of knowing and no single truth. I seek to understand *with* teachers. To understand that historical and cultural contexts are at play, we must examine these books with a critical lens. We all created our own poems with texts, but also together as a book club, we created shared poems. In Chapter 1, I described the theoretical framework underpinning my study. Critical sociocultural theory (Moje & Lewis, 2007) builds on Rosenblatt's notion of transaction by recognizing "the roles that identity, agency, and power play in the production of knowledge about literacy" (p. 3). My study examined the interplay among the teachers, the texts, and the shared space of the book club.

As a result, I pulled from the critical scholarship in teachers' reading identities, reading communities and powerful texts, and how teachers take up social justice work to support my argument that reading is a political act.

How Is This Kind of Reading Different?

Aesthetic Stance and Efferent Stance

Preservice teachers are the focus of many research studies on reading habits and identities. While my study involved in-service teachers, a review of the literature on preservice teachers was relevant to my study. One such study investigated the reading habits and attitudes of preservice teachers (Applegate & Applegate, 2004). It drew from Rosenblatt's stances toward reading: aesthetic (reading for pleasure) and efferent (reading for information). The authors gathered survey data about preservice teachers' stances toward reading. They linked enthusiastic readers as those more likely to read literature from an aesthetic stance. The authors argued, "Because classroom instruction is largely driven by the beliefs of the teacher, it seems reasonable to conclude that some teachers will be unable to promote aesthetic reading through their instruction because they have no experience with it" (p. 561). While the study data had limitations, this argument seemed open to further exploration. From this work, we learn that developing an aesthetic stance toward reading in teachers is a worthy endeavor. I can contribute to this area of research because my study has a foundation of aesthetic reading through the book club. My work explored further how teachers who develop this relationship to reading think about their own reading histories and lives. In addition, my study asked teachers to consider how they think about reading in their own classrooms.

Building on the notion of an aesthetic stance, I am intrigued by the possibility of a third stance to reading, *expressive response* (Soter et al., 2010). This stance was developed because the authors contended that aesthetic response is not sufficient to describe the ways readers engage with texts. The aesthetic response "may have been asked to do the work for which it was never intended" (p. 205). They described a response that draws from the reader's experience and

is personal and emotional. Adding this new connection that readers have to text is an expansion of Rosenblatt's work. Aesthetic responses are emotional but center the text. Expressive responses are also emotional but focus on personal connections to the text. This work aligned with Rosenblatt's (1995) insistence that the terms *aesthetic* and *effereent* were more of a continuum than a binary. This caused me to reexamine Applegate and Applegate's (2004) study described previously. How might an understanding of teachers' reading lives be bolstered by the consideration of an expressive stance toward reading as well? What implications does this have for my study?

How Are Book Clubs Important Spaces for Teacher Learning?

As I read the literature, I became interested in spaces for teacher learning. These spaces are often outside of traditional professional development and offer opportunities for teachers to connect meaningfully with others (Picower, 2011; Riley, 2015). These spaces are known by different names: for example, second classroom (Campano, 2007), counter-publics (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Fraser, 1990), or third space (Babha, 1994; Oylar et al., 2017).

While the discussion around a *second classroom* is largely in connection with student learning, it is possible to extend this "alternative pedagogical space" (Campano, 2007, p. 48) to teacher learning outside of formal professional development. When I was an instructional coach, some of the best conversations I had with teachers were as we walked into the building in the morning or over text in the evening. These conversations in the "margins" were generative and rich. This continued with the informal book club. Obviously, the book club itself existed outside of official professional development, but also the shared Google documents, text threads, and loaned books demonstrated how the book club "operates by a different sense of time, largely

improvisational, aspiring to respond to opportunities creatively” (p. 48). The learning we did as a group is dynamic and organic; it did not follow a prescribed schedule.

The concept of counter-publics (Fraser, 1990) draws from scholarship on resistance. Counter-publics have historically meant alliances among different stakeholders to resist the dominant ideology and resulting policies in public education (Anderson & Cohen, 2015). Although our teacher book club was not developed to engage in formal acts of resistance, we did seek to “build counter-discourses and deliberate acts of reappropriation” (p. 8) of reading in the face of standardization. As we took aesthetic and expressive stances toward literature, we pushed back against the approach to reading that requires readers to disconnect from their own histories and only cited evidence from the text. In addition, we thought about the broader implications of the texts available to students. In a meeting in spring 2022, we had a conversation about book challenges in the teachers’ school district. We talked about how teachers might use excerpts from the book *Ban This Book* (Gratz, 2017), to offer students examples of how to respond to book bans. Furthermore, over the course of the study, we engaged in formal acts of resistance (these are explored further in Chapters 4 and 5). While our book club was organized primarily for reading, the social justice novels we read lent themselves to connecting to larger issues and movements in education.

In some ways, our book club was a third space (Bhabha, 1994) that connected the personal reading lives of teachers with social justice YA literature to create a space to examine pedagogical practices. Some attributes of our book club aligned with the notion of “activism in action” (Oyler et al., 2017), where teachers are engaged in activist work with their students. For example, after we read *No Fixed Address* (Nielsen, 2020), a book about a middle schooler who lives in a van with his mom, one of the teachers talked about this book with her students. As a

class, they read more about the issues impacting unhoused students. It prompted the class to reflect on the experiences of unhoused students in their school. Together, the teacher and her students identified things the school could do to support those students. They worked to get the locker rooms opened before and after school so students could shower. They also convinced the principal to make the home economics laundry facilities available to students and their families. Most importantly, the students also began to look at housing costs in the area and identified the disconnect between wages and rents. Students wrote letters to representatives in support of a bill in the legislature that would allow multi-unit buildings in places that had previously been zoned for single-family only (McNichols, 2022). In this way, the book club met the guidelines outlined for activism in action. Through social justice literature, our book club “support[ed] teachers to envision and build systems of schooling that create and sustain a more just society” (Oyler et al., 2017, p. 232). While it was possible for this teacher to do this work without the book club, the shared community we created supported and encouraged her work.

As I considered my study, I was curious how the book club would embody attributes of these alternative spaces for teacher learning. It seemed likely that we would continue to move among these descriptions as we engaged in critical literacy work. I anticipated we would continue to engage in Freire’s (1970) reading and naming of the world by identifying the systems of oppression we read about in our books and recognizing and naming those same systems in our schools. I anticipated a continued connection between reading social justice literature in community and an activist stance in the classroom.

Reading in Community

My study was designed specifically around a teacher book club. Book clubs provide teachers with an opportunity to explore their own ideas about reading for themselves and as

teachers (Hall, 2009). Why are people drawn to book clubs? What does it say about literature that people want to meet to talk about it? Many English teachers discuss universal human experiences in literature. While I bristle a little at this framing because it often is without a lens of justice and equity, I think there is some truth to why we connect to literature. Readers are connected to the emotions and struggles of characters. As Rosenblatt discussed, the readers and the text create a poem of meaning through the reading process. Book clubs allow readers a place to work through their own poems, listen to the poems of others, and create a new poem through the experience of a reading community. Teaching is an oddly isolating profession. While teachers spend their days among their students, they have little time among their colleagues. Book clubs provide an opportunity for teachers to create community with each other. Building on this work is the importance of reflective communities for teacher learning. I drew from the foundational scholarship of Dewey who argued that critical reflection was a key component of teacher learning. Dewey was critical of “the growth of central supervisory personnel in schools” and other bureaucratic structures that impeded teachers’ ability to reflect on their own work. Instead, Dewey argued for “freedom of action and freedom of thought for teachers” (Lageman, 2000, p. 51).

The notion of teachers as readers is a frequent focus of literacy scholarship. One study (Lassonde et al., 2005) included preservice teachers in teacher preparation courses. Their professors structured their classes to include “book groups” as part of their course requirements. The structure of these groups looked slightly different for the elementary and secondary groups, but the overall goal was the same: to “excite candidates about developing their reading lives” (p. 45). The researchers hoped preservice teachers would take an inquiry stance as they read and discussed books with their peers. Their findings supported the role of book clubs in teachers’

literacy development. While some of the responses from preservice teachers were negative, the majority of the participants reported that the book groups were a positive experience. The authors had a goal of broadening the candidates' definitions of literacy. The quantitative findings showed an increase in candidates self-identifying as readers. The largest growth was in students who identified as avid readers; this number more than doubled. "We believe that through candidates' construction of a personal understanding of literacy, which we see as possible to obtain through participation in methods such as book groups, they are encouraged to explore their present and future reading lives and how these lives influence whom they will become as professionals" (p. 51). While this study design differed from my research, there are takeaways for my work. This work reinforced the idea that literacy development is an ongoing process. In addition, engaging in a book club affords teachers the opportunity to continue to expand their ideas about reading and their own identities as readers. My work continued to explore these concepts.

Teachers as Readers

Understanding teachers as readers is important, but the logical next area for study is how that influences their pedagogical practice. Supporting teachers as readers has benefits for teachers' own reading experiences as well as their students (Cremin et al., 2009). The authors explored the notion of what it means to be a reader who teaches and a teacher who reads. They organized their study to support teachers' own reading habits and to broaden teachers' familiarity with a diverse range of authors. The goal was to help teachers engage in conversations about books and build a more expansive knowledge of books to recommend to their students. The results presented suggested that supporting teachers as readers works to build a larger community of reading. One particularly intriguing finding was that participants "took risks and

engaged with texts that they would not necessarily have read” (p. 13) otherwise. This had implications for my study because we collectively chose the novels we read, and many of us read books we might have avoided or skipped. This opportunity to expand our reading choices had the potential to influence our understanding of issues of equity or justice in new ways. In addition, the participants in this study reported that the book club community extended beyond the meeting times, and teachers would recommend books to each other for additional reading. The participants discussed the value of these personal recommendations in place of lists of books from other sources. Much as the narrative at the beginning of this chapter described, personal recommendations from colleagues impact readers.

Continuing to explore the link between teachers’ reading experiences and their reading pedagogy, I hope to build on the work of another study (Hall, 2009) about teacher book clubs. This study explored preservice teachers’ initial notions of a binary of “good” and “bad” teachers of literacy. The study further explored participants’ visions for what it meant to be a “good” literacy teacher and found that teacher book clubs afforded preservice teachers “space to reconsider, and in most cases explain, their visions of what it meant to be literacy teachers” (p. 313). This shift in how teachers conceptualized reading in their classrooms as a result of their own experiences as readers suggested the same might be true for social justice issues. However, this same study cautioned that teachers might have trouble enacting these new visions of reading in their classrooms. Many of the preservice teachers in the study were concerned with conforming to the cultures and practices of their new schools. This connected back to the work of Cremin et. al (2009) and the culture of reading and led me to questions about my own study. How would the book club community support the teachers in my study? All the participants in my study taught at the same middle school. Would it be easier for them to enact radical change

to their practice since they had colleagues who were also engaged in the same work? My study did not seek to answer this question, but it suggested an area for future study.

Patterns of Discourse

How we talk about literature is also important. As I discussed previously, standardization has reduced reading to a set of skills to accomplish, rather than a complex experience influenced by readers' cultural knowledge. My study sought to center aesthetic and expressive responses to literature. Diversifying the books teachers know and disrupting the patterns of discourse used with literature are other benefits of reading communities. One such study (Smith et al., 2001) explored teachers-as-readers discussion groups. I considered the implications for our book club. If we intended to move into deeper discussions about social issues within books, this study suggested we must be explicit and intentional from the start. The authors detailed the shortcomings of their approach and suggested, "Look hard both at the norms that characterize response-centered discussion and at the instructional strategies..." (p. 163). This study's documentation of how their process did not align to meet their goals was instructive. While my intention was not to facilitate a teacher book club but rather immerse myself as a member of the book club, I needed to be explicit that our goal was to examine the book and the social issues within. This meant our book club needed to continue the work of intentionally analyzing and discussing the systems of power and oppression and the acts of resistance we see within the books we read.

From these studies, we learn that my focus on a teacher book club to explore teachers' reading lives and habits and how teachers take up reading for justice in their classrooms was supported by existing literature. In addition, this personal practice also served as professional practice. Teachers engage in reading which helps them think about what their own students

might need from reading. Teachers also expand their knowledge of books students might enjoy. This study can contribute to the developing scholarship on this relationship.

There is a wealth of research supporting the importance of teachers' reading lives. Some of this draws from existing research on readers in general, while some of it pulls from specific scholarly work on teachers' reading habits. Overall, the conclusion is clear: Teachers who read are better reading teachers. However, I was also interested in how reading is important to teachers outside of their work as reading teachers. Why is it important for teachers to have a relationship with books? Why does reading matter? The narrative about Sarah at the beginning of this chapter captured one example of how reading can matter. When we grow and learn as humans, we grow and learn as teachers. Teaching is not a separate experience; it is an extension of who we are. *The Hate U Give* (2017) helped Sarah recognize the connections between a local police murder, the views of her white family and friends, and her students. These were not separate parts of her life. Prior to that, Sarah had compartmentalized her orientation toward social justice as separate from her role as a teacher and separate from her relationships with her friends and family.

How Do YA Social Justice Books Impact Readers?

...literature schools us in a different set of affairs, the affairs of heart and soul that have little truck with information as such.... It is not sentimental to state that literature and art illuminate—engage, constitute—our experience in ways that other fields do not. (Weinstein, 2021, p. 7)

For my study, I intended to have book club meetings with YA books. This would expand teachers' knowledge of current books to recommend to students. It would also give them a better sense of the books their students might be reading. Layered in with this was a focus on books that address issues of equity and justice. For example, *New Kid* and *Class Act* by Jerry Craft (2019, 2020) are paired graphic novels written by a Black author that allow readers to discuss

issues of race and class. These novels push readers beyond surface-level analysis and use powerful narrative to think about how race and class impact characters in big and small ways. Learning about the history of racism or the impact of capitalism has often been seen as work for the social studies classroom. In fact, literature can be a way to make those abstract concepts more personal and concrete for readers.

A book like *They Both Die at the End* (Silvera, 2017) does not sound like it is ripe for discussions of equity; however, this dystopian novel centers characters who are receiving foster care services, are multiracial and queer, and are faced with the question of what one does if they know they are going to die. What our informal book club appreciated about this novel was that the queer characters were not wrestling with their sexual orientation or “coming out”; rather, their sexuality is just a part of who they are. One teacher spoke passionately about the importance of novels that do not focus on queer pain exclusively. She remarked, “The queer characters’ sexuality is not central to the struggle of the story. It is another part of their identities as they wrestle with all the other parts of their lives.” She continued, “I would have *loved* to read a book like this when I was in middle school. It would have absolutely changed my life.” This teacher had a personal connection to the novel, but also placed the novel in the context of larger social issues.

In my work, I planned to collaborate with teachers to determine the books we read. In our informal book club, we drew from established lists like Printz Award, Coretta Scott King Award, Stonewall Book Award, Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, Pura Belpré Award, Schneider Family Book Award, Newbery Award, and others. However, some of our favorite books came from recommendations from students. We continued to use the interests of students

as a guide as we selected books. The books we chose mattered because our goal was to engage in Freire's (1970) work of naming the world through literature.

It is important to make a case for YA literature. Despite its widespread commercial appeal, it is often missing from English language arts classrooms or relegated to "independent reading time" (Elliot-Jones, 2017, p. 29). The idea of "literary merit" frequently drives text selection. My choice to use YA books was intentional and deliberate. I sought to resist the historically oppressive canon of authors who are predominately white, cisgender, and male. I am taking up the work of Lesense (2010), who argued that YA literature is deserving of study in English language arts classrooms:

From its earliest incarnations, YA literature has suffered from a misconception that is somehow less literary than *real* literature. Junior novel, teen lit, adolescent book: Even these early terms for the literature carry negative connotations. I am willing to bet that you have encountered this apparent prejudice against using contemporary literature in the classroom, particularly for classroom study. I think those folks who would denigrate using YA literature fail to see that it has structure, style, and substance. It is worthy of scrutiny in the classroom. (p. 4)

One way my study can contribute to existing scholarship is centering these powerful texts as rich pieces of literature that merit deep exploration.

In addition to offering these texts as worthy of English language arts instruction, I used YA social justice literature in my study to engage teachers in discussions about issues of equity and justice. One reason I pursued this work was to disrupt notions of teaching as politically neutral. There is a wealth of scholarship demonstrating how teachers often see neutrality as the ideal approach to teaching and learning (Dávila & Barnes, 2017; Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Miller-Lane et al., 2006). My project took up the work of "Critical English Education" (Morrell, 2005; Winn, 2013) that "is explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations" (Morrell, 2005, p. 313). In my study, our

responses to the texts were not solely observations and analysis of literature; we also sought to examine and critique issues of injustice in novels.

My work built on a call to action for teacher educators. One study (Falter & Kerkoff, 2018) investigated the use of YA literature to examine preservice teachers' beliefs about racial injustice. The study centered on one novel, *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), used during a YA literature course for preservice teachers. The authors found that many preservice teachers (PSTs) were able to discuss the book during class, but in pursuit of neutrality, deemed it "too political" for their own classrooms. This study closed with a powerful statement: "...young adult literature can only open the door to these discussions, but PSTs *also* need to critically and openly interrogating neutrality as their default positions, or they risk perpetuating further violence on Black and Brown bodies in schools" (p. 271). The authors' warning aligned with the reminder from Smith et al. (2001) to be intentional about the work at hand. As I thought about my study design, I was reminded that as a group, we need to remain committed to critiquing and disrupting systems of power and injustice.

Chapter 3: Study Design

On a sunny Friday afternoon in October, I set snacks in the middle of a large table and eagerly awaited the arrival of eight middle-school teachers. This meeting was the start of my pilot study, and I did not really know what to expect. As teachers arrived, everyone chatted and decompressed from a long week. When the time seemed right, I asked everyone to find a space around the table and pressed record on the audio app on my phone. Almost 2 hours later, I stopped recording and said goodbye to the teachers. The book club had been a lively conversation among the teachers. They discussed the book and the issues of justice it addressed, often connecting it to their own practice or real-world experiences. They also reflected on their own relationships with reading, occasionally sharing intimate or painful stories. There were so many threads of the conversation I wanted to follow, but I did not know how to begin. I wrote a field memo to capture my thoughts and found myself thinking about many of the personal stories the teachers shared.

One early realization was about the limitations of space and time during book club meetings. Specifically, although the book club was a generative space for discussing the novel in depth, it did not afford teachers the opportunity to discuss their personal reading histories or even the connections to their own practice with the same depth. As I wanted to explore these areas further, I needed a study design that included individual interviews with participants. I decided to conduct a follow-up interview with one teacher, Carla. I reviewed the book club transcription and my field notes for potential lines of inquiry. In the end, I settled on three broad topics for the interview that covered Carla's personal reading history, her experience with social justice and literature, and implications for her own teaching. As I asked questions during the interview, Carla responded enthusiastically. She had so much to share that it was challenging to take notes.

I often realized several minutes later that I wished I had asked a follow-up question to a point she made. After the interview, I wrote an interview memo that captured my excitement. The interview provided a space for Carla to tell her own reading stories in depth. It also afforded a space for her to think about her own practice and make connections between her own reading history, her experiences in the book club, and her classroom practice. Although this interview was a rich and generative conversation, I could see the limitations of the overly broad questions I had asked. Through a course on interview research, I developed an interview guide and conducted two interviews with teachers. These additional interviews allowed me to refine this aspect of my study.

As I designed this study, I drew from the experience of my pilot study. While that book club meeting was a powerful space for teachers to talk about the novel, I reflected on my role in the book club. During the pilot study book club, I assumed a dual role of quiet observer and facilitator. Teachers looked to me for prompts or guidance, but I did not add to the conversation about the book or my own reading history. I took notes and listened. As I reflected on this, I realized this approach did not align with the principles of co-construction of knowledge, a position I held core to my identity as a researcher. The aim of my study was not to examine my ability to facilitate a teacher book club; rather, it was to create a collaborative experience of participating in a book club. I wanted to research *with* teachers, not *on* them.

I needed a chance to practice this approach, so I decided to ask the teachers from my pilot study if they would like to form an informal book club so I could see how to make the experience more collaborative. I received a series of positive responses over text: “Yes, I loved talking about *New Kid* with this group!” ... “I have been wanting to join a book club, but I haven’t found the right one yet.” ... “Wahoo! I’ll be there. Just tell me when.” Due to the

ongoing global pandemic, we began meeting monthly over Zoom and then transitioned to backyard meetings as the weather improved. Our conversations were dynamic and fun. I made a conscious effort to participate more and facilitate less. As a result, it became a more responsive space for teacher learning. Occasionally, someone would suggest a participation structure to try. One meeting, a teacher said, “I really want to try ‘Audacious Questioning’ [Cherry-Paul & Johansen, 2019] with my students. Can we try that here?” Other times, it was a space to talk about our relationships with the books. During a discussion of *Two Boys Kissing* (Leviathan, 2015), one teacher shared personal connections to historical information in the book. We spent much of that meeting talking about how narrative is a powerful tool for history. These informal book club meetings guided me to design a study drawing from multiple methodological approaches that aligned with my epistemological and ontological stances.

“We Know More Than We Can Say”

I recently relistened to a 2020 episode of Radiolab (Kielty & Cusick, 2020), in which guests were asked, “What’s the one sentence *you* would want to pass on to the next generation that would contain the most information in the fewest words?” Writer Nicholson Baker answered, “We know more than we can say.” That sentence stuck with me since I first heard the podcast nearly 3 years ago. I found myself saying it over and over in my head. As I thought about the hours of audio recording and pages of notes from my pilot study, I wondered about the ways the data might be more than the data could say. How might I (re)imagine my data in new ways to go beyond what was being said?

Since I conducted the pilot study, the initial interview with one participant continued to resonate with me. Carla was an eighth-grade teacher I knew from my former role as her instructional coach. In our previous work together, she frequently spoke of her developing sense

of “authenticity.” I saw this emphasis on authenticity during our book club meeting. I heard it again in my interview with Carla. Carla was beginning to embrace her authentic self more as she grew as a teacher. Authenticity is a complicated term, but for the purposes of this work, it serves to capture the desire to bring oneself (with social, historical, and political context) into a space. She recognized that her experience as a “fat, biracial girl who loves sports” mattered to students, too. Carla used some version of that phrase several times during the book club and the interview. This reclamation of two aspects of her identity that were previously sources of ridicule was a clear example of Carla’s desire for authenticity. During our interview, we explored Carla’s reading habits and identity when she was younger and now. The juxtaposition between these two times in her life described a time when she was not her authentic self (or her authentic self was not valued) and a time when she was very much in touch with who she is as a reader.

In my initial data analysis work, I looked for themes and coded the transcript and my notes accordingly. In an effort to (re)imagine the data, I spent some time “deeply hanging out” (Geertz, 1998) with my data in an effort to find the ways the data “glowed” (MacLure, 2013). I hoped to “detach a little from [my] own strongly held ideas” (Orellena, 2020, p. 127). I prioritized the places where Carla’s engagement and joy came through, rather than the places that aligned with my literature review. Drawing inspiration from the Radiolab episode, I chose to narrate the data to bring more than just Carla’s words to life.

In our conversation, Carla described her notion of a “good reader” when she was younger. “My idea was you were a good reader if you could read chapter books. The bigger the book, the better the reader!” She laughed, then was quiet for a few seconds. “I don’t even know if I was a good reader. I never remember hearing that from teachers.” Another silence filled the space for a moment. I asked how she described a good reader now. Her voice was animated

again, and she talked very quickly. “There’s so much! A good reader knows what they like and what they don’t like. That’s the start.” She continued to explain how good readers question what they read; they interrogate texts. In Carla’s understanding, good readers can talk about what they read. They can “verbalize their thoughts.” She continued to explain how when she started teaching, the emphasis was on fluency and accuracy. Carla stated emphatically, “That’s not what makes a good reader. That’s not even close to true.” The change in Carla’s tone and affect was notable. When she thought back to her own experience, her voice dropped and flattened. When she was able to talk about reading for her students, her voice lifted, and her words seemed to bounce with rhythm. It was as though I could hear the effects of the “spirit murdering” (Love, 2019) Carla experienced as a student.

When I asked Carla what she wished she could tell her younger self about reading, she was uncharacteristically quiet for a while. “I wish I would have told me to try reading different types of books.” Carla described how she initially loved reading, especially in middle school. She described loving Dean Koontz books but finding Stephen King books too scary. She sighed. “I really loved reading. If I had tried reading other books, I might have loved reading longer. Ninth-grade honors English ruined it for me.” Carla shared her painful experience in that honors class. “I was told I wasn’t good enough to be an honors student. I was told I wasn’t a good writer, and I didn’t read enough.” She explained that her teacher mocked her Dean Koontz books and made it clear there was a certain kind of book that was “real” reading, and Dean Koontz books did not meet the criteria. Once again, Carla’s voice seemed smaller than usual. After describing her ninth-grade experience, she quietly offered, “I would have told myself I was good enough to be an honors student.”

I approached Carla's interview with the intention of amplifying her experiences as a person of color in English language arts classrooms. In this way, I aligned myself with the recent scholarship of an "empathetic" (Fontana & Frey, 2005) interview approach. I was an "advocate and partner in the study, hoping to be able to use the results to advocate social policies and ameliorate the conditions of the interviewee" (p. 117). My intention was to use Carla's experiences as a student of color to help teachers reflect on the experiences of students in their classrooms. In addition, I sought to access Carla's "lived experience." I was mindful of the "words [I] use[d] to guide the participant and the words they use to respond" (Seidman, 2013, p. 18). This meant I noted the words and phrases Carla used to describe her reading habits and identity and used those words back when we asked additional questions. As I looked to help these data tell a story, I found "new connections spark[ed] among words, bodies, objects, and ideas" (MacLure, 2013, p. 229).

The (re)imagining and (re)visiting of the story of my pilot data led me to implications for this future study. How can I know more from the data than the data say? The selection of the text is critical for book club discussions. Carla engaged with issues of race and equity in the novel and quickly transitioned those discussions to reflect on her own experience. During the follow-up interview, Carla built on ideas that were initially developed during the book club discussions. There were lines of thinking between the book club and the follow-up interviews that I wanted to capture in my study. How could I design my study to make more space for what participants know? Was there a way to use journaling to help participants engage in that reflective process throughout the study? I am always mindful of teachers' busy schedules, so could I offer options that could be done through quick voice memos or videos? How could I incorporate opportunities for multimodal reflections? I was aware that my interview with Carla was bolstered by our

existing relationship. I wanted to be intentional about the ways unspoken data are shared by participants I do not know already. Thinking through the data with the lens of knowing more than what the data were saying allowed me to think about the process of research in new ways.

Overview

Using an inquiry approach with participatory structures and ethnographic tools, I explored how teachers conceptualized themselves as readers, engaged with social justice literature, and took up justice-oriented literacy work in their classrooms. I positioned teacher knowledge as central to this inquiry group. The research was based in an inquiry group centered within a social justice teacher book club. Through this study, I sought to answer the following questions:

- How do teachers critically explore their own relationships with reading, both through their reading histories and reading lives?
- How do teachers critically engage with texts through a YA social justice book club?
- How do teachers use their own experiences in a YA social justice book club to inform or reimagine their classrooms?

For this project, I used qualitative data from multiple sources including: book club field memos, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, artifact collection, and reflective journals and memos. I planned to analyze these data in an ongoing way throughout the study.

The study was informed by a pilot study I conducted in the fall of 2019 that examined teachers' relationships to reading. The pilot study consisted of a 2-hour book club meeting with eight middle-school teachers and a 1-hour follow-up interview with a teacher. In addition, I participated in an informal teacher book club beginning in January 2021. Finally, I developed an

interview protocol and conducted two 1-hour teacher interviews during a class in the fall of 2021. The findings and experiences from the pilot study, informal book club, and additional interviews informed the study design.

Research Design

Co-Constructing an Inquiry Community of Teachers

This study took up the construct *inquiry as stance* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). This framework used the metaphor of “stance” to describe the relationship between theory and praxis for researchers and teachers, what *stance* we take. In qualitative research, it is common for researchers to name our perspectives or the lenses through which we develop our ideas, conduct our research, and analyze our data. An inquiry stance allows us to work with others to construct knowledge related to our own work, evaluate and analyze existing research, and develop new ways of thinking about pedagogy. Therefore, inquiry as stance troubles the traditional notions of inquiry as a project or activity; rather, inquiry as stance positions teacher learning as ongoing, collaborative, and generative. In addition, inquiry as stance sees teaching as a “complex activity that occurs within webs of social, historical, cultural, and political significance” (p. 288). Inquiry as stance aligns with the theoretical framework, critical sociocultural theory, undergirding this study.

This study positioned teachers as “deliberative intellectuals” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and disrupted the notion of a theory-practice divide by arguing that teachers “constantly theorize practice as part of practice itself” (p. 2). In this way, my work stands on the shoulders of practitioner scholarship. This study upholds teachers as experts in their practice. The teachers in the study were not the topic of my study; rather, it was only through our shared experience in the book club and their reflective thinking that I developed a deeper understanding. In addition, I

contended that teachers in collaboration with other teachers engage in inquiry work that builds on their collective knowledge and creates momentum toward classroom and community change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). When teachers have space to connect and collaborate with other teachers, they are able to ease the feelings of isolation and create a learning community. In particular, Cochran-Smith and Lytle argued that these spaces are rich and inform pedagogy:

...inquiry communities structured to foster deep intellectual discourse about critical issues and thus to become spaces where the uncertainties and questions intrinsic to practice can be seen (not hidden) and can function as grist for new insights and new ways to theorize practice. (p. 37)

To understand inquiry communities more completely, it is important to explore practitioner inquiry further.

This study was rooted in inquiry, or systematic exploration. The study developed from my interest in how a teacher book club sparked a change for both teachers and students in my former school. The study drew from the tradition of practitioner inquiry in which educators engage in intentional study of their own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The characteristics of practitioner inquiry are as follows:

- Practitioner as researcher;
- Assumptions about links of knowledge, knowers, and knowing;
- Professional context as a site of study;
- Community and collaboration;
- Blurred boundaries between inquiry and practice;
- New conceptions of validity and generalizability;
- Systematicity, including data collection and analysis;
- Publicity, public knowledge, and critique. (p. 39)

While this study diverged from some of the features of practitioner research, some aspects were evident in the design and implementation. Foremost, I positioned all participants in my study as “knowers, learners, and researchers” (p. 42). My study held that these teachers are experts of their practice and the in-classroom teaching and learning they conduct and bring back to the group are central to our own learning. In addition, community and collaboration were central to this study’s design. It was only through our shared book club experience that we were able to think more deeply about our own reading habits and practices and those in classrooms. This study shared the feature of systematicity. I used multiple data sources that included traditional forms (observation and interview) as well as insider data sources (text threads) that centered informal thoughts and insights. Overall, this study was strongly aligned with the tradition of practitioner research.

Participants

The study included seven middle school teachers in the Pacific Northwest. I limited my participants to middle-school teachers because sixth through eighth grade is uniquely suited for YA literature. Unlike high school, there is less of an established canon that middle-school teachers must use. In the district where these teachers work, the adopted English language arts curriculum for middle school gives teachers the opportunity to incorporate a breadth of novels, meaning there is not a set of novels middle-school students are expected to read. This autonomy affords teachers the flexibility to use the novels we read in our book club with their students. While the intention of the book club was not to “practice” with a book that teachers would use in their classrooms, it was certainly beneficial that teachers had that option.

The teachers had various roles: one special education co-teacher, one general education co-teacher, two general education teachers, English language development teacher, reading

intervention teacher, and teacher librarian. Six of the seven teachers identified as white, and one identified as biracial. Three of the teachers used they/them pronouns. Two of the teachers used ethnic or religious identifiers as part of their identity descriptions. All of the participants taught at the same middle school in a mid-sized city that is part of a larger metropolitan area. The school serves nearly 800 students. It is a Title I school, with 65% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The majority of the students identify as students of color. Of the total student population, 20% are English language learners, 20% receive special education services, and 3% are unhoused (Office of Superintendent of Public Education, n.d.).

Data Sources

The following is an overview of my data sources:

1. Fieldnote memos from book club meetings;
2. Audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with participants;
3. Fieldnote memos from interviews;
4. Researcher journal entries;
5. Personal communication with teachers via phone, text, and/or email; and
6. Various artifacts created by participants.

I wrote a fieldnote memo after each of the book club meetings. Fieldnotes are “the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 111). The book club meetings were typically 2 hours (sometimes more), with additional time to socialize at the beginning and end. Since I wanted to capture my initial thoughts, I recorded a voice memo (audio-recorded, stream of consciousness thoughts on the meeting using an app on my phone)

immediately following each meeting. Then, I used the voice memo to write a fieldnote memo, a written reflection on the book club with my research questions in mind.

I audio-recorded the semi-structured interviews with every teacher. During the interviews, I took minimal notes, focused only on my participants' body language, tone of voice, and other cues. I transcribed these recordings and used my notes to add descriptions of teachers' nonverbal communications to create a broader picture of participants' responses. In addition, I asked participants to clarify their answers when I was uncertain. During these interviews, I used the interview protocol included in Appendix A. In addition, I used the same protocol of recording an initial voice memo immediately following the interview, followed by an interview fieldnote memo.

In addition to traditional qualitative data sources, I used several other sources. First, I maintained a researcher journal during my study. I wrote entries to reflect on the various aspects of the research process and how I was thinking about my study. I included this practice as part of my intention to analyze data continually throughout the study as well as reflect on the research design and methods. Second, I included personal communication with teachers via phone, text, and/or email. In particular, the text thread was a rich source of conversation during our informal book club and continued to be. Finally, I used various artifacts (unit and lesson plans, classroom photographs, anonymized examples of student work, etc.) that teachers shared with me.

Book Club Meetings/Reflective Practices

The design of this study centered on a social justice book club; therefore, the meetings were the primary source of data. During my pilot study and the ongoing informal book club, the conversations in book club meetings included insights into the book and related social justice issues, personal connections and stories, and ideas for how the books might be used with

students. Initially, I planned to structure the study to alternate between typical book club meetings and reflective meetings about our lives as readers and the implications for teaching and learning. However, when I discussed this structure further with the teachers, they decided they wanted to focus on a book at every meeting. This is an example of how my study drew from a collaborative research model and was responsive to participants' interests and needs.

Interviews

I conducted individual interviews as part of my research. My initial plan was to conduct interviews in teachers' classrooms, so they would be able to share classroom libraries, student work, and/or unit or lesson designs as needed. This would allow making connections between their reading lives and their reading praxis. However, the participants were eager to talk with me outside of their classrooms. One teacher said, "This has been a really hard year, and I don't want to be in there any more than I have to." Another teacher said, "I'd rather hang out with you in a coffee shop." As a result, all of the interviews took place outside of school. Again, this is an example of how I collaborated with teachers in the research design. The interviews took between 1 to 2 hours to complete. As a research method, an interview "pursues a logic that emphasizes discovery rather than a logic that emphasizes verification" (Gerson & Damaske, 2021, p. 9); this suggests that I approached an interview as a process for uncovering, not proving. While I developed an interview guide for my study, I engaged in active listening and adjusted the questions I asked according to the teachers' responses. I used the guide to active listening developed by Seidman (1991). First, I ensured I understood teachers' answers and continued to probe to understand more deeply. I was also mindful of both logistics and the emotional state of the teachers as I conducted interviews. The decision to conduct interviews outside of their classrooms was an example of how I was responsive to both and adjusted accordingly. I audio-

recorded the interviews and took minimal notes during the process, so I was able to focus on the conversation at the time. Then, I transcribed the recordings through an interpretive process that recognized the differences between spoken language and written language (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015); that is, I noted pauses, gestures, body language, and other nonverbal communication drawn from my notes as much as possible. After I completed the transcription process, I used a collaborative process to “member check” my transcriptions. This meant I asked participants for clarification when I was unsure of their meaning or intent.

The strength of interview research is the opportunity to talk to “experts” about what they know best (Lareau, 2021). I used interviews because they were a way for teachers to share information about “their key life events, hopes and dreams, and situations that have shaped their lives” (p. 64) in the context of reading. In addition, interview research allowed me to ask participants directly, rather than relying on observational data. I was able to hear participants’ experiences, accounts, motivations, aspirations, and meaning making (Gerson & Damaske, 2021). I crafted an interview guide that allowed the teachers to answer questions drawn from my research questions. I hold the position that “far from being ‘just talk,’ interviews can evoke a layered narrative that provides a powerful tool for theorizing the links between worldviews, structures, and actions” (Lareau, 2021, p. 25). Interviews help construct a story that explains how concepts and ideas are actualized.

Data Analysis

Glow of Data and Wonder

As I looked through fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and reflective memos from my pilot study, informal book club, and this study, I often experienced what MacLure (2010) called “glows” from the data. These are places that drew my attention and created an energy and sense

of possibility. MacLure explained it as more than just finding “examples”; rather, these glows generate new connections and opportunities. In my pilot study, my description of Carla as a glow captured this notion: “The connectivity that smoulders [sic] in examples does not stop at the point of writing—that is, it is not a matter simply of writing the example down” (p. 282). As I experienced the glow from Carla, I moved from her words to the line from the podcast and back to Carla. Over the course of days, I began to develop my understanding of what it meant to “know more than we can say” in relation to my work. I began to understand how to use narrative to center Carla’s voice in my work. The glow of her voice rising and falling was a connection to Love’s (2019) notion of spirit murdering, but I was not simply using Carla’s voice changes as evidence. Instead, I was seeking to understand Carla deeply and use this theoretical concept to “name the world” (Freire, 1970). Through this process, I began to gain my footing as a researcher who follows the data, instead of having the data follow my argument.

MacLure (2013) continued this orientation to data analysis by arguing for more wonder to counter the “exercise of reason through interpretation, classification, and representation” (p. 228). Since I wanted to avoid the urge to “prove” and instead to understand more deeply, wonder is a valuable approach to data analysis. MacLure argued that wonder exists in a liminal space that is “not simply ‘in’ the data; but not only ‘in’ [the researchers]” (p. 231). I sought to center a stance of wonder, looking for the glows in my data. In addition, I drew from the scholarship of Bazeley (2013), who described a set of strategies for data exploration: “read, reflect, play, and explore.” Bazeley urged researchers to use these strategies at the beginning of data analysis to “build a sense of the whole” and “shine light on the focal point” (p. 101). By engaging with data in this way, I engaged in ongoing analysis throughout my research study. I engaged in members checks along the way. I asked teachers to review memos throughout the

process. Initially, I tried to share the actual memos, but they were reluctant to engage. I created a shared Drive so teachers could access the memos. One teacher told me, “I really like hearing about your dissertation, but I don’t have time to read anything else.” I started sharing my thoughts verbally during meetings, and the teachers engaged in reflection and feedback on my insights. Occasionally, one or two teachers would stay later after meetings to talk through the research process. Another teacher spent part of the individual interview asking about my findings. Throughout the process, I maintained flexibility and transparency so teachers could engage with the data in the ways they wanted.

Validity and Trustworthiness

In this inquiry group research study, I did not intend to generalize beyond this work. Rather, I sought to understand the particulars of this group of teachers and their relationships to reading. This study was grounded in Freire’s (1970) notion of dialogic learning, the way meaning is made between people as they attempt to name the world. As a result, in the spirit of Freire’s approach, I did not study the teachers themselves; rather, I studied the meaning we created through our shared book club. Freire described the process this way:

Consistent with the liberating purpose of dialogical education, the object of the investigation is not the persons (as if they anatomical fragments), but rather the thought-language with which [people] refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world, in which their generative themes are found. (p. 97)

Furthermore, Freire argued through dialogue a “climate of mutual trust” (p. 91) forms. It is through this trust that I reported the findings of this study. Since I used collaborative structures, I positioned teachers as partners. As such, their interpretations were important to my study. I engaged participants in member checks (Creswell & Miller, 2000) to ensure that I reported credible and accurate findings.

Limitations

Since this study was designed to understand this specific inquiry group of teachers, it is limited to the results I found. In addition, this study included middle-school teachers exclusively. A study that includes elementary and/or high school teachers would likely yield different results. This study included teachers who already knew each other and me; a study with teachers who did not have established relationships with each other and the researcher might report a different depth of dialogic learning. Finally, this study used YA social justice literature, which limited the titles of books we read in our book club. This study presents conversations about literature that focus on systems of power and oppression in society, with special attention to intersectional identities in the novels. We intentionally chose books whose authors represent historically marginalized groups. The books we used were contemporary rather than classics. A study focused on the traditional canon might include some of these conversations, but would be more likely to center a white, middle-class, heteronormative perspective.

Presentation of the Findings

In the following chapters, I present my findings and the themes I explored. In Chapter 4, I focus on the book club meetings and interviews with participants. In Chapter 5, I look across the interviews and book club meetings for similarities, differences, themes, and overall findings. I also explore possible implications for research, policy, and practice.

Chapter 4: Findings

Co-Construction of Book Club Practices

On a sunny but crisp afternoon in January 2023, a few of us sat around a fire and chatted while we waited for the rest of our group to arrive. This was our last “official” book club meeting of this dissertation study. Even though we had decided to continue our book club beyond the scope of this project, there was a sense of finality to this meeting that made us all reflect on our time together. Erin commented, “The first book club I had so many pages marked in my book, and I was so nervous I wouldn’t have anything smart to say. Now I sometimes come to book club without finishing the book, but I always have something to say.” She laughed and then continued, “It’s so different now. I feel like a real reader now, I’m not pretending to be a reader.” Erin’s observation about her personal relationship with reading is explored later, but her reference to the first book club speaks to how the structure of our meetings evolved over our time together and the ways the structure was central to our collective learning.

Our first book club meeting in October of 2019, which I discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, served as a pilot study for my dissertation. During that meeting, I had not yet realized the importance of my participation in the discussions, so I functioned more like a facilitator than as a member of the book club. I also brought a one-page list of general book discussion questions, and we relied heavily on those for our conversation. There were some moments of reflection that drew from the teachers’ own experiences with reading, either in their past or with the novel, and this is where the conversation felt more generative and energizing. These moments would prove to be pivotal as we developed as a community of readers together.

In the months before my study officially began, I reached out to the teachers to see if they were interested in an informal book club. They were very excited, and we met virtually because of the global pandemic. At one of our first meetings, as we said hello to each other, one teacher

said, “I hate the beginning of Zoom meetings. It always feels so awkward.” Another teacher added, “There aren’t any side conversations. Everything you say is for everyone to hear.” As I thought about how to build relationships with future participants over Zoom, I was struck by that idea. *Everything you say is for everyone to hear.* In a meeting with my writing group the week prior, we talked about this aspect of Zoom meetings. This same issue came up in a board meeting I attended earlier in that month. It made me wonder why this was a common complaint about Zoom meetings. Then, I thought about how I spent my time in the moments before an in-person class or meeting started. I often organized my notebook, pens, and water bottle on the table. Sometimes, someone would comment on my pen pouch or a sticker on my water bottle. I might look over and notice someone’s tasty dinner or cute shirt. These comments often led to longer conversations. After one class several years ago, I walked to the train with a classmate, and we talked about my favorite soccer club because she asked about a sticker on my laptop. These conversations helped me build relationships. At the time, we were approaching one year of distance learning, and I could feel the loss of those relationships. I thought about ways to offer space and time for people to get to know each other, like ice breakers or opening questions, but those lacked the authenticity and spontaneity of in-person interactions.

I wondered: What did that mean going forward? How could I understand the limitations of virtual spaces, but also push through to help participants build relationships with each other? At the end of a later book club meeting with teachers, one participant said, “I love all the dogs and cats in the backgrounds of our videos!” This led to a show-and-tell of our pets. Everyone was excited, and people talked over one another. It was a stark contrast to the usual turn taking during most of the meeting. I understood that while planning icebreakers and warm-ups for every meeting was important, allowing space and time at the end of a meeting for spontaneous

conversation might also be important. This realization helped our Zoom meetings feel more friendly and less formal. I structured the meetings to include that informal time at the beginning and end of every meeting, but we also collectively agreed to let our whole selves be a part of the meetings. We welcomed intrusions from pets or family members. We talked about the snacks we were having. People gave tours of their homes. It was not exactly like meeting in person, but it was closer. In the spring, once everyone had been vaccinated, we collectively decided to meet in-person, but outside. Moving to in-person meetings meant it was easier for teachers to have side conversations with each other in contrast to our virtual meetings. In addition, it made it easier for me to move away from the assumed facilitator and into a collaborator.

The shift to book club meetings in my backyard represented a shift in the way our book club functioned, too. Previously, I had chosen a book for us to read, often from lists of current titles that addressed social justice issues. Teachers enjoyed the books and often commented that they appreciated reading new and unfamiliar titles. To align with my intention to actively co-engage in research with my participants, I knew I wanted to collaborate with teachers in the book selection process. However, I recognized the need to minimize the additional work on teachers. Understanding the stressors and time constraints on my participants, I started attending publishing webinars, reading posts from national and local organizations like American Library Association and Oregon Battle of the Books, and following book-related accounts on social media. I wanted to ensure I kept abreast of upcoming titles, especially from authors of color. This informal research of book titles was an intentional move on my part to come to meetings with engaging, interesting texts and make space for teachers to engage as co-researchers through book selection.

Buoyed by my knowledge of YA titles, I started bringing a collection of books to each meeting. After we finished our discussion of that month's book, we would spend time choosing the next book. During this time, some teachers would read the back covers, others would flip through books and read sections, and others would read reviews online. We would engage in some kind of consensus-building process of choosing the books. Sometimes, teachers would rank the books from favorite to least. Other times, a participant or two might make a strong case for a book and convince everyone else. A few times, we used a method that allowed people to remove a book from the choices. It was through this process that we learned that Sam abhors historical fiction, especially set during the Civil War, so we eliminated *Dread Nation* (Ireland, 2019) from the stack of horror books. Another time, when we were unable to decide between our three top choices, Alex said, "Can we do the cheesy thing where we read the first page aloud and see if that helps?" We all agreed and were able to decide through that process. In addition, the process of choosing books was further refined as teachers began to take more of an active role in suggesting genres or content or authors we should read. At one meeting, one participant mentioned how much they loved romance, so we read *Love Is a Revolution* (Watson, 2021). During another meeting, Rachel said, "We haven't read a book with a male central character in a while. I'm looking for books I can share with some of my students, and I think a book with a boy would be helpful." At one of our last meetings, two teachers talked about how much they loved reading horror. The rest of us shuddered a bit, but agreed it was a genre we were willing to read as a club. The process of selecting books evolved over our time together. My goal was to make the process participatory but not burdensome. During my interview with Gabriela, she mentioned another book club. In that book club, the group members took turns picking the book for the group. She said, "And when it came to my month, it was always a lot of pressure. I know what I

like to read, but what if I pick a book they hate?” (Interview transcript, 01/20/2023). Gabriela’s remarks offered support for the book selection process that developed in our book club. The process was responsive to the needs of the group.

Another crucial attribute of our book club was that teachers came to the book club even if they had not read the book. This spoke to the importance of the space for teachers and the collective space that was created by its members. It was not just about the book. The community and conversation added value to teachers’ lives aside from the novels themselves. In addition, teachers openly shared with the group that they did not read the book. At one meeting, Chris sat down and said, “I didn’t read this, but there was no way I was missing the discussion.” This sentiment was echoed often during our meetings. Teachers valued the book club for the space and community. Several of the teachers in the book club are parents of young children. Often, our book club meetings included children, dogs, and once even mason bees! The book club was a space that adjusted to meet the teachers’ needs, rather than asking teachers to conform to specific expectations for how to discuss literature or what it meant to be a member of a book club. Sam explained the difference in book club cultures during our interview: “In another book club, it feels like we pick books we think we’re supposed to read. Like, we read this Sally Rooney book and I think we all hated it, but we’re too scared to admit it” (Interview transcript, 01/07/2023). In contrast, during our book club meeting about *Pride: A Pride and Prejudice Remix* (Zoboi, 2018), a novel unanimously loathed by the group, teachers freely discussed the aspects of the novel they disliked. In fact, the discussion of the ways the novel was disappointing was a generative discussion about reading preferences and interests. Our club functioned outside of the typical book club model that centered the book; instead, we centered ourselves. We focused on our

reactions to the book, our ideas about the issues of justice in the book, and the ways we were thinking about reading in our classrooms.

Reading Is Political

In this study, I position reading as a political act that cannot be separated from the personal or pedagogical. Reading is always political. This research project developed out of my desire to understand how teachers think about their own reading lives as well as their roles as teachers of reading. To understand better how teachers engage with reading personally and pedagogically, I designed this research project around a book club which offered teachers the opportunity to read in community with other English language arts teachers. Our book club conversations frequently wove through our personal habits as readers, how we were thinking about reading in our classrooms, and the ways the books addressed or avoided issues of oppression or injustice. While this space was highly generative, I also wanted additional space for teachers to reflect on their ideas about reading. I met with teachers individually to hear their stories and ideas. These conversations afforded us time to discuss their past experiences with reading but also explore topics that were raised in our book clubs.

“I don’t feel like a hypocrite anymore”: Reading YA as a Teacher

When I designed this study, I intentionally planned it as a young adult (YA) literature book club, focusing on books that center issues of justice. This choice was drawn from my experience with a teacher book club in the past. In addition, I hoped it would help teachers develop a broader understanding of young adult literature. The books we chose addressed important social and cultural issues, including topics like homophobia, racism, fat phobia, gentrification, trauma, and loss, but within those books were stories of resistance and resilience.

In our book club conversations, we were drawn to the ways characters thrived. We also developed an appreciation for YA books and the myriad stories that can be told.

Teachers recognized the value of having a better understanding of current YA titles as English language arts teachers. Ama is a self-described “reader” who has always read multiple books a month. She describes the impact of being a YA reader on the way she talks to students about books.

For a long time, I don’t know. I went through a period where I didn’t read any young adult books. I mean, I’ve always talked to students about books, you know, and connected with them around what they’re reading. And I’m always, I’m a curious person, so I’m always like, ‘Oh, that looks really good. Is it good?’ And ‘What do you think about it?’ But I think being a part of this little community and talking about the books, I think has given me more of a confidence about knowing these books. I see my students reading books or authors I’ve read and I can talk from experience. (Interview transcript, 01/21/2023)

Knowing the books that students were reading or being able to suggest books to students was something teachers thought was helpful prior to the book club, but then realized it was vital to their practice. During a book club meeting, one teacher remarked, “Now as a teacher, I will always be reading at least one YA book.” Other teachers nodded in agreement. At a later meeting, Ama said, “Yeah, because Erin and I co-teach, we are often reading our book club book in the classroom, and the kids want to know what’s so great about this book that both of us are reading it!” Teachers frequently described the ways they saw their own enthusiasm for specific books as “infectious” or “contagious.” They were excited to share books with students. After she read *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds (2019), Gabriela said she could not wait to do a book talk about it for students. She explained further that since she did not have enough copies to meet the demand for the book, she showed students how to use Libby, an app that links to one’s public library account. She laughed and remarked, “I don’t know why I didn’t think to do that earlier. I mean, I use Libby all the time. Why hadn’t I told them?” In the book club described in the

opening chapter, I reflected on the energy or buzz around reading that I noticed after our book club. Since I am no longer in the school as an instructional coach, I am not able to notice this firsthand. These anecdotes from teachers suggested an energy about reading among students when teachers are excited about what they are reading.

For Rachel, the book club introduced her to a new way to have a relationship with reading. As a child, she struggled to read because she is dyslexic. In addition, her parents both put pressure on her to engage only with literature they deemed worthy of her time. For her parents, this meant classic, often obscure literature that was at best incredibly challenging and often well beyond her ability at the time. Our book club afforded her space and time to read for pleasure.

Fun was not a big part of my reading history, but it came in even recently because of this book club. It's actually really hard for me to read, which I guess makes sense. This group is the closest to fun reading that I've ever done in my life. It's pretty uncomfortable for me, but the community keeps me in it, right? I think that's why I struggled when I first started teaching reading. I had no concept of what it meant to enjoy a book. I thought books were meant to be like going to the opera. You were meant to be moved, but you didn't really enjoy it. I really enjoyed reading some of the books for this book club. Some of the books were actually fun to read. (Interview transcript, 01/17/2023)

In book club meetings, our discussions frequently referenced the classroom. How might this book be a good companion to other books? Which students might enjoy this book? How has reading this book made us think about reading in our classrooms? Erin discussed one impact the book club had on her as a teacher.

I really like that I don't feel like a hypocrite anymore. I've read a lot of young adult books by this point because the book club kind of kickstarted me and then I started reading lots of YA, so I can talk to kids about what they're reading because I've read the books, or I have suggestions. And so, it's another opportunity to just be a be a person with a student and not be such a...[pause] sometimes the relationship between a teacher and a student can feel very authoritarian depending on the teacher [pause] And so reading these books I feel more equal to my students and I just like to have real conversations with them. And so now that I'm actually reading books that they're reading, it feels a lot more genuine. (Interview transcript, 01/08/2023)

While I expected that reading YA books would afford teachers a better understanding of current titles, I had not anticipated this response. I intended that we would liberate ourselves from the existing canon and examine systems of oppression in society. Erin was saying that reading YA books was a way she has been able to disrupt power dynamics in her classroom. I am interested in this as a possible area for future study. Erin's response also supports the methodological choices I made for this study. By centering qualitative research that allowed me to develop meaningful relationships over months, I was able to create opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own experiences and share insights like this.

The following sections capture critical incidents from the book club meetings, individual interviews, and text threads. These sections illustrate the affective dimensions of the community and the space.

***Starfish*: How 244 Pages Sparked Reflection and Critique**

At a book club in the summer, we sat in the shade, sipped cold drinks, and caught up with each other. Some group members had traveled internationally recently and shared stories and photos from their trips. Erin talked about the new baby goats on her farm. Sam talked about the simple pleasure of having coffee at home instead of during their commute to school. Everyone was enjoying the relaxed vibes of the summer, and the return to school seemed distant enough to not be a bother.

We had read *Starfish* (Fipps, 2021), a middle-grade novel in verse. The book's central character, Ellie, is a middle schooler who is bullied about her weight. In addition to the fatphobia she experiences from peers, Ellie's mother is cruel and dehumanizing about her daughter's body. The conversation about the book began slowly. As the discussion picked up, it was clear the abuse from Ellie's mother had impacted many of us. One teacher talked about their experience

with their own mother: “The things she said weren’t the same topic, I mean my mom wasn’t abusive about my weight, but it felt the same.” This picked up the conversation. We discussed the shock as we read scenes with the mother. One teacher said:

If I had a book like this when I was younger, I would have been appalled at Ellie’s mom and cheering for Ellie to stand up to her. I think it might have made me realize the same thing was happening to me. Maybe not right away, maybe it would have taken some time, but I’m pretty sure I would have been able to see how similar they were. That would have been nice, to not have to wait until I was an adult to see how abusive my mom was. (Fieldnotes, 08/21/2023)

Our discussion shifted to the power of literature to help one make sense of one’s own life. We talked about how a book like *Starfish* can be important for different readers for different reasons. Chris said, “I know I have students who have made fun of other students because they were fat. You know, I think about them reading this and thinking about things from the perspective of that fat student.” Another teacher remarked, “Windows and mirrors. It’s always about windows and mirrors. She [Rudine Sims Bishop] knew what she was talking about.” This playful quip shows the ways the teachers did not separate their personal reading lives from their pedagogical selves, and reading is always political. The teachers recognized that books are ways for students to see themselves in books or see others in new ways, and through that process they engage with their various identities that are privileged or marginalized.

Throughout the conversation, Gabriela referenced the specific harms that happen to fat girls and how *Starfish* highlights fat phobia. Parsons (2017) noted, “[Novels] are positioned within the sociocultural climate of anti-fat bias, the medicalization of obesity, and the pervasiveness of the idealized female body” (p. 191). While most novels do not trouble fat phobia, *Starfish* explicitly does. The main character, Ellie, talks about the “Fat Girl Rules” she uses to make herself small and unnoticeable. Gabriela, who self-identified as fat, talked about her own set of rules: “It’s real. We constantly think about the space we take up in public. God,

especially in crowded public spaces.” She further discussed how the medical community excludes and alienates fat people, using standardization tools like BMI (body mass index). Gabriela continued, “Just like in education, we have the scale of where everyone is supposed to be that doesn’t account for anyone being slightly different.” This led to a discussion of the racist origins of BMI and how we see similar parallels to assessments in education. Sam said, “You know, it’s actually just as hard for kids with low BMI.” Gabriela quickly responded, “No, it’s not hard for kids who are low BMI. Maybe the doctor has concerns and wants more appointments. But the difference is they’re not a ‘bad person’ for low BMI.” There was a pause, and then Sam nodded and said, “No, you’re right. It is different.” The relationship and trust had been built, so participants felt safe challenging each other. In particular, Gabriela centered her lived experience as a biracial fat woman to push back against the specific ways fatphobia, not just being outside the norm, impacts people. She connected her lived experience to talk about how fatphobia is perpetuated and upheld structurally through systems like medicine and further drew parallels to education. We talked about intersectionality and how this book seems squarely focused on fatness, which led to a discussion of when an identity is so oppressed it begins to take over one’s identity. This conversation was rich and honest and the direct result of a 244-page novel in verse targeting younger adolescent readers.

A bit later, our conversation returned to the adults in the novel. Erin remarked, “Yeah, I just feel like all of the adults in general were disappointing. Well, almost all of them. It makes me wonder about the ways that I’ve disappointed students.” There was a long pause as our collective group took in those words. People nodded or sighed. As I looked around the group, I noticed everyone seemed to be reflecting on Erin’s words. It was striking that no one tried to contradict or appease Erin. No one was defensive or dismissive of Erin’s point. The teachers

took the moment to think about what she said. The space of the book club gave teachers time to reflect and consider the complexities of education. Additionally, the conversation did not shift into “solving” the problem. Teachers did not try to brainstorm the ways they could support fat students or address bullying. They took the time to sit with their thoughts about the ways they may have disappointed students and consider the larger implications for their own classrooms. In contrast to school or district professional development, teachers were afforded space and time to *not know*. They were not required to document their learning; they were allowed to engage in meaningful exploratory talk.

Through this conversation, teachers were able to use *Starfish* to engage in deep conversation with each other using the book to see themselves and see others. While this complex concept was simplified to “windows and mirrors” in the discussion, the ways teachers were engaging with the text and each other demonstrated a much deeper relationship with the work. Teachers used *Starfish* to reflect on their own experiences and to have an opportunity to see the experiences of others simultaneously. Both the novel and the resulting book club conversation created space for teachers to critically analyze complex social systems of bias and oppression, both personally and pedagogically. Parsons (2017) argued for this multifaceted understanding of literature as enjoyable and a source of critical work: “We read literature for enjoyment, for experience, to consider the human condition, and for empowerment. We are empowered when we critically evaluate literature’s embedded cultural messages” (p. 204). As a community of readers, we supported each other as we engaged in this meaningful work.

“I’m pissed”: Book Bans, Rage, and Action

At the beginning of our meeting, as everyone was settling in and gathering snacks, Gabriela said, “Before we start, can we talk about the book ban? I’m pissed!” Earlier that month,

the district where the teachers worked had voted to ban the book *47* (Mosley, 2005), a YA novel that follows a young, enslaved boy who is known only by the number 47. This novel was not required reading at any grade, but part of a collection of books available during a book club unit in the district-adopted reading curriculum. According to Gabriela, the committee nearly unanimously voted to ban *47*. The teachers were especially upset that their current instructional coach was among those who voted to ban the book. The district has had a history of book challenges, but this was the first time recently that a book had been banned. In May of 2016, another novel centering an enslaved main character, *Copper Sun* (Draper, 2006), was challenged by a group of parents who objected to the content. Both books are written by Black authors, and Sharon Draper includes an author's note in *Copper Sun* arguing the importance of the book and its relevance by explaining that she is the granddaughter of an enslaved person. In a 2005 interview on NPR, Walter Mosley responded to a question about the premise of his novel:

Many black people, young and old, are afraid to read about slavery. They're afraid because they don't want to identify with the main characters because it's just too heartbreaking to do. And so I wanted to write a book that, you know, it's going to be—all the terrible things about slavery are gonna be there, but in the end you know that your main character is not only gonna survive but is going to thrive. (Grigsby Bates, 2005)

Both authors expressed a clear understanding of the gravity of the content, while simultaneously advocating for the need for these stories for adolescent readers.

This research project was conducted during one of the strongest waves of censorship the literary world has experienced. In September of 2022, the American Library Association (ALA) released its preliminary data on book bans for the year. ALA projected 2022 was expected to see the most attempts to challenge or ban library materials exceeding the previous record-breaking year in 2021. ALA President Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada characterized the attempts to restrict or ban books as part of a larger movement:

The unprecedented number of challenges we're seeing already this year reflects coordinated, national efforts to silence marginalized or historically underrepresented voices and deprive all of us – young people, in particular – of the chance to explore a world beyond the confines of personal experience. (American Library Association, 2022)

As we engaged in our reading, book challenges and bans as a growing phenomenon were a common topic in our meetings. However, the book ban in the teachers' own district shifted the conversation from general despair and frustration to specific engagement and action.

During our book club conversation about the book ban in the teachers' district, the teachers expressed anger and outrage at the challenge itself, but more vehemently at their fellow educators on the curricular materials review committee. One teacher remarked, "I don't understand how they think it's okay?! We are now a district that bans books." This realization settled over the group. Another teacher commented on the fact that the people challenging *47* had not read the book: "The challenge never should have moved forward. That's the first question on the form and they checked no." One teacher said, "I feel like I don't want to work in this district." Another teacher responded, "What can we do? We have to fight this!" This remark changed the energy in the space. Teachers sat up and nodded. Sam, who is a teacher librarian, shared the organizing the district librarians were doing. I shared resources available on NCTE's Intellectual Freedom Center (see website at <https://ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/>). As teachers looked through resources on their phones, one teacher commented, "You know, almost all of the books we've read have been challenged or banned in places. We know how amazing they are because we've read them." That sparked a conversation about how to spotlight frequently challenged or banned books in their classrooms by sharing their own experiences reading them. Teachers enthusiastically chimed in: "Like a PR campaign!" "Let's fill the halls with recommendations!" "Yes, from us and from the kids!" "Maybe we could do something on the announcements?" "Will they let us?" "Oh, I'm going to do it. Let them try to

stop me!” The energy shift when teachers began to think about how to organize and respond to the book ban was palpable. Teachers were animated and excited. This moment was a clear example of how the book club space created an opportunity for teachers to engage in reading personally, pedagogically, and politically. Those three aspects of their reading lives were simultaneously driving the conversation about how to respond to the book ban.

After the meeting, Gabriela took up the work on organizing the appeal to the ban. She and I exchanged texts to collaborate. I sent links to resources and even t-shirts with messages opposing censorship and advocating for books. She texted, “Thank you. I am going to fill out the appeal process and actually use research-backed articles unlike the ones [the book challenger] used. We will see. Thank you for the shirt link!” The energy from the book club meeting and the text collaboration between the two of us helped Gabriela stay committed to the appeal process, despite her already demanding time schedule. A few days later, Gabriela texted me with an update:

I just had a zoom meeting with the Right to Read foundation to help me with my talking points to appeal the book ban. They are super disappointed in how the process went down and feel like even if I can’t get the decision turned, I might be able to make change in how the process went and future appeals. She thought it was ridiculous that the woman hadn’t even read the book.

Throughout the process Gabriela vacillated between her outrage at what it means to ban a book and her knowledge of how this book had impacted her students:

It makes me so angry. Last year a kid who was a ‘high flyer’ [a term used by administration to refer to students who frequently broke school rules] read this book and loved it. Only book she read. She asked so many questions. I was talking to Erin about it, and she was so proud of this kid.

Gabriela’s passion for the appeal was driven by her expertise as a teacher. She understood the implications of what it meant for a district to ban any book and the impact of losing novels like *47* for her students. She felt compelled to appeal the decision to ban *47*, even if it seemed

unlikely to be overturned. Alongside her work on the appeal, Gabriela and I collaborated on ways to raise more awareness about book censorship nationally. We looked into an interesting concept developed by the Chicago Public Library: establishing a book sanctuary. According to the Chicago Public Library's toolkit:

A Book Sanctuary is a physical or digital space that actively protects the freedom to read. It provides shelter and access to endangered books, and can be created by anyone and can exist anywhere – in a library, a classroom, a coffee shop corner, a community center, public park, your bedroom bookshelf, or even on social media. (Book Sanctuary, n.d.)

Gabriela and I thought students would appreciate this idea. We also discussed ways we might connect this to Chicago Public Library's notion of sanctuary and discuss sanctuary cities, immigration, refugee status, and information control. We thought about the books we had read in our book club that could be important texts for students. Gabriela and I frequently exchanged texts that included NPR stories, TikTok videos, Instagram posts, and more. While we had our own text thread to collaborate, the issue of book bans frequently surfaced on the book club's text thread. After attending a panel on book banning at NCTE, I texted the group:

I heard a panel yesterday with Nic Stone, Jerry Craft, George M. Johnson, Malinda Lo, & Meg Medina...they all said the best way to prevent censorship is to talk about how amazing their books are, why they matter, why the stories are important. Also, George said to stop saying kids & start saying teenagers or young people because when people hear "kids need this book" they think literal children. (Book Sanctuary, n.d.)

This reminder from some of our favorite authors that our work to talk about why their books matter to students was affirming because there was a new book challenge in the district—this time for *The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime That Changed Their Lives* (Slater, 2017), a book we had read together. A teacher responded on the text thread, "Fortunately Dashka Slater (the author of *The 57 Bus*) already has a ton of book challenge resources for the book...apparently as an author you have to have that ready to go these days. 😞"

While the teachers shared frustration on the text thread, they remained committed to fight censorship and protect students' access to stories that have been silenced.

Literary Nostalgia: The Harry Potter Problem

Literary nostalgia was a common thread both in book club discussions and individual interviews. Participants talked about books from their pasts that were influential, evoked fond feelings, shaped their identities, or developed their understanding of the world. As a book club, we talked about how books can transport us to another time and place, introduce us to new ideas and perspectives, and form emotional connections that last a lifetime. For many of the participants, the books they read in their childhood and adolescence held a special place in their hearts. The characters and stories they encountered in those books helped them make sense of social dynamics and world events or provided comfort as an escape from the world.

The books they read in adolescence or even young adulthood were linked to their sense of security and comfort. Participants referenced characters from their favorite books with a sense of closeness and familiarity. Teachers shared that they often re-read their favorite novels from adolescence during difficult times in their lives. In particular, *Harry Potter* was frequently referenced. One teacher mentioned re-reading the series multiple times in their life. Sam talked about uncertainty they felt after the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Everything felt so confusing, like I never expected [Trump] to win, so I couldn't make sense of things. So, I re-read the entire [Harry Potter] series. It wasn't like I said I can't make sense of the world so I'm going to read HP again, I just found myself reading it. And I found it inspiring and hopeful. It helped me figure out who I was supposed to be in that time. I was like, "Okay, I'm just part of Dumbledore's Army. That's how I need to think about this." (Interview transcript, 01/07/2022)

Sam returned to the Harry Potter books when they felt unsettled about the state of the country. As Sam mentioned, it was not a conscious decision, which suggested that Sam sought the comfort and familiarity of those books subconsciously. During a book club meeting, one

teacher said, “Hermione was like my best friend. I’d go back to parts and re-read like she was giving me advice instead of Harry.” Multiple teachers mentioned re-reading the *Harry Potter* books specifically, which suggested the novels hold a powerful position in their reading histories and lives. During their individual interview, Alex talked extensively about the series. As they talked about a specific line, Alex got emotional: “There’s this part in book six with Harry and Dumbledore, [pause] I’m going to cry just talking about it, and Dumbledore says, ‘I’m not worried, Harry, I’m with you.’ And I had that embroidered into my wedding suit but changed it to [my partner’s name]” (Interview transcript, 01/06/2022). During a book club meeting, Erin said, “I was Ginny Weasley, in my family, in my life. I have never connected with a character more in my life.” The characters in *Harry Potter* seemed to move beyond the pages of the book and into participants’ memories beyond reading.

Often, this series was referenced as they talked about their memories of reading, frequently citing it as a shift into developing their own reading lives. The experience of my participants was mirrored in a study of British students in 2016. “The Potter books—particularly the thicker ones—acted as a ‘Portkey’ or ‘gateway,’ transporting readers into the world of more mature fiction” (Dempster et al., p. 278). The book club teachers discussed the series as an indication that one was a serious reader. Alex described their relationship with the *Harry Potter* series as both connected to family memories and their identity as a reader.

For me, it initially was something I associated with like long car rides. We listened to them on audio and then all my family is just a bunch of nerds, so we’d talk about them and read them. And before I was even able to access them independently, they were the books that I thought of. It was like, that’s what it meant to be a reader. Reading *Harry Potter* meant you were a reader. (Interview transcript, 01/06/2023)

Alex was expressing a strong nostalgia for these books, both for the comfort they provided and the sense of pride and accomplishment they felt reading them. Chris also named the Harry Potter book as an important part of their relationship with reading:

I got Harry Potter for Christmas one year, and that book is the book that made me a reader. I opened it up, read it, and was obsessed with it. And that that's the book that kind of reignited my love for reading because I think I stopped for quite a while reading at home at least. (Interview transcript, 01/08/2022)

Through almost all my interviews and frequently in book club meetings, this series came up and was described as “foundational,” “important,” or “life-changing.”

However, with these books in particular, many teachers expressed reservation or concern. A thread that ran through some of our book club meetings and several participant interviews was the idea of literature the teachers now see as “problematic,” but enjoyed in the past. In addition to J. K. Rowling, some teachers discussed authors like Orson Scott Card and Dr. Seuss; however, Rowling was most frequently referenced. They were conflicted by their memories and relationships with the books and their understanding of the ways the authors of these books perpetuated harm on systematically oppressed groups of people. Additionally, they also struggled with their roles as teachers and whether to have these books in their classrooms or recommend them to students.

Teachers also expressed reservations about the series, sometimes citing J. K. Rowling's transphobic ideology, and were uncertain how to navigate the tension between the author and these beloved pieces of literature.

Harry Potter—I know J. K. is a horrible human being—but these books have been so influential in my life. It's hard to know where to put my love for the series. I don't buy anything new anymore. I don't have my table groups organized as Hogwarts houses, but the books are in my classroom library. And kids still love the books! I'm not sure what the right decision is. (Interview transcript, 01/08/2022)

Teachers struggled to abandon the books completely because of their own relationships to these books. Many of the teachers had read these books as middle schoolers themselves and were connected to the stories and characters.

I'd say when things were getting inappropriate and hateful from J. K., I was in that place of like, well, I guess I have to not wear my Hufflepuff hat anywhere and like, that's fine. I think I had a pretty selfish view of it. I was like, oh, that sucks. I can't talk about my favorite thing anymore, which is maybe the wrong way to view it, but I figured I'll say that. (Interview transcript, 01/06/2022)

In addition, teachers struggled because they still saw the series as a valued text for their current students.

And then now I'm in a place which is maybe not the healthiest, but I love these books. If a kid isn't sure what to read and I think they'd like them, I'm going to recommend them to them. Like if there's a better way to be about it, I'm all ears. But I think so many people I know and kids, I know those books unlock something for them. There's a student I worked with last year who was struggling to find something to read, and I put *Sorcerer's Stone* (1998) in her hand, and she came to me first day of school this year and said she finished the series over the summer! Yeah, I'm going to keep giving Harry Potter to kids. I think, who knows, maybe I'll change my mind again. I mean, honestly, personally, I have also struggled with it. (Interview transcript, 01/06/2022)

When authors' personal beliefs and actions conflicted with teachers' values, but the books were less relevant to teachers' identities or memories, it was easier for the teachers to discard the books. Some teachers who previously used Dr. Seuss titles like *The Butter Battle Book* (1984) and *The Lorax* (1971) were able to substitute other titles easily. However, Harry Potter books created a dilemma for them both as readers and as teachers.

The teachers' reflections on *Harry Potter* demonstrated their critical approach to literacy. As Shor (1999) argued, "This is where critical literacy begins, for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane" (p. 2). The teachers recognized how J. K. Rowling used her power and influence to further marginalize trans people. This troubled their relationship with the novels, despite the role the series had previously played

in their lives. However, the teachers still wrestled with whether they should remove the books from their classroom libraries, often mentioning how the books engaged students who had not otherwise connected with reading. The teachers simultaneously saw the Harry Potter series with joy and criticality. While the books we read in book club could be characterized as social justice books, *Harry Potter* is not. Yet teachers still engaged a critical lens to try to make sense of their relationship with the series and its role in their classrooms.

The Rich Emotional Landscape of the Text Thread

An unexpected source of rich conversation and community developed in our book club text thread. In the weeks between our meetings, teachers often used the text thread to share thoughts about the book. In October, we read *Sanctuary* (Mendoza & Sher, 2020), a near-future dystopian novel about a girl and her family living in the United States amid a growing and violent crackdown on undocumented immigrants. The novel was written during the Trump administration's increased policy of detainment and family separation. The events in the book, while fictional, often felt plausible. During the weeks before our book club meeting, teachers periodically shared their feelings about the book. One teacher texted, "I want to say book group, this book is a doozy. It's so intense!" Another responded, "It is! I cried a bunch." Still another added, "Seriously. Intense. I have to take breaks when reading." Teachers used the text thread to process their responses to this emotionally charged book. Throughout this study, the text thread served as an additional space for teachers to engage in meaningful conversation about reading, books, and teaching.

However, it also served as a space for us to connect as a community of educators. After the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas in May 2022, I texted the group. "Friends, I am without words. Please take care of your hearts." I sent links to resources for conversations with students,

but also resources for teachers' own mental health needs. My texts did not connect to any novels we had read; rather, it demonstrated the community we had cultivated. When this tragedy happened, I immediately thought of them. I cared for them as fellow educators and wanted to support them as we all grieved. The thread became a space for teachers to share their despair, anger, fear, and heartbreak after that shooting. While this conversation was not related to novels we read, it demonstrated the community we had created extended beyond the books. During this especially difficult time, it was a way to connect outside of our regular meetings.

In addition, topics introduced in the text thread were often revisited in our in-person conversations. Our emotional responses to *Sanctuary* surfaced at our meeting about the book. Many of us expressed a need to take breaks from the emotional intensity of the book. One teacher shared the way the book ignited her personal fears for her undocumented students. "It just feels like this book is so close. I would never want my students to read it because it feels too real for them." This led to a conversation about how we might attend to students' emotional responses to texts in our classrooms. We discussed content warnings and the impossibility of knowing every possible emotional trigger in a book, even with websites like <https://www.doesthedogdie.com> or <https://www.common sense media.org> as resources. One teacher said, "I think it's less about me being able to tell kids what might be in a book, but more just about letting them know books can bring out emotions, even unexpected ones." Teachers agreed with that approach and discussed ways they could build that understanding in their own classrooms: "I think it needs to start with me. I need to tell them about this book and how I had to take breaks because it was just too intense in places." This idea that readers need to attend to their emotional responses while reading was an important moment for many teachers, both personally and pedagogically.

Teachers discussed ways to create and sustain a culture of reading that attends to students' emotional responses to books. Chris shared an example of a student book club in their class. As a group, they had chosen to read *Monster* (Myers, 2009). Partway through the novel, one student said he could not read it anymore because it reminded him of his family's experience with incarceration. Chris helped the group figure out a solution that allowed that student to switch books, but the group stayed together for discussions. After Chris's explanation, Ama remarked that she had not considered keeping students together in that situation, but now she was rethinking how she might in the future. Later in the text thread, Ama said, "On my drive home, I thought about how I never considered that people in the same book club could read different books. And now I know they can. So cool! I love our book club!"

During the conversation about *Sanctuary* and emotional responses, Alex referenced the quote from Dr. César Cruz: "Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." We spent time unpacking our understanding of that quote and its role in literature. It made Rachel, who was on leave from her permanent position and subbing in other districts for the year, discuss how the book might be valuable for some students: "I can see how this book might be important for students at [predominately white, affluent, progressive school] where I'm subbing. They don't have the lived experience, but they care deeply about immigration and immigrants' rights." Teachers talked about the role of books to tell stories that have been historically and systemically silenced. Chris said, "It sounds so cliché, but when I first read *The Hate U Give* [Thomas, 2017], it made me understand police shootings better. I was able to talk to my conservative family about it and say, 'You should read this book.'" Sam nodded, "Another cliché, but *To Kill a Mockingbird* [Lee, 1960] was like that for me. Obviously, I'd recommend other books to students now, but it opened my eyes to injustice when I was younger." Teachers nodded and

shared other examples of books that were outside of their lived experience. Weeks later, Alex texted me to say they appreciated that we read this book because they had not been able to stop thinking about it and our conversation about influential books.

I've been thinking about those other books people mentioned. I'm going to have my kids write about the books that helped them see injustice. It's such a great question and is a cool way for kids to share books that impacted them. I think I'm going to put them up in the hall so other kids can see it too. It's another way to fight censorship.

The book club conversation sparked an idea for the classroom for Alex. While the conversation was not directly about classroom practice, Alex used the conversation to reflect on their teaching and change something in their classroom. Throughout the study, I frequently received texts from participants sharing the ways the books or conversations from our book club were impacting them.

In addition to using the text thread to process difficult emotions, it also became a space to share joy and excitement. Rachel used the text thread to express gratitude after a meeting: "Thank you for this time tonight. It was awesome to see everyone and talk about books and literature and teaching and connect." She continued, "I feel strengthened for the week ahead after seeing you all." These types of messages were common. Teachers also used the thread to share disappointment when they could not make a meeting. Erin texted a couple of hours before our meeting: "I loved loved loved this book and was so looking forward to talking about with you all, but the fates were just stacked against me all day." Shortly before a meeting started, Gabriela texted, "Running late. Was desperately trying to finish the book and I was so close! But on my way!" Later after the meeting, she followed up with, "Omg y'all. Just finished the book and I am in love. I desperately need this author to write more!!" These texts were doing more than just giving status updates; teachers used the thread as an additional space to collaborate. Before a meeting, Sam texted, "Hey all, I won't be able to make it today either.... I am excited about an

author study and love all the suggestions [Gabriela] sent us.” During the previous meeting, the group had trouble deciding which book to read next because there were too many choices they wanted to read. After we selected a book, some teachers talked about the problem of having so much good literature. In the weeks before the next meeting, teachers used the thread to discuss options like short story collections, an author study, and nonfiction titles. The thread gave teachers space to offer input or support for existing options.

Summary of Findings

Much of the research about teachers and book clubs focuses on teachers reading professional books together. While some research about teachers’ reading lives has been conducted, most of the literature centers on teachers’ personal reading habits. The existing literature on teacher book clubs is primarily focused on preservice teachers in teacher preparation courses. This study offered an alternative approach that centered in-service teachers and reading. Through a collectively driven learning community, teachers consistently engaged in a critical stance toward young adult (YA) literature by reading and discussing books with a trusted group of colleagues.

By focusing on YA books, the teachers and I built our knowledge of available titles. We read recently published books centering voices and stories often silenced or marginalized. Through the process of reading YA books, teachers stated they were more confident discussing books with their students. They could also recommend more titles or specific authors based on their students’ interests. In addition, YA books helped teachers develop their own reading lives and identities.

The books we read encouraged us to discuss issues of justice and injustice, power and oppression. We were able to connect the experiences of characters in the books to larger systems

of power in society. Since we had established a culture of trust, teachers were able to challenge each other and explore personal topics deeply. Teachers were able to apply a critical approach to literacy to social justice-oriented texts, but they also began to reconsider influential texts, like *Harry Potter*, through a critical lens. Additionally, as we read, we often reflected on our roles as teachers and theorized our own practice.

As we read together in our book club, the United States was undergoing an unprecedented strategic and coordinated movement to restrict access to books. Nationwide, more books were being banned than ever before in history. This was reflected in the district where the teachers worked. During this study, a book was banned in their district. This topic came up at book club, and the teachers expressed feelings of despair and anger. During the book club meeting and later through text coordination, one teacher worked to appeal the ban. Collectively, the teachers in the study committed to raising awareness about censorship with their students.

Teachers often used the text thread to share ideas, offer insights, or engage in conversation. This thread was a rich source of data for the study because teachers used it frequently in between formal meetings. Reflection, community, and collaboration epitomized the book club group.

Chapter 5: Discussion

“And That’s What This Book Club Is All About”

I sat across from Ama at a small table. She clipped the voice recorder to her collar and our interview began. It was an easy conversation, and Ama reflected on her life as a reader with ease. She told stories that offered insights into her own reading habits and often connected those to how she was thinking about reading in her classroom. She took time to think about each question and often checked in to make sure she had answered the question completely. Toward the end of the interview, she said, “We haven’t really talked about the book club, and I have to tell you something about this book club. Can I say it now?” I nodded and she began.

One of the reasons I love this book club is because there are people in it that I love. Well, now I can say I love pretty much everybody in it. I love some more deeply than others because I know them more deeply than others. So, I feel super safe, you know, because we talk about really personal things. You know, because when you’re talking about books, it’s like, how do they connect with you? And, I love the book club and I love that. Like, if you didn’t get through the book all the way or I love that there’s no guilt because guilt has been a huge theme in my life. And now I’m kind of doing things that are more free of guilt, you know? And also, because we’re reading books that some of which could be in my classroom or are in my classroom. And so, I’m connecting more with children or young adult literature. And you know, it’s helping me talk to kids about books in a different way. And think about books differently. You know, I can see how reading books is helping me talk to kids about issues in the world in new ways that I couldn’t or wouldn’t before. And so, yeah, I love our book club. It’s helping people to become their most authentic. And that’s what this book club is all about. Being authentic. (Interview transcript, 01/21/2023)

When Ama finished, her eyes shone with tears, and I thanked her for sharing. We continued with the last few questions and finished the interview. When I transcribed the interview, I had initially forgotten about her comments because asking specifically about the book club was not part of my interview questions. As I read her words, I was struck by how clearly she captured the heart of this study. Ama recognized the value of reading young adult

(YA) literature in a supportive community. In addition, she described how she now thought about reading both for herself and in her classroom in new ways.

I developed this study to understand how middle-school teachers conceptualize themselves as readers, engage in reading for justice, and envision these concepts in their own classrooms as they participate in a YA literature book club. The inspiration for this study came from my experience with a teacher book club, as described in Chapter 1. Through my experience as an English language arts teacher and instructional coach, I observed the complicated relationship middle-school teachers (including me) can have with reading. I wanted to create a space for teachers to develop their reading lives further by participating in a teacher book club.

Given the current sociopolitical landscape of the United States broadly, and education in particular, it was important that our book club focus on books centering race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities. Rather than shy away from these “controversial” topics, our shared commitment to antiracist and liberatory pedagogy created a sense of urgency. We wanted to explore and unpack issues of equity and identity through literature. We selected social justice YA books, many of which have been banned across the country. Furthermore, teachers often have limited time to collaborate and learn together, so the study was designed with regular 2-hour book club meetings. Teachers also used our text thread as a space to share ideas or reflections. In addition, through my pilot study, I had recognized the need for more time with participants one on one, so my study included 1-hour individual interviews with each teacher. Finally, through my work as an instructional coach, I observed the importance of a co-learning mindset and sought to position myself alongside teachers’ learning. This meant I did not facilitate or direct the conversations in book club meetings; rather, I engaged fully as a member of the group. My experiences as a teacher and an instructional coach, along with my pilot study,

led me to design a study that created space for teachers to engage in critical reading of books centering issues of justice with a community of colleagues through a YA social justice book club. I collected field notes from every book club meeting. I recorded and transcribed individual interviews. I saved text threads. I analyzed data collected through fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and text thread conversations. This tapestry of data captured teachers' reflections and insights about their relationships with reading, the books, social justice issues, and reading in their classrooms.

As I began my study, I knew that teachers would enjoy reading and discussing the books together. However, I was not certain if teachers would take up the broader social justice issues in the books. I was also unsure how or if teachers would relate their own experiences to those of their students. My experience with the pilot study suggested it might happen. Through this study, I sought to uncover the ways teachers engaged with the book club as a third space for their own learning and look for the implications.

Discussion of the Findings

The teacher book club disrupted traditional models of professional development by creating a sustained community of readers who employed a critical orientation to YA literature and engaged in reading that mirrored the experiences of their students. In contrast to district or building professional development, the teachers in the book club were afforded time to engage in meaningful learning about YA literature with a trusted group of their colleagues. They took on a critical approach to social justice texts, but this approach extended beyond the book club and allowed them to analyze their own reading habits and experiences from a critical literacy perspective. They were not asked to produce evidence of their learning, which afforded opportunities to collaborate with each other, reflect and discuss, and engage in activism. The

teachers' expertise and decision making were at the core of the study design. The book club was a collaborative space and organized so that teachers could learn from and with each other. The findings indicated that time and autonomy, what I refer to as parallel experiences, and a critical mindset allowed the book club to serve as meaningful professional development.

The book club allowed space for teachers to consider, reflect, and discuss large problems in education and society. They were able to follow their own lines of inquiry. The book club was “structured to foster deep intellectual discourse about critical issues and thus [became a] space where the uncertainties and questions intrinsic to practice [were] seen (not hidden)” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37). This allowed teachers to gain “new insights and new ways to theorize practice” (p. 37). Teachers engaged in the work of what it means to be a reader, which allowed them to think about what it means for their students to be readers. As Ama explained in her statement found at the beginning of the chapter, the book club helped disrupt her ideas of what it means to be a “reader” and release the powerful feelings of shame and inadequacy around reading. Teachers engaged in reading YA literature as readers themselves instead of only thinking about how to teach students. As a result, teachers were able to think more deeply about the learning because they were engaged in the practice themselves. By engaging in reading for the book club, teachers were able to think about their own strengths and struggles as readers and about implications for their classroom.

Teachers used the book club space and the experience to reflect on teaching and learning in their classrooms. They discussed the ways they thought about books and reading in their classrooms. The findings of this study suggested that teacher book clubs can function as third spaces for teacher learning (Babha, 1994; Oyler et al., 2017). These spaces are characterized by a sense of community and collaboration among the participants, a shared interest in professional

learning, and a commitment to open and reflective dialogue. Through interviews and during book club meetings, teachers described feeling a sense of belonging and connection with their colleagues and emphasized the importance of the book club as a safe and supportive environment for learning. During interviews, teachers reported that book club discussions allowed for deep engagement with the text and that the discussions provided opportunities for reflection and analysis, both of the book and of their classroom teaching. The participants also noted that the book club provided access to diverse perspectives and experiences through the novel choices, which helped to broaden their understanding of issues of justice and oppression. Moreover, they discussed the ways they felt more confident as teachers.

Through the practice of reading in community, teachers were able to reflect on their own experiences as readers, which allowed them to make their reading habits and practices more explicit for students. I am using the term *parallel practice* (Regenspan, 2002) to describe our book club. Teachers were doing the work they often ask students to do in their classrooms. As the book club moments in Chapter 4 illustrated, the teachers took opportunities to reflect on and further develop their philosophies about reading and to discuss the values and beliefs that underpinned their practice as English language arts teachers. During book club meetings, teachers discussed new ideas and approaches for their classrooms. In addition, teachers often shared the ways that the book club helped to deepen their understanding of their students' learning needs. The book club helped teachers see their teaching in a broader context and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning. The book club provided opportunities for ongoing and sustained professional learning.

This study has important implications for the design and implementation of professional learning opportunities for teachers as well as educational research. While I did not seek with this

study to prove that participation in a teacher book club would have a direct impact on classroom practice, there is evidence to suggest it might. This is an area for further research and study.

“I didn’t expect that when we started”: Teachers as Readers

In my analysis of the teachers’ participation in and experiences with the book club, I found that this professional learning space provided opportunities for them to engage both as teachers and learners. By reading YA literature, teachers built their knowledge of current authors and titles. During both book club meetings and individual interviews, teachers referenced that they had developed a deeper understanding of YA literature. Through this process, they developed an appreciation and understanding of the genres, topics, and formats available in YA literature. While the teachers in this study did not read books with the intent of teaching them in their classrooms, they discovered they were able to have meaningful conversations with students about books. In addition, they were able to make recommendations to students because they had a deeper understanding of current titles. For example, Chris discussed the impact of the book club on their classroom:

The hugest benefit for me for this book club is showing up. And I feel like even if I haven’t read it, when I listen to everybody else talk about it, it gives me knowledge so that if a kid were to ask me about the book, I can say, “Oh it’s about this,” or “This is really great for this type of reader.” So it’s like a crash course in the book, and that’s what makes it beneficial to me. Like, I always want to go because I’m like, “Well, some kid’s going to want to read this book at some point.” And I don’t have to say, “No, I haven’t read it.” I can say, “Oh, Ms. [Gabriela] loved this book!” or I can say “It’s a really interesting book about stand-up comics, or online role-playing games, or whatever.” You know, I feel like we’ve talked about how the book club is like a nice community and we enjoy being together, and so people come for that reason. So, it’s nice. But that idea that it helps you pedagogically with students, too. Yeah, that’s really cool. I didn’t expect that when we started. (Interview transcript, 01/08/2023)

In this passage, Chris identified several key impacts of the book club. First, they talked about how they were motivated to attend book club, even if they had not read the book because they

were able to understand the book better through the discussions other teachers had. Chris expanded on this by describing how knowing more about YA literature helped them recommend and discuss books with their students. Finally, Chris reflected on this unexpected benefit to their work as a teachers.

In addition to knowing about YA literature, the specific books we read resonated with teachers. In particular, teachers discussed the importance of books specifically addressing issues of justice. During our one-on-one interview, Erin talked about the role of social justice literature:

Well, back to our human brains. The way that we learn is through stories. And so, if we don't read stories about other people, we can't, we can't know. We can't have an understanding of people who are not just like us or have different experiences. And learning how to say this, why it's important. Like, we need people to care about everyone. Or else it negatively impacts everyone. And how beautiful of a place would it be if everyone read social justice books. I mean there's movies, but those are two hours of your time. They don't seep into your heart the way that a book can. Because with a book, you spend a lot of time with those characters, and you build those relationships that make you want to change the world for them. (Interview transcript, 01/08/2023)

Erin's ideas about the power of narrative were repeated in every interview and frequently in the book club meetings themselves. Teachers said things like "Remember how reading about Felix's [*No Fixed Address*] experience of being unhoused really impacted students?" and "Kids really connected with Jordan [*New Kid*], which made it easier for them to understand what he was saying about racism." Teachers recognized how these books were able to support conversations about social justice issues. However, Chris suggested the books themselves were not enough; just as our book club conversations supported them, students might need support to discuss the issues in the books.

But for some kids, it's hard for them to pick up a book that has issues in it and to understand it. I feel like there's a lot of nuances even in the book, *New Kid*. There's like a lot of things that the author talks about that a kid could read right over it and just see the drama that's happening between the friendship and not really see the underlying current of social issue stuff. So, it has to be discussed. Like, I don't think I could give a kid a social issues book and expect that they're going to get the issues from it. It has to be

pointed out and I need to ask them, “What do you think about this?” or “Did you notice this?” because the discussion is where the learning really happens. (Interview transcript, 01/08/2023)

Chris recognized the importance of dialogue to support a deeper understanding of the issues in novels addressing oppression or injustice. Chris further explored the role of the reader when describing their experiences reading *New Kid* multiple times:

And I think about *New Kid*, for example, and how I’ve read that book a bunch, for multiple book clubs. And every time I read it, I’m like, Oh, that. Now I see how he’s talking about microaggressions here. I had missed [that] before. And that’s even me intentionally reading it as a social justice book and looking for those issues. So, I think about the role of rereading and also that you grow and change as a person. When I read that in the fall of 2019 for our book club, I’m not that person anymore. I have had different life circumstances. Since I know more now, I read it with all that new knowledge. (interview transcript, 01/21/2023)

Chris is describing Rosenblatt’s (1978) notion of the poem, “What each reader makes of the text is, indeed, *for [them]* the poem, in the sense that this is only [their] direct perception of it” (p. 105), but Chris expanded on this idea to discuss the implications for social justice literature. Chris reflected on the way they read the graphic novel *New Kid* with new knowledge each time, which led to new understandings, or what Rosenblatt called poems. The text itself has not changed, but Chris has changed and, therefore, the meaning they make has changed. The ongoing and long-term nature of the book club lent itself to this type of relationship with texts. We were able to revisit ideas and concepts we explored in previous novels. When we read *The 57 Bus* (Slater, 2017), some members of the group were unfamiliar with some of the expansive gender identities discussed in the book. We spent time talking through them and sharing additional resources. When we read other books later such as *Just Roll with It* (2021) and *Cheer Up: Love and Pompoms* (2021), one member of the group mentioned using the definitions included in the back of *The 57 Bus* to make sure she used the terminology correctly. As we read, we brought lenses informed by previous discussions.

What Does It Mean to Read Together?

The book club fostered a culture of collaboration and community among middle-school teachers, which often countered their day-to-day teaching experiences. Teaching can be a solitary profession, and it can be challenging for teachers to find the time to collaborate meaningfully with their colleagues. Through the book club, we collectively developed our understanding of books by engaging in a collaborative process of thinking about reading together. The book club provided a structured platform for teachers to connect with each other, share their ideas, and support one another. During our one-on-one interview, Rachel discussed the role of building friendships through the book club:

The friendship aspect and combating isolation aspect should not be overlooked in talking about these book clubs. Yeah, a lot of what kept me coming was I was extremely isolated and extremely lonely at work. I wanted to have friends at work. This book club was a space to build friendships and then that led me being less lonely at work. I was physically isolated in the building and then metaphorically isolated because I didn't have a team, and this, this book club helped break some of that down. (Interview transcript, 01/17/2023)

Teachers frequently talked about the way the book club created a community that they were missing. Ama reflected on the importance of reading and discussing YA novels with other educators:

I have loved this book club and found it to be very different than other book clubs. It's not performative. We talk about the meanings we got from the book. Those connections to the book. That's one thing that I really love. And doing this with other teachers, it helps me see how I could talk about books with kids. Sometimes I talk about what people said about a book, like, I might say, 'When Ms. [Erin] and I were in book club, she noticed this part of the book.' And it makes it easier to bring that into my classroom. (Interview transcript, 01/21/2023)

The book club interactions created a space for intellectual collaboration and a strong sense of community among the teachers. During our book club discussions, teachers were able to share their challenges and successes in teaching, exchange feedback and ideas, and develop a

sense of belonging to a community of practice. Rather than collaborating to produce unit plans or lessons, teachers were working together to deepen their philosophies about teaching and learning.

“The Spell That Reading Casts”

Katherine Marsh, YA literature author, wrote a piece in *The Atlantic* about the need for readers to enjoy books. She spoke with educators who lamented the rise in reading accountability systems like No Child Left Behind and Common Core State Standards. One veteran teacher said, “There’s a whole generation of kids who associate reading with assessment now” (Marsh, 2023). In Chapter 1, I discussed the role of standardization in reading instruction. Contrary to the popular “Reading Wars” controversy, this argument does not attribute phonics vs. whole language instruction as the root of the decline in reading; rather, it suggests that the focus on reading as a set of skills is the problem. Marsh argued:

Young people should experience the intrinsic pleasure of taking a narrative journey, making an emotional connection with a character (including ones different from themselves), and wondering what will happen next—then finding out. This is the spell that reading casts. And, like with any magician’s trick, picking a story apart and learning how it’s done before you have experienced its wonder risks destroying the magic. (n.p.)

My study contributes to the scholarship arguing for reading for pleasure. As a book club, we immersed ourselves in the “narrative journey” as we connected with characters in the novels. We did not use text evidence to make an argument about the books, but we drew inspiration from the novels to explore issues within the books.

“If You Don’t Believe in Reading, Your Students Never Will”

The book club gave teachers a unique opportunity to engage in reading that mirrored what they wanted their students to do in class. Both the process of reading and the book club discussions helped teachers to expand their understanding of reading. During my interview with

Chris, they described their experience in the book club, “Yeah, it was just, it was a cool way to be almost, like a student. I put myself in students’ shoes” (Interview transcript, 01/08/2023). I probed further and asked them to expand on that thought.

I made decisions about my classroom that were because of my experience in the book club. Well, just the two things that come to the top of my head. I don’t think I would have ever taught a graphic novel or a poem book to students before until I read *Long Way Down* and *New Kid*. And we did a whole week-long unit with *Long Way Down*, which was amazing. And the kids latched on to it super fast, and it was like a cool way to show them that poetry can be cool. And then *New Kid*, I didn’t do it, but I helped [Gabriela] come up with her idea for her *New Kid* unit. And I don’t know, I just think that it kind of shows that there’s books out there that like, you know, we talk about the canon like oh, those books are dead, we should be reading new books, but then we don’t even do it ourselves. We’re like kind of like, oh, poetry books and graphic novels shouldn’t be taught. It was like, oh no, we can take a page out of what we’re our own book and like, bring books that we normally wouldn’t teach into kids’ hands and, like, use them as access or entry points or even just like there’s just so much to them that is teachable and can get kids into the act of reading. (Interview transcript, 01/08/2023)

Chris’s reflection described how their experience in the book club helped them reconsider the kinds of texts they use with students. Reading graphic novels and novels in verse in our book club helped them develop an appreciation for these types of novels, which helped them envision a way to use them in their classroom. Alex talked about how the experience of the book club helped them develop empathy for students’ experiences, noting that “It’s also good to put yourself in a kid’s shoes and know what it feels like to show up to a book club meeting not having finished the book” (Interview transcript, 01/06/2023). Teachers frequently mentioned how much they learned about themselves as readers through the process of reading for the book club. In addition, for many teachers, it strengthened their pedagogical stances about reading.

And it’s making me more and more believe that if you want to be a teacher of reading, you have to read. And I don’t care what you read, you find what you like. You might be going through this journey with your students, but being honest without saying, “Guys, I read this book, it’s horrible. I hate it. You guys got suggestions for me?” Like I’m seeing that play out in my life right now, it’s a requirement to read. If you don’t believe in reading, your students never will. (Interview transcript, 01/20/2023)

Gabriela's reflections demonstrated how the practice of reading in a book club helped her theorize about the importance of reading. The book club discussions provided teachers with a space to analyze and reflect on the literary themes, characters, and contexts within the books, but more importantly, they thought about what it means to be a reader for themselves and for their students.

The Problem with Traditional Professional Development

Traditional models of professional development (PD) for teachers are often inadequate and fail to provide meaningful support for educators. PD options frequently employ a standardized model that ignores the diverse needs of educators. PD programs that take a uniform approach are unable to address the specific needs of individual teachers, leading to disengagement and a lack of enthusiasm for learning.

Indeed, research on PD in the United States found that most teachers receive PD of short duration (less than eight hours on a topic, usually in afterschool workshops) and that, during the No Child Left Behind Era, there was an increase in this short-term approach and a decline in access to more sustained professional learning approaches. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 1)

Moreover, most PD programs tend to be generic and lack relevance to teachers' specific contexts, leading to a lack of transferability and applicability in their classrooms.

Professional development opportunities for teachers are typically not sustained over time, which does not support ongoing teacher learning. Many programs are delivered in a one-off workshop or training session, which may not provide enough time for teachers to reflect on and apply the knowledge they have acquired. In a study of PD, Darling-Hammond (2009) argued for sustained opportunities for teachers.

The three studies of professional development lasting 14 or fewer hours showed no effects on student learning, whereas other studies of programs offering more than 14 hours of sustained teacher learning opportunities showed significant positive effects. The

largest effects were found for programs offering between 30 and 100 hours spread out over six to twelve months. (p. 49)

In addition, inadequate follow-up support and ongoing feedback make it difficult for teachers to integrate new knowledge and skills into their practice. The absence of sustained support not only hinders teacher learning but also undermines the effectiveness of the PD programs.

Typical models of professional development for teachers often fail to provide opportunities for collaborative learning and teacher-led inquiry. Collaboration and inquiry-based learning can be powerful tools for professional growth, as they enable teachers to learn from each other, share experiences and expertise, and engage in meaningful dialogue. Darling-Hammond (2009) argued that “structured dialogue as part of a group’s inquiry cycle can provide the necessary opportunities for a continual focus on improving practice” (p. 49). However, traditional PD often omits or limits teachers’ collaboration time. This results in missed opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful professional learning with colleagues that can enhance their practice.

The need for personalized, sustained, and collaborative learning experiences is essential to support teachers in developing their skills and knowledge to improve their practice. Innovative and dynamic approaches to PD that address these needs are necessary to ensure that teachers have access to the support and resources they require to be effective educators. Gloria Ladson Billings and Mary Louise Gomez (2001) offered this guidance: “We believe that teachers have to be active participants in their own professional development. And we cannot expect that one-shot, one-size-fits-all workshops directed by ‘expert’ consultants can produce the kinds of changes in pedagogical practices that will support student learning” (p. 495). This research suggested that PD should be ongoing, personalized, and teacher-driven.

In this study, I sought to offer an alternative to traditional models of professional development by enacting a model for teacher learning oriented toward criticality and hope. The teacher book club enacts key components of critical pedagogies of hope (Zemblyas, 2014), offering ways for teachers to have autonomy and collaboration as they develop professionally. “Pedagogies that support development of critical consciousness are distinctly social; while direct instruction and passive learning anesthetize awareness of oppression, active dialogue and problem posing promote emancipatory learning” (Crabtree & Stephan, 2023, p. 106). Through this teacher book club, teachers engaged in dialogue with each other and focused on examining and transforming systems of oppression.

Book Clubs as Communities of Hope

The book club community embodied Freire’s (1970) notion of a pedagogy of hope. Through novel choices and the ensuing discussions, we aligned ourselves with Freire’s belief in the power of education to enact social change and envision a better future for ourselves and our students. Freire argued that “hope is an ontological need” (p. 2) but cautioned against a naïve view that hope alone will lead to transformation. Rather, Freire argued for a way of teaching that encourages critical thinking, creativity, and a sense of agency in learners. As a book club, we enacted Freire’s belief that every person has the capacity to learn, grow, and make a positive impact on the world.

One of the key components of pedagogies of hope is dialogue. Freire believed that true learning occurs when there is a genuine exchange of ideas and perspectives. While Freire discussed dialogue most often between the teacher and the learner, I employed an expansive understanding of those terms for our book club and extended the concept to teachers’ professional learning. Through the process of reading and discussing together, we were

simultaneously teachers and learners. This aligned with Freire’s idea that the teacher is not an authority figure who dispenses knowledge to passive learners, but rather a facilitator who encourages students to explore their own experiences, beliefs, and values. In our book club, we facilitated learning for each other. Occasionally, this took the form of direct teaching. In a meeting about the graphic novel *Flamer* (Curato, 2020), Alex explained aspects of scouting to the group; while discussing *Slay* (Morris, 2019), Ama described the design and mechanics of online role-playing games. However, we often developed deeper understanding of complex issues through sharing lived experiences or connections to the text. For example, when we read *Just Roll with It* (Durfey-Lavoie & Agarwal, 2021), a graphic novel about a middle schooler with obsessive compulsive disorder, Gabriela said:

This book is so important because people have no idea what OCD really is. They joke about it because they like to keep their fridge clean or something. This book shows how powerful OCD can be for some people. This book is truly a window and a mirror. Kids with OCD will feel seen & kids without will understand better. (Fieldnotes, 07/18/2022)

Gabriela has a familial connection to OCD and she used the text to dispel common misconceptions. In this way, Gabriela aligned with hooks (2003) who argued, “I rely on the sharing of personal narratives to remind folks that we are all struggling to raise our consciousness and figure out the best action to take” (p. 107). Through dialogue about young adult (YA) novels—a synergy between the characters and scenarios from the page and the lived experiences teachers brought to their reading—we developed critical awareness about the world and the social forces that shape it, and we began to imagine and create new possibilities for ourselves and our students.

Books as Sparks for Change

Critical pedagogies frame education not as a means of adapting to existing social structures, but rather as a tool for transforming them; learners thus become agents of change.

Throughout the book club, teachers enacted change in their classrooms because of the texts themselves or their experiences in the book club. After reading *Sanctuary* (Mendoza & Sher, 2020), we were captivated by the “Authors’ Notes” section at the end of the text that discussed the relationship among organizing, activism, and education. One teacher decided to revise an existing unit to make those connections more explicit. Not only did she add more titles to the book options, but she added Twitter threads and articles from activists and organizers working with immigrants and refugees. Another teacher used excerpts from *New Kid* (Craft, 2019), *Stand Up, Yumi Chung!* (Kim, 2020), and *Cheer Up: Love and Pompoms* (Frasier & Wise, 2021) to discuss microaggressions with students. She discussed the impact during a book club meeting, “At first, they used it as a joke, ‘Don’t microaggress me, bro!’ but as we read more, they really understood the impact and how to interrupt microaggressions when they heard them” (Fieldnotes, 07/18/2022). While we were reading *Firekeeper’s Daughter* (Boulley, 2021), one teacher shared how they spent time learning more about Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) after it was mentioned in the book: “I heard a story on NPR about ICWA and shared it with [the social studies teacher] because I thought it adds to their unit on Indian boarding schools” (Fieldnotes, 11/13/2022). The book club supported teachers’ sense of agency and encouraged them to take action and work towards a more just and equitable society, whether through individual acts of resistance or collective social movements.

Communities for Justice

Teacher book clubs are a powerful way of teaching that prioritize critical thinking, creativity, dialogue, and social transformation. By recognizing learners as active agents of change, this critical orientation to literature and community offers a sense of possibility and hope for a better future. Teachers used the book club space to reflect and examine their own biases and

lack of knowledge. In addition, because we had developed a trusting community, we were able to hold each other accountable as we pursued a critical analysis of the world. As hooks (2003) noted:

Since the practice of critical thinking requires that we all engage in some degree of critical evaluation of self and other, it helps if we can engage individuals in ways that promote self-motivated interrogation rather [than] reactive response to outer challenge. (p. 107)

We created a critical space for our community to engage in thoughtful examination of ourselves and systems of power. Ama described it as a “safe space”:

Yeah, but this is a safe place. That’s the thing, because [we] created a safe space for people to talk about this stuff. You know, I wouldn’t have been able to say what I just said, you know, about being formed in a racist society, I couldn’t say that in a staff meeting. We can’t have conversations like that there. (Interview transcript, 01/21/2023)

In Ama’s explanation, safe space refers to a place where she (and others) can examine not only systems of oppression and injustice, but also our roles in them. In an increasingly complex and oppressive society, teachers need spaces that embody pedagogies of hope to create a more just and equitable society.

The book club also embodied Zemblyas’s (2014) extension—pedagogies of critical hope—emphasizing the need for critical engagement with the world and a commitment to social justice. The book club discussions in this study encouraged teachers to analyze and critique the systems of power and oppression that exist in society, while also fostering a sense of hope and possibility for change. Zemblyas argued that pedagogies of critical hope are rooted in relationships and take an emotional and critical approach to the world.

To say someone is critically hopeful means that person is involved in a critical analysis of power relationship and how they constitute one’s emotional ways of being in the world, while attempting to construct, imaginatively and materially, a different lifeworld. (p. 13)

Our book club embodied this relational construct to engage in meaningful ways with both the novels and each other as we used the novels as catalysts to critically examine systems of power and oppression in society.

One way we enacted pedagogies of critical hope was through centering multiple perspectives and voices. We did this through the novels we chose, emphasizing authors whose lived experiences came from historically marginalized groups. Through this process, we positioned ourselves as “co-learners rather than experts” (Hauschildt, 2015, p. 98). We recognized the ways power operates in society and how it can be used to silence groups of people. By centering these stories, we also engaged in reflection about our position in systems of power. Boler (2004) noted, “Critical hope requires seeing one’s self within historical context, reevaluating the relationship of one’s privilege to others in the world. It entails seeing how these relations of power shift over time and in one’s lifetime” (p. 130). Throughout the book club, we engaged in this reflexive process about power and positionality. In my individual interview with Ama, she reflected on this:

I was formed in a racist society. And so I’m one hundred percent sure that I’ve said things and done things that are racist. And I’m like, that chills me to the bone, you know?... I used to think I just needed to be a good person and be positive for my students and that was enough. That it would be enough to help them kind of move through this time in their life in a positive way and be able to sort through all those things. So, yeah, some of these books have really kind of challenged that for me. I found *New Kid* really helpful talking about the systemwide things versus microaggressions. How they’re not micro because they’re small, they’re micro because they’re between two people. Just having that language and then having kids be able to read these books and explore this stuff so that they don’t get my age think now I got to wrestle with this. (Interview transcript, 01/21/2023)

In addition, it meant that we valued the lived experiences of members of our group and learned from each other. By engaging with a range of perspectives and experiences, learners can develop a critical consciousness that enables them to identify and challenge systems of oppression.

Reading for Action

Our book club was centered on praxis, meaning we were not simply engaged in intellectual exercises in literary analysis, but rather in a process of reflection and action. We took what we learned and applied it outside of the book club. This created a sense of agency and engagement, as teachers enacted change sparked by the books we read and the conversations we had. Additionally, pedagogies of critical hope emphasize the importance of collective action and social change. As I was writing this chapter, the teachers' school district proposed a budget that eliminated secondary teacher librarians, including Sam. Our group used the text thread to organize and support the movement to oppose the budget. In the text thread, one teacher said, "Sam is recreating our book club experience for students at lunch. This is what librarians do." In a previous book club meeting, Sam described their monthly lunch book clubs for students. Sam and I had collaborated on how to engage students in meaningful discussion about the graphic novel *Speak: The Graphic Novel* (Halse Anderson, 2018). The teachers understood that it is not enough for individuals to simply critique and challenge systems of power; rather, they must work together to create a more just and equitable society. They saw the elimination of teacher librarians in middle and high schools as an affront to the work of liberatory education and harmful to all students, but especially students impacted by poverty. In the text thread, one teacher said, "So many kids become readers because they have access to so many books. It doesn't cost them anything unlike every other part of their lives." Another teacher responded, "It's like [district administrators] haven't been in a library since they were in middle school. They have NO IDEA how much learning happens!" The study participants understood how the library functions as the largest classroom in the school, a space that supports all students.

Enacting pedagogies of critical hope requires building relationships of trust and solidarity as well as developing a shared vision of what a better world might look like. Through the book club, teachers engaged in “future-oriented critical thought, emotion, and action” (Zembylas, 2014, p. 14) and worked toward creating change for themselves, their students, and their communities. Pedagogies of critical hope emphasize critical engagement with the world, a commitment to social justice, and a sense of possibility and agency. The book club supported teachers as they engaged in dialogue and centered voices most often silenced by systems of oppression. In addition, the book club fostered praxis and encouraged collective action, which supported teachers’ work to become agents of social transformation.

Implications

The research on teacher book clubs is limited, but this study suggested there is a need for further research about teacher book clubs and the kind of professional development that occurs in third spaces. This study positioned teachers as experts. In this work, I rejected the notion of a divide between theory and practice. I argued that teachers theorize as they practice and practice as they theorize. Just as it is impossible to truly separate reading as a political act from other types of reading, it is also impossible for teachers to separate themselves from educational theory while they are teaching. Regenspan (2002) argued that critical theorists often fail to connect with teachers: “The words are decontextualized from the hearts and souls of most of the specific individuals who are drawn to education” (p. 17). Although some research has attempted to separate theorizing from practice, I also argue that separation limits the possibilities for deeply understanding teaching and learning. Christianakis (2010) argued that historically, “teachers have been asked to implement others’ ideas, curriculum, and pedagogy, which demeans their

own expert knowledge and relegates it to ‘craft’ or ‘technical work’” (p. 112). In contrast, this study offers a model for how teachers’ knowledge and expertise can drive educational research.

Study Design

Methodologically, this study argued that qualitative data are rich and worthy of deep study. My study centered teachers’ voices through a tapestry of qualitative data. The fieldnotes highlighting critical moments or ideas from our book club meetings and interview transcripts captured teachers’ reflections on reading and literature. The relationships I developed with the teachers and the teachers with each other were a crucial part of this study. As a group, we engaged in what Orellana (2020) called “enmeshing ourselves in activities and relationships” (p. 86). Orellana further argued that these relationships are real and central to the research. This was evident in the individual interviews I conducted. Unlike many of guidelines for interview research which reproduce hierarchies of power between “researcher” and “researched,” I specifically designed this part of my study to match the epistemological underpinnings of my work. I met with participants in places that felt comfortable for them—coffee shops, bars, or a walk along the river. I recorded these interviews but chose not to take notes during these interactions. These choices were driven by the relationships we had developed. The interviews felt more like conversations, and teachers occasionally asked me questions. When we were finished, one teacher said, “That was it? It felt like we were just having a regular conversation.” Another shared, “I was really nervous about the interview, but that was fun!” I made intentional choices to disrupt traditional notions and formalities of interviews that allowed my participants to engage in ways that felt conversational and even fun. Drawing from Lareau’s (2021) work, I thought of the interview as a collaborative process and a partnership, while also positioning the teachers as experts of their own lived experiences.

Furthermore, the study design offers guidance for further research. Currently, there is a movement in educational scholarship toward collaborative research. My research highlighted ways to do this. While the research questions were mine, the study was grounded in collaboration and co-design. The study proposed a third space for teacher learning, and the participants in my study helped design that space. Teachers selected the books we read and drove the discussion about those books. I did not push my agenda if a big idea that interested me did not take hold in the discussion. I understood that our collective experience discussing books would happen over time and recognized that each meeting would be different. My study was grounded in collaborative practices that emphasized teachers' knowledge and expertise while being attentive to their time constraints. The teachers and I developed "reciprocal alliances" (Christianakis, 2010, p. 114) that focused on our common goals. Those goals often looked like developing a deeper understanding of young adult literature, but also extended to our collective work to address book banning. In this way, we embodied the ideals of collaborative research.

Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, there are opportunities for further research in teacher book clubs. This research project centered the experiences of seven middle-school teachers in the Pacific Northwest. A natural extension of this is the creation of additional teacher book clubs at different grade levels and in other contexts. How might primary-grade teachers engage with young adult literature, despite its lack of curricular relevance to their classrooms? The teachers in my study all worked together and had relationships with each other prior to the study. How might teachers who do not know each other engage with the book club community? How might teachers of other content areas like science or math occupy the space of a young adult literature book club?

Social Context and Online Spaces

This study was completed during ongoing movements for justice and equity. The ACLU (2023) is tracking 435 anti-LGBTQ bills in the United States, many of those targeting trans people. As this dissertation made evident, there is a connection between the practices of educators within a book club and the broader social context in which the book club is situated. As I wrote this section, a grassroots movement started on social media under the hashtag #TransRightsReadathon. It is a one-week call-to-action to read books by trans authors or books that center trans characters. The originator of the movement asked content creators to use the hashtag to share books with their followers. Another aspect of the readathon suggested that content creators ask their followers to make donations to organizations that support trans people or issues, either by flat donations or page, chapter, or book pledges. This movement has me thinking about reading as an act of justice and the role of social media conversations. There are opportunities for further research in this area. How might teachers intentionally engage with justice-oriented reading communities online? How might teachers use book-centered social media with their students? This might be a standalone area for research or a component of a teacher book club. In the absence of official book clubs, online communities might serve similar roles.

Young Adult Literature

The teachers and I intentionally read YA books that centered stories of characters historically marginalized and silenced by systems of oppression. This intentional decision to read books from diverse perspectives led us to examine and challenge our biases and understand individual stories and systemic oppression more deeply. By reading these books, we learned about the experiences and struggles of others as well as their triumphs and joys. This study

recognized that YA literature is worthy of deep study, both for ourselves as readers and for our students. Fleming (2023) situated YA texts within a larger movement:

What we are experiencing is indeed a revolution when it comes to the inclusion of young adult literature in our curriculum—a shifting of the paradigm and a dismantling of privilege. When we choose to center YA literature, we are listening to our young adults, and honoring their stories, their key issues, and lived experiences. We are choosing to amplify the voices of those who have been traditionally silenced in curriculum, dominated by the canon. We are deliberately making space in our curriculum, our classrooms, and our hearts for those individuals coming from traditionally marginalized populations, and we are doing so publicly and unapologetically amidst a climate that seeks to further silence them. This work is revolutionary. (p. 48)

YA literature is understudied and undertheorized. Much of the research about teacher book clubs focuses on teachers reading professional literature together (Burbank et al., 2010; DeWitt et al., 2018), with a few exceptions (Goldberg & Presko, 2000) of teachers reading literature together. YA literature is valuable and worthy in itself, not merely as literature for adolescents. My study suggested that teachers can engage with and theorize from these texts. As scholars, we need a deeper understanding of these texts. There are opportunities for further study of teachers and students reading YA literature.

Additional research that expands and deepens our understanding of teachers' relationships with YA literature offers opportunities to engage with some of the existing literature. The scope of this study could be expanded to include affinity groups by race, gender identity, or sexuality. How might a book club of black teachers engage with literature centering black YA stories? Or how might queer teachers engage with queer YA literature? Are there ways for teachers to use book clubs as affinity spaces?

The findings from this study are a call to action for schools to create more opportunities for teacher-centered learning. Additionally, the findings suggested that book clubs can be a

valuable third space for teachers and that the study of YA literature is a worthy endeavor. Teacher book clubs present an opportunity for further research and practice applications.

Closing: “Isn’t that what we want as teachers?”

I used to be like so worried about what students were doing during book club meetings in my classroom. I would walk around and guide them back to the book if I heard them talking about, ya know, other things. Our book club, it showed me, it made me realize that conversations about the book can seem “off-topic,” but they are really connected to the students’ learning. Like once recently, I heard a group of students talking about Dame [Damian Lillard, NBA player for the Portland Trail Blazers] and my instinct was to say, “Okay, guys, let’s get back to the book,” but instead I just listened for a while and waited. They were talking about who has the right or the responsibility or obligation to talk about racism or any issues of social justice. It was such a good conversation, like it was exactly the kind of discussion you hope for as a teacher. And I think about how before I would have told them they should be talking about the book, but they were talking about the book really. You know what I mean? They were making the issues in the book real to them. They were talking about the issues in the book and how they connected to the world. And I mean, isn’t that what we want as teachers? (Interview transcript, 01/06/2023)

This study captured the arc of my career in education. I began as a middle-school English language arts teacher, transitioned to an instructional coach working with teachers, and then pursued a doctorate. My study allowed me to reconnect with middle-school students by proxy through my participants. This insight from Alex made a strong case for the importance of this work. While my study did not seek to prove that engaging in a book club would impact classroom teaching, examples like this suggested that the experience did help them reconsider the ways they engaged with teaching and learning in their classrooms. Educational research must remain connected to teachers and classrooms because theory and practice happen simultaneously.

Alex’s reflection captured the ways teachers engaged with the book club. They saw it as an opportunity to develop new approaches to reading rather than as activities or lessons to use in their classrooms. Their learning was most often characterized by a change within themselves.

Furthermore, Alex's students were considering who has the right or responsibility to talk about issues of equity and justice. I argue it is our responsibility as researchers to see classrooms and teachers as agents of change. We must recognize reading for justice as the interconnection of personal, political, and pedagogical engagement with books. A young adult literature social justice book club is a way for teachers to enact and engage in reading for justice.

This study has demonstrated how middle-school teachers conceptualize themselves as readers, engage in reading for justice, and envision these concepts in their own classrooms as they participate in a young adult literature book club. The critical moments shared previously suggested that teachers who engage in YA literature book clubs can develop a deeper understanding of themselves as readers as well as a greater awareness of social justice issues and engage in action to address injustice. Additionally, teachers who participate in these book clubs can deepen their thinking about reading in their classrooms.

I argue for a greater emphasis on the value and importance of teacher-centered learning communities. By providing teachers with a space to share their reading lives and engage in critical dialogue about social justice issues, YA literature book clubs can help teachers to become more reflective practitioners and develop more meaningful reading experiences for students.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Demographic Information

I'd like to start with some basic information. Can you tell me your job title?

How long have you been at that school?

What positions did you hold previously?

How long have you been a teacher?

Can you tell me a little more about the school where you work?

How many students attend the school?

What are the demographics of the school?

Reading Outside of School

OK, I would like to start discussing your memories and experiences reading outside of school.

Think back to your earliest memories of reading at home. What do you remember about reading at home? Who read with you? How did you feel during those times?

What books do you remember? Did you have favorite books?

Probe: Do you remember going to the library or bookstores?

Think back when you were 9 or 10. What do you remember about reading at home? Did you read with other people? How did you feel about reading?

What books do you remember? Did you have favorite books?

Probe: Did you go to the library or bookstores when you were that age?

Think back to your teenage years. What do you remember about reading at home? Did you read with other people? How did you feel about reading?

What books do you remember? Did you have favorite books?

Probe: Did you go to the library or bookstores when you were a teenager?

Reading at School

Think back to your earliest memories of reading at school, maybe kindergarten or first grade. What do you remember about reading at school? How did you feel during those times?

What books do you remember? Did you have favorite books? Were there books you disliked? Think back to later elementary, maybe 4th or 5th grade. What do you remember about reading at school? How did you feel during those times?

What books do you remember? Did you have favorite books? Were there books you disliked?
Probe: Did you choose the books you read in school? How did you choose? If not, who chose for you?

Think back to high school. What do you remember about reading at school? How did you feel during those times?

What books do you remember? Did you have favorite books? Were there books you disliked?
Probe: Did you choose the books you read in school? How did you choose? If not, who chose for you?

Think back to college. What do you remember about for your classes? How did you feel during those times?

What books do you remember? Did you have favorite books? Were there books you disliked?
Probe: Did you choose the books you read in school? How did you choose? If not, who chose for you?

Current Reading Habits & Experiences

Moving forward to now. Do you read at home? Do you read with other people?

How do you choose books to read? What kind of books do you like to read? What kind of books do you dislike reading?

Probe: Do you go to the library or bookstore often? Do you buy books or check them out? Do you listen to audio books or use an e-reader?

Do you consider yourself a reader? Why or why not? What does it mean to be a “reader?”

Appendix B: Book Club Titles

Title	Author	Year	Notes
<u><i>New Kid</i></u>	Jerry Craft	2019	Directly deals with issues of race & class, set in NYC, uses words & concepts like microaggressions, code switching, representation, etc.
<u><i>Class Act</i></u>	Jerry Craft	2020	Same setting & many of the same characters as <i>New Kid</i> , friendship, intergenerational families
<u><i>Stand Up, Yumi Chung!</i></u>	Jessica Kim	2020	Navigating parental expectations, Korean-American main character, comedy as an art form, set in LA
<u><i>No Fixed Address</i></u>	Susin Nielsen	2020	Multiracial character, homelessness, navigating friendships, set in Vancouver, B.C.
<u><i>Two Boys Kissing</i></u>	David Levithan	2015	Greek chorus style narration, follows multiple sometimes intersecting stories centering queer youth
<u><i>Long Way Down</i></u>	Jason Reynolds	2019	Narrative verse, gun violence, also available as a graphic novel, audio book is read by Jason Reynolds!
<u><i>Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky</i></u>	Kwame Mbalia	2020	Black American folklore, set in Alabama, death/loss/grief
<u><i>Love is a Revolution</i></u>	Renée Watson	2021	Navigating crushes & love & identity, set in Harlem
<u><i>Clean Getaway</i></u>	Nic Stone	2020	Intergenerational mischief, road trip that weaves narratives about the Civil Rights movement, loss/grief
<u><i>Slay</i></u>	Brittney Morris	2019	Gaming, Afrocentric excellence, complex discussions of race, identity, safe spaces
<u><i>Just Roll with It</i></u>	Lee Durfey-Lavoie & Veronica Agarwal	2021	Graphic novel, set in middle school, centers mental health, role-playing games are an important component

Title	Author	Year	Notes
<u><i>The Girl from the Sea</i></u>	Molly Knox Ostertag	2021	Adolescence, friendship, love, identity, selkies (Celtic/Norse mythology)
<u><i>Cheer Up: Love and Pompoms</i></u>	Crystal Frasier & Val Wise	2021	Graphic novel, queer romance, microaggressions, parental pressure, people pleasing
<u><i>Flamer</i></u>	Mike Curato	2020	Graphic novel, coming-of-age story, scouting, queer identity, bullying
<u><i>Starfish</i></u>	Lisa Fipps	2021	Novel-in-verse, fat phobia/shaming/bullying, Judaism, therapy
<u><i>You Brought Me the Ocean</i></u>	Alex Sanchez & Julie Maroh	2020	DC Comics, Aqualad, queer romance, set in Truth or Consequences, NM
<u><i>Me (Moth)</i></u>	Amber McBride	2021	Novel-in-verse, loss/grief, Hoodoo & Navajo myths
<u><i>Sanctuary</i></u>	Paola Mendoza & Abby Sher	2020	Dystopian novel, centers undocumented immigrants, loss/grief/trauma
<u><i>Firekeeper's Daughter</i></u>	Angeline Boulley	2021	Thriller, Ojibwe characters & language, grief & loss, addiction, hockey
<u><i>Burn Down, Rise Up</i></u>	Vincent Tirado	2022	Horror, set in The Bronx, mysterious disappearances, mysticism, resguardos
<u><i>Pride: A Pride & Prejudice Remix</i></u>	Ibi Zoboi	2019	Retelling of <i>Pride & Prejudice</i> set in Brooklyn, gentrification, romance, family dynamics
<u><i>My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich</i></u>	Ibi Zoboi	2020	1980's Harlem, imagination, friendship, NASA, Star Trek
<u><i>Punching the Air</i></u>	Ibi Zoboi & Yusef Salaam	2021	Novel-in-verse, youth incarceration, power of art