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**READING CONFERENCES TO SUPPORT 5TH GRADE INDEPENDENT  
READING**

by

Kaitlyn Carter

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education

College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of  
Masters in Reading

at

Rowan University

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Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ph. D.



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I would like to thank my parents and boyfriend, Bill, for their endless support, love, encouragement, and guidance throughout my research and thesis writing.

## **Abstract**

Kaitlyn Carter

READING CONFERENCES TO SUPPORT 5TH GRADE INDEPENDENT READING  
2019-2020

Susan Browne, Ph. D.

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study was to document how reading conferences can support students while independently reading. The specific goal was to focus on how reading conferences can help students become aware of their reading choices and text selection. Questions that guided my research included: How can reading conferences help hold students accountable for their independent reading? How are students selecting independent reading books? How can reading conferences encourage conversations when the text connects to the student's Funds of Knowledge? Do students make more connections to a text if they have prior background knowledge on the topic? Data was collected through reading conferences, anecdotal notes, and questionnaires. Students participated in at least three conferences about their independent reading book when they discussed how and why they selected their current text. Reading conferences helped students become more reflective about their text selection and helped students to make more connections while reading.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

I do believe something very magical can happen when you read a good book.

(Rowling, 2017)

I am fortunate to have had many different teaching opportunities throughout my short nine year teacher career. I began my career as a special education inclusion teacher, co-teaching with a regular classroom in kindergarten and first grades. I continued on as a regular education teacher teaching grades three through five. Throughout this span of time, I have had the opportunity to loop with a class three different times.

Looping is when a teacher moves with the same students from one grade to the next, therefore teaching the same students for two years in a row. Two of the years I looped with my same exact class and one year I had only about half of the same students.

Looping has been a career altering experience and has made me the teacher I am today.

Because of looping, I feel that I am a more well-rounded, adaptable, and easy-going teacher. Looping has challenged me to learn new curriculum and differentiate instruction and activities for all students. There are many benefits of looping such as the rapport that is built, the knowledge of strengths and weaknesses at the start of the second year together, and level of comfort in the classroom.

This year is my third time completing the looping process. I have the same exact class as last year and have looped with this class, not only getting the opportunity to be their fourth grade teacher but also their fifth grade teacher. One of the most beneficial

parts of looping is the opportunity to continue to form relationships with my students and continue to strengthen their skills as learners. According to Jim Grant (2019) “perhaps the most important reason for deciding to keep students many experts are citing the importance of significant relationships in young people’s lives” (p. 2). The relationships I have formed with students in classes I have looped with have been overall more trusting and stronger than with students who I have taught for one year. Looping with this current class has led me to develop my research project and complete this research with the same class that helped to create this idea.

Last school year, I had an “aha” moment. This moment has motivated my research, it has changed my views as a teacher, and has changed my classroom environment. This moment has forever changed my teaching career, for the best. I noticed a student had just finished an independent reading book. He then started to browse our classroom library in attempts to find a new book to begin reading. After a short amount of time, the student returned to his spot on the rug to read. I walked over and sat down next to him to have a quick, extremely information reading conference or conversation about his text selection. This was our short, but powerful, conversation:

Ms. Carter: I see you just selected a new independent reading book! What did you choose?

Student: Yes, I got a Goosebumps book

Ms. Carter: What is the book called?

Student: Ummm, let me look...

Ms. Carter: What made you choose this book to read?

Student:           hesitated, then replied I don't know.

My student did not know why he was reading this book. He simply picked a book off of the shelf. He chose a book randomly without looking through it, reading the back cover, or making any connections to background knowledge. This student did not choose this book because he knew something previously about the topic. He was not familiar with the author, series, or genre. I was distraught! Haven't I taught my students enough about text section, genre, and background knowledge to guide them into choosing a book for a specific reason? How many of my other students were choosing books the same way?

This short moment sparked so many ideas that began flying around my mind. How were my students selecting their independent reading books? Were they making connections to previous knowledge? How might reading conferences help? What other information can I find out from reading conferences? These questions have guided my teacher research. I wanted my students to be passionate about reading independently and be able to explain why they selected a book to read. I wanted my students to be excited about choosing an independent reading book and even more excited to have a discussion about this book.

Through the power of looping, I am able to complete this research with the same class that inspired this research initially. What an amazing experience to be able to have a class for two years, to continue to learn and grow together.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to document how reading conferences support independent reading. Reading conferences were used to help figure out how students

selected their independent reading book and what connections they could make to this self-selected text. The goal was to use the information learned through these reading conferences to help guide students while choosing an independent reading text. The experiences in my classroom like the one mentioned above allowed me to reflect. How many students were choosing books randomly without any specific reason? How many students were selecting books that did not connect to their Funds of Knowledge, or their experiences? How can I play a part in changing this habit? Independent reading time in the classroom is often a time where teachers meet with small reading groups or complete other activities with students. Students are often left to read on their own without any accountability or checking in. Reading conferences are a useful way to help hold students accountable for reading that happens during this time. Reading conferences can allow teachers to guide students in selecting independent reading text that is appropriate, interesting, and just right for them. Jennifer Serravallo and Gravity Goldberg (2007) believe that “my job as a teacher is to help students feel comfortable as they read. I need to help them find books that they feel are “just right”- books that they can read with fluency, accuracy, and comprehension” (p. 31) They believe that reading conferences are vital to student reading success. Serravallo and Goldberg continue to state that through reading conferences with students they “urgently work to find out about them as readers so I can help guide them in their own book choices” (p. 32). Reading conferences help teachers learn information that can help them guide students when they are selecting an independent text.

In many classrooms in my district, writing conferences occur regularly but reading conferences are not common or formally used during independent reading time. In my years of teaching I have completed very informal reading conferences with my students during their independent reading time but these were often not documented. Teachers often focus on conversation during guided reading groups, where the text is selected for the small group based on reading level or skill. More often than not, teachers in my district often do not have time to complete reading conferences or simply do not know the most useful way to structure a conference.

Reading conferences are important in order to help hold students accountable for their independent reading. Independent reading occurs often in classrooms. Students independently read a book of their choosing everyday in my classroom. Reading conferences are a way to help monitor this reading. Boushey and Mosser (2009) state that conferring with students “raises accountability for teachers and students in ways that are almost immeasurable” (p. 19). Through my research and implementation of reading conferences, my goal was to motivate students to select independent reading text that was a “just right” fit for them. A book that they thought carefully about before selecting and a book that they can make connections with or have some prior knowledge on.

It was important to read various research and information on reading conferences before beginning my own research. I read empirical articles, text books, journals, and other teacher resources in order to gather more information. There is a great deal of information and research on this topic and it was important for me to sort through

the knowledge and opinions that I have about reading conferences and independent reading in order to further extend my knowledge on this topic.

### **Statement of Research Problem and Question**

The purpose of this study was to document how reading conferences support independent reading in a fifth grade classroom. The goal was to focus on how reading conferences can help students become aware of their reading choices and text selection. How can reading conferences help hold students accountable for their independent reading? How are students selecting independent reading books? How can reading conference encourage conversations when the text connects to the student's Funds of Knowledge? Do students make more connections to a text if they have prior background knowledge on the topic? These questions guided my classroom inquiry.

### **Organization of Thesis**

The remainder of this paper is a qualitative study designed to answer my research questions. Chapter two discusses a review of literature about independent reading text selection, benefits of reading conferences, and connecting background knowledge to text selection. Chapter three describes the design and context of the study, information about my district, school, and classroom, and data collection. Chapter four is an analysis of the data and presents the research findings. Chapter five presents conclusions based on the research findings, study limitations, and suggestions for further research and the benefits and uses of reading conferences.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Reading changes your life. Reading unlocks worlds unknown or forgotten, taking travelers around the world and through time. Reading helps you escape the confines of school and pursue your own education. Through characters – the saints and the sinners, real or imagined – reading shows you how to be a better human being. (Miller, 2009, p. 18).

Reading is powerful. Reading can transform. Reading can take you on an adventure. Reading allows the reader to have new and exciting experiences. Reading changes your whole entire life, for the best. But how do you become a reader? What if you don't like to read? How can a teacher help change this? How can a teacher help their students engage in meaningful reading experiences?

Teachers instill their love of reading and books to their students. Most of the time, a teacher's enthusiasm is contagious and students take in every word read or book suggested. But there are also a few kids in every teacher's classroom that do not want to read. Reading is more of a chore to these students instead of a desirable activity. Independent reading is often a time in a classroom where students have the opportunity to read a book of their choice and can be a crucial time for hesitant readers. Reading conferences in the classroom can help lay the guidelines of independent reading and help foster a love of reading.

Chapter two is a review of the literature about the benefits of reading conferences, the advantages independent reading through student choice when selecting a text, and the connection between background knowledge and text selection. The first section examines research on the benefits of independent reading and the importance of student selected text. The next section outlines research on the advantages of reading conferences and their uses in the classroom. Finally, the last section will discuss research on background knowledge and its relationship to text selection.

### **Independent Reading**

Everyone's a reader. Whether they recognize it or not. This love of reading is often created during students' school years. Some students' love of reading takes a longer time to foster than for others. Sometimes it can be a difficult task but other times it happens naturally. Sometimes it takes a specific genre, topic, or theme to awaken this love of reading. Donalyn Miller, a teacher who writes about awakening the reader in every child, believes that "students need to be surrounded with books of all kinds and given the opportunity to read them every day" (Miller, 2009, p. 34). The more books a student has access to, the greater chance of them falling in love with reading. Independent reading is the perfect time for this to happen. Independent reading is an opportunity for students to select a book and read this book on their own. This reading often occurs for enjoyment instead of reading for a specific purpose, such as reading in order to write or answer comprehension questions.

Independent reading should occur frequently, including at home and in school. The research of Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) showed that "children who spend more



time reading are better readers and comprehenders than children who spend little time reading” (p. 415). Their research studied reading motivation and factors that affect independent reading. Donalyn Miller agrees that the amount of time spent reading is important as well as where a student reads. Miller states that “my students are more likely to read a book at home when they have started reading it at school. Free reading also liberates underground readers so they do not have to switch back and forth between their book for school and their own book” (2009, p. 51). Students should be encouraged to read not only during independent or free reading time in the classroom, but also at home as well.

Sanden (2012) believes that independent reading is the key for student reading growth. In her research Sanden studied how teachers use independent reading in her classroom. Her research found that “one statistically significant factor uncovered was that students in the most effective and moderately effective schools spent more time independently reading than did students in the least effective schools” (p. 223). Furthermore, she believes that allowing students opportunities to read increases reading growth. “Inserting intentional opportunities for reading instruction and holding students accountable for the learning that ensues allows independent reading to hold increased possibilities for influencing students’ reading growth” (p. 228).

Sanden’s (2012) research focused on observing various teachers’ classrooms during independent reading time. Through her research she found that there were similar components that effective teachers used in their classroom during independent reading. She found that “the teachers demonstrate some shared beliefs about the elements

contained in classroom independent reading, including opportunities for students to be given choices in a variety of genres, to work at their own levels, and to interact with the text without depending on adults to solve their problems. These components seem consistent with a conventional understanding of independent reading” (p. 224).

Independent reading allows students opportunities to enhance their reading skills while interacting with a text that they chose.

Although research shows the benefits of independent reading for students, it also stressed the importance of supervision. Yes, independent reading is free reading time when students can select their own book, but in order for this time to be most effective this time must be supervised in some way. This idea will continue to be discussed throughout this chapter. Sanden (2012) notes that teachers “providing students with unsupervised reading time may not prompt the learning opportunities they envision” (p. 226). Research shows that reading conferences are a great way to monitor and support students’ independent reading. “The independent component of independent reading is actually a developmental process that occurs most beneficially under the guidance of expert adults” (Sanden, 2012, p. 227). In order for students to get the most out of their independent reading experience,

### **Student Choice of Text**

Research shows that one of the most critical and important parts of independent reading is text selection. Students must be choosing their own book instead of having a book assigned to them, which would occur during guided reading groups. Miller (2009) believes this is an important part. “Embracing their inner reader starts with students

selecting their own books to read” ( p. 23). She continues her explanation by asking the question “why does choice matter? Providing students with the opportunity to choose their own books to read empowers and encourages them. It strengthens their self-confidence, rewards their interests, and promotes a positive attitude towards reading by valuing the reader and gives him or her a level of control” (Miller, 2009, p. 23). Students are more likely to read when they get to choose the book they are reading.

Students are also more motivated to read when they can select what they are reading. In their research also previously mentioned, Edmunds & Bauserman (2006) state that “motivation plays a major role in reading development” (p. 414). In their study they found that “children were motivated to read when they were given an opportunity to decide what narrative text they would like to read” (p. 417). Edmunds & Bauserman (2006) also found that “books they could read to gain knowledge, books they chose, and books related to their personal interests affected their motivation to read most” (p. 417). Students are more interested in reading and feel empowered when getting to select their own text. Miller (2009) agrees by stating that “readers without power to make their own choices are unmotivated” (p. 23). Kragler and Nolley (1996) studied book selection strategies among 4th graders and also found self-selection to be motivation for students. They state that “allowing students to self-select their instructional reading books can be a motivator for reading. Self-selection also helps to alleviate some of the pressure teachers have regarding students reading books of a particular difficulty level. When students have a strong interest in a particular book topic, finding books at a certain reading level becomes less important” (p. 355).

In their book, *Conferring with Readers: Supporting Each Student's Growth and Independence*, Jennifer Serravallo and Gravity Goldberg (2007) support the idea that students need to select their own independent reading book. "One of the aspects of being an independent reader is to know how to choose books that fit you" (p. 10). Kragler and Nolley (1996) agree on the importance of self-selection of text. They believe that "students who are encouraged to self-select their own reading material are more motivated and enthusiastic readers. The process puts responsibility on the reader thus providing early lessons in decision making and life-long learning" (p. 385). Having the freedom and opportunity as an independent reader to select their own reading book enhances reading growth and independence.

### **Background Knowledge/Interest**

Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) noted in their research that "children's reading motivation was influenced by their own interests. Children revealed that they found books interesting because of the books' relation to their personal interest" (p. 416). Students will often choose a book to read independently that they have prior knowledge on or if the book is on a topic that is interesting to them. This is why student selection of text is an important part of independent reading, as students are often more motivated to read a text that they have selected which they have background knowledge on.

Newman, Kaefer, and Pinkham (2014) studied the contribution of background knowledge to student comprehension. "Put simply, the more you know about a topic, the easier it is to read a text, understand it, and retain the information" (p. 145). They believe that background knowledge is a very important part of reading. "It makes good sense that

to comprehend a story or text, readers will need a threshold of knowledge about the topic. Without such knowledge, it becomes difficult to construct a meaningful mental model of what the text is about” (p 146). They go on to state that “understanding text depends on readers supplying enough of the unstated premises to make coherent sense of what is being read. But to do this well, readers need to have a foundation of knowledge about the topic. Background knowledge acts as a road map for students, allowing them to stay on target” (p. 146). Newman, Kaefer, and Pinkham’s research looked at why background knowledge was important and the most beneficial ways to build background knowledge. They concluded that “the importance of background knowledge is especially salient in the age of Common Core. To meet the demands of these new standards, children will be expected to develop knowledge through text, both narrative and informational, within specified difficulty ranges in each grade level. The imperative to foster children’s background knowledge as a means for providing a firm foundation for learning, therefore, is greater than ever” (Newman, Kaefer, and Pinkham, 2014, p. 148).

### **Funds of Knowledge**

Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2007) research on addressing the achievement gap discusses the importance of tapping into a student’s Funds of Knowledge in order to identify students’ prior knowledge on specific topics. “When talking with students and their families, teachers might learn about stories and experiences shared within their community and family that can be connected explicitly to texts read in class. In addition, listening to students and analyzing their writing provided information about features of students’ oral and written language” (p. 99). They go onto explain that “student

knowledge and experience can be joined with the strategies required for reading with understanding different kinds of text (e.g., literature, science) that involve varied prior knowledge, text structures, vocabulary, and goals” (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007, p. 100).

Esteban-Guitart and Moll’s (2014) research can further help to explain how Funds of Knowledge can be connected to reading conferences and text selection. Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) explain that through finding a sense of self and having different experiences, students can form their own identities. “It can be argued that identities, created and recreated in interactions between people in a given context, are lived experiences on self. In that sense, identity is a conceptual artifact that contains, connects, and enables reflection” (p. 34). They also state that “through participation in human activities and practices- socialization and education- people develop and create lived experiences within themselves” (p. 35). Students’ experiences help them to form their own identity. One way this can be seen in the classroom is through text selection, as students are selecting a book that is reflective of themselves as a person. Esteban-Guitart and Moll go on to say “we have learned from the funds of knowledge approach that through investigating and documenting the many particular funds of knowledge that students have, their identities can be validated and incorporated into school” (p. 36). By having the ability to self select a text and share information during reading conferences, students are creating and expressing their identity and enhancing their funds of knowledge.

A student's Funds of Knowledge can help them greatly while participating in a reading conference. It can help them make connections, have a discussion, and select a new independent reading book. The research of Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez (1992) and González, Moll, & Amanti (2005) help to define what Funds of Knowledge are and how they can be applied. Families have abundant knowledge that students can apply during reading conferences and selection of text. Students bring with them funds of knowledge from their homes and communities that can be used for skill development. Teachers can focus on helping students find meaning in activities and help them connect their Funds of Knowledge during reading conferences.

### **Reading Conferences**

Readings conferences can be used in various ways in the classroom. The ultimate goal is conferring with a student on a text they are currently reading. Reading conferences are a time to have an often informal conversation with a student about what they are reading. This is a time where the teacher can check in with the student, perform a quick assessment on a specific skill, model strategies, and set reading goals. Conferences are also a useful way to hold students accountable for their independent reading.

“Individual conferences are an opportunity to monitor and assess student comprehension and to make teaching decisions based on that assessment” (Serravallo, 2010, p. 58).

Jennifer Serravallo has done extensive research on reading conferences and has written many books on the topic. In her book, *Conferring with Readers* that was mentioned in a previous paragraph, Serravallo and Goldberg (2007) state that “reading conferences are often one-on-one work with a student in which instruction is

individualized to support her strengths and help to push her to the edge of what she's just beginning to be able to do" (p. 9). They go into details when discussing the many benefits and uses of reading conferences. "Taking five minutes at least once a week to sit with every young reader offers you the opportunity to accomplish the lofty goals of fostering lifelong learners. It offers you the opportunity to make instructional decisions that match the individual reader and to choose methods that grow and change along with the student" (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007, p. 6).

Krulder (2018) is a high school English teacher who was struggling to find a successful way to hold her students accountable for their independent reading. She began asking herself questions that guided her learning and research, such as "if I wanted my students to become authentic readers, why was I assigning them activities that real readers- including me- would never voluntarily engage in?" (2018, p. 2). Krulder began using reading conferences with her students on their choice reading book for the purpose of "supporting students in thinking about their books and helping them find books they enjoy" (2018, p. 3). At the end of her research with implementing reading conferences, Krudler stated that "more of my students read far more books than ever before, and without regular conversations, it's far easier to notice and support students who are struggling with finding a book they enjoy. I'm able to tap into some student interests, and most importantly, I've noticed my connections with students strengthening" (p. 4). Reading conferences allow teachers the opportunity to make connections and strengthen relationships with their students through conversation.



Gill (2000) believes that a teacher's interaction during a reading conference is important. "The teacher supports the reader by demonstrating or suggesting strategies at the point of need, taking over if the reading is too difficult or simply talking about the book with the student. Teachers help students find what interests them, set their own purposes, and use strategies for making meaning" (p. 502). "Reading conferences may be more important than has heretofore been recognized. Teacher roles that may support students' literacy development include making assessments that are critical to good instruction, demonstrating strategies at the point of need, and providing successful reading experiences" (Gill, 2000, p. 508).

Reading conferences are a useful way for teachers to help their students select an independent reading book. "Children in a reading workshop are expected to keep up with their own independent reading alongside class units of study, and some children need help with doing this. Teaching children to self-select books and set plans for themselves as readers for a chunk of time helps keep them engaged and motivated" (Serravallo, 2010, p. 86). Reading conferences help guide students to select a text that is a perfect fit for them, according to their reading level, interest, and genre preference. "It is my goal to help children be metacognitive about the kind of work they do as readers. I teach children that in a conference, they should be ready to share their process and skill work" (Serravallo, 2010, p. 89). Reading conferences are a great way to help readers think about their reading in order to help them make connections and reflections, ultimately helping them find a new book to read.

There are a few theories and frameworks that support reading conferences.

Vygotsky's work with social influences on cognitive development can be connected to reading conferences. Vygotsky (1978), "much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with a skillful tutor". The teacher can model behaviors and provide verbal instructions for the student. Vygotsky refers to this as cooperative or collaborative dialogue. The student begins to understand the actions or instructions provided by the teacher then internalizes the information as they use it to guide or regulate their own performance.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development can also be directly connected to reading conferences. The zone of proximal development can be defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Vygotsky believed that when a student is in the zone of proximal development for a particular task, providing the appropriate assistance and support will give the student confidence and ability to complete that task. Reading conferences are an excellent way to help students move through their zone of proximal development. Teachers help students by modeling and practicing reading strategies and skills. The teacher supports the student as a reader through these conferences.

The Gradual Release of Responsibility model and scaffolding also help a student move between zones of proximal development. Gradual Release of Responsibility mode was developed by Pearson and Gallagher (1983) but based around Vygotsky's research.

This model allows students to work towards independence of a specific skill. Teacher's begin with all of the responsibility and gradually release this to the student along the way, moving from focused instruction and modeling to guided practice then eventually to independent practice of this skill. According to Fisher (2008) "The gradual release of responsibility model provides teachers with an instructional framework for moving from teacher knowledge to student understanding and application. The gradual release of responsibility model ensures that students are supported in their acquisition of the skills and strategies necessary for success" (p. 2). During reading conferences, gradual release of responsibility can be seen when teachers help students select a text, making connections, or retell a story.

Scaffolding is an important part of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and the gradual release of responsibility model. Scaffolding involves students working with a teacher to achieve a specific goal. The teacher can provide support to the student and help guide them on their way to mastering a skill. Teachers can help students by thinking aloud, modeling, and supporting through conversations during reading conferences.

Clay's book *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control* which was published in 1991 also lays a foundation for reading conferences. Clay believes that teachers should base their teaching decisions on careful observation of children's reading behavior. Reading conferences help teachers gather more information on the reading habits of their students. Pletcher and Christensen (2017) analyze Clay's research and make connections to her research and reading conferences. When engaging in reading conferences, "teachers meet individually with students to help them build, through

feedback and prompting, a self-extending system. The self extending system that Clay describes takes place when students gain the ability to monitor their own reading and correct any miscues or misunderstandings” (p. 2). Pletcher and Christensen’s research focused on the use of reading conferences and how they supported students in the classroom. Clay believed that daily recording of students and their reading patterns and behaviors was important as it allowed teachers to guide further instruction.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, after the review of the literature and research on the topic of reading conferences, much of the information is connected to independent reading, student selection, and background knowledge. Reading conferences can be used to check in with students about their independent reading book. Student selection of text is important during independent reading time, as being able to select your own text is motivation to read, as stated in the research provided in this chapter. This information works together to support my research questions as the conclusions that were drawn from the research helped to guide my reading conferences in order to help my students become independent and motivated readers.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Context**

This study was completed in the elementary school where I currently teach. I have taught in this district for nine years, seven of those years teaching in my current school. The study was completed in the classroom with my twenty-two students. This study examined how reading conferences can help hold students accountable for their independent reading.

### **Community**

The school site for this teacher research was an elementary school located in southern New Jersey. At the time of the 2010 census, the population of this town was 14,707 with 6,226 households, and 3,860.120 families residing in the township. The racial makeup of the town at this time was 93.16% White, 1.50% Black or African American, 3.95% Hispanic or Latino, 0.16% Native American, 2.71% Asian, 0.01% Pacific Islander, 1.11% from other races, and 1.36% (200) from two or more races.

The median income for a household in the township was \$51,076, and the median income for a family was \$65,269. In the community, about 3.6% of families and 6.2% of the population of the community were living below the poverty line, including 2.4% of those aged 18 or younger and 9.9% of those age 65 or over. There were 6,207 households out of which 27.5% had children under the age of 18 living with them.

## **District**

In the school district where the research study was implemented, 2018-2019 enrollment data reports that there were 2,035 students enrolled in grades Pre-K-12th. The district's mission statement is to expand minds, cultivate problem-solvers, and inspire leaders who persevere in an evolving world.

## **School**

The elementary school site, Bridge Elementary School, had approximately 200 students enrolled in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. When looking at students by gender identification, there were approximately 108 females and 92 males. There were 5% of the students who received free or reduced-price lunch program, 17 students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and receive speech and/or pull-out support in the resource center. The school site employed 10 full time teachers and 8 part-time/traveling teachers. In the classroom, the average teacher student ratio was about twenty to one.

## **Teacher Researcher**

This study took place in my fifth grade classroom. There are 22 students in my classroom, 12 boys and 10 girls. Eighteen students are White, one student is Asian, one student is Hispanic, and 2 students are of two or more races. Three of these students are classified and have IEPs that identify their specific needs and accommodations. One student receives LLI (Leveled Literacy Intervention), which is reading intervention support. To support the necessary modifications for these students, there is a classroom aide that is present in the classroom for four hours a day. Two students receive replacement instruction in the resource center while one student receives in class support

from the classroom aide. This study focused on students who were present in my classroom during reading time, which is 20 students. Reading time is approximately one hour and thirty minutes a day. During this time students participate in whole class mini-lessons, small guided reading groups, and independent reading and work time. Students read many different text including whole class read aloud books, guided reading text, and independent reading chapter books of their choice. To support independent reading, there are references of comprehension strategies, book recommendations, and guided reading charts hung around the classroom. Students have the ability to move around the classroom during reading time. The classroom library is filled with chapter books of various genres and levels which are organized according to author, genre, and topic. Students also attend library once a week at the school's library where they may check out a new book.

For this research, I focused on the independent reading time of my literacy block. A wide variety of books are available to students and my research focused on how students choose a book, if background knowledge and/or Funds of Knowledge played a part in this selection, and how reading conferences during this time can help guide student text selection.

### **Participants**

This study focused on six students in my classroom. These students do not have IEPs and they do not receive any support in reading. These students are referred to as pseudonyms Lily, Jack, Eve, Kate, Vince, and Adam to protect their identities. When I was selecting students to participate in this study, I wanted to keep the cohort small. I felt

that this would allow me to have more meaningful and frequent reading conferences. I selected three boys and three girls for this study, in order to equally study how both genders select independent reading books. I also wanted to conference with students on various reading levels with different reading behaviors. For example, some students selected are reading two or three levels about the grade level expectation while some have just made the reading benchmark this marking period. The reading benchmark levels are based upon the Fountas and Pinnell reading system. These specific students were selected because they represented a wide variety of readers with various reading behaviors. Some of these students are avid readers with great reading stamina while reading is not as enjoyable for some of the other students selected. I was hopeful that a wide variety of students would give me valuable information. The following chart notes important information about the students selected.

Table 1

*Student Information*

<b>Student Information</b>						
	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Interests</u>	<u>Favorite Genre(s)</u>	<u>Reading Level</u>	<u>Reading Habits</u>
<b>Lily</b>	5th	10	Reading, Crafts	Fantasy, Fiction	Two levels above marking period expectations	Avid reader, reads many books



	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Interests</u>	<u>Favorite Genre(s)</u>	<u>Reading Level</u>	<u>Reading Habits</u>
<b>Jack</b>	5th	10	Science, Video Games	Science Fiction, Non-Fiction	One level above marking period expectations	Only reads when required, depending on the topic and not for long periods of time
<b>Eve</b>	5th	11	Dancing, Coloring, Reading	Realistic Fiction	Three levels above marking period expectations	Loves to read and chooses to do it often
<b>Kate</b>	5th	11	Playing Sports, Hanging with Friends	Realistic Fiction and Fiction	Three levels above marking period expectations	Avid reader, reads often
<b>Vince</b>	5th	11	Playing Sports and Reading Harry Potter	Fantasy and Realistic Fiction	Two levels above marking period expectations	Rereads series often, loves to read specific series
<b>Adam</b>	5th	10	Playing Sports	Fiction	Reading on marking period expectations	Often has trouble choosing a book

Table 1 (continued)

## **Research Design**

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how reading conferences support my students independent reading. The following sub questions helped to guide my data collection and research: Do students select text based upon background knowledge? How can reading conferences help hold students accountable for their independent reading when the text connects to the student's background knowledge and Funds of Knowledge? How do I support my students in selecting culturally relevant texts in which they have some prior knowledge on for independent reading? What happens when we conference about these books? This topic was chosen as it has always been a topic of interest during my nine years as a teacher. As time as progressed, it has been clear that students often choose a text randomly for their independent reading book that they choose for themselves. This teacher research focused on how and why students select books and how is connects to their Funds of Knowledge and background knowledge on the selected book.

This study occurred in a natural classroom environment with my current fifth grade students. Informal reading conferences and conversations have already occurred in this classroom, students were not required to do any additional work that was not previously required of them already. All students who participated in this study will remain anonymous and were given pseudonyms. This study was qualitative, which means that it was revolved around research that could be observed instead of number driven. Teacher observation, anecdotal notes, questionnaires, reading logs, and reading conferences were all qualitative methods of collecting data that were used.

## **Procedure**

Qualitative methods were used throughout the entire study to collect and analyze data. There was an established rapport with students, as I taught them fourth grade and then looped with them to fifth grade. This allowed for natural, relaxed, and constructive reading conferences during this research. Before beginning reading conferences, my students completed a questionnaire that allowed me to gather information about how students select their independent reading books. While filling out this questionnaire, students stated what book they were currently reading and what page they were on. Other questions on the questionnaire included:

- Why did you choose this book?
- Did you have any knowledge on this book? If so, what did you know?
- Did you choose this book because you already knew something about its topic?
- What connections can you make to this book?
- What genre is this book?
- Do you normally read books in this genre?
- What do you like about the book you are reading?

Students' answers to these questions were used to guide reading conferences. Reading conferences were already taking place in my classroom but they were completed very informally. There was no documentation, as these conferences were simply a quick conversation with students about what they were reading.

As I began to conference with my six students, I used information from their initial questionnaire to guide questions and include during conversation. Each reading

conference took around five minutes to complete. During each conference, I would transcribe student answers on my reading conference form. I also took anecdotal notes on each student's conference where I noted things such as how quickly they are reading, their ability to make or not make connections, and possible follow up questions for the next conference. These notes were helpful in my planning of the following conference. These specific things are important to note because they could be used to guide future conferences and help students select an independent reading book. Questions that were used as a guideline during reading conferences were:

1. What book are you currently reading?
2. What page are you on?
3. Can you tell me what the book is about so far?
4. Why did you choose this book? Are you happy you chose it?
5. What did you know about this book before reading?
6. Is this topic or main idea of the book something you are interested in?
7. What personal connections can you make to the main characters or events?
8. Why do you think you are able to make those connections?
9. Can you make any connections to self? To others? To the world?
10. Are there any new topics that have come up in the text that have been confusing?  
(prompting if necessary, such details with characters, cultural events or traditions)
11. What are any other tricky things that have come up while reading? What can you do when you are reading something new that is difficult to understand?

These questions that were asked during the reading conference allowed me to gather useful information on what connections students could make to the text and this relationship to their selection of the text. It was useful to track this in order to figure out if students make more connections and were able to connect more background knowledge as they continued to read the book.

I met with each student approximately four times, about every two to three days. During each conference I focused on asking questions about prior knowledge to the book and connections that could be made. Reading logs were also used as a way to plan conferences. A reading log is a form that is used to track what books students are reading and what page they are currently on. I have a form for each student, which has the date and a space to write what current book they are reading and what page they are on. Reading logs are used daily in my classroom as a way for me to track student progress during independent reading as a way to hold them accountable for their reading. As I took daily reading pages, I was able to gauge where my students were during their book and when would be an appropriate time to have our next conference. As students finished a book, we discussed how students could choose a new book and how their prior knowledge or interests could help influence this. Using qualitative methods, data was collected and analyzed throughout the reading conferences.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

Data was collected through a reading questionnaire, anecdotal notes, and reading logs. The reading questionnaire allowed me to gather information about how students choose an independent reading book. Through the questionnaire, I was able to figure out

if the six students I studied had any previous knowledge on their book before reading it, if they selected the book because they already knew something about the topic, any connections they can make to the book, and if they normally read that genre of book.

Anecdotal notes were the most important part of my data collection. I met with each student approximately four times, with each conference taking around five minutes. I kept detailed anecdotal notes during the conference on the reading conference form that was already printed. This information included what they were reading, any prior knowledge on the topic, and any difficult parts during reading. The anecdotal notes were taken on an organized, printed sheet so that I could quickly and efficiently record the information while talking to the student. Quick, shortened notes were used during the note taking process to save time. The anecdotal notes helped inform my teaching in order to guide each future conference with appropriate follow up questions.

Student reading logs were also used as a data source. These were simply logs that I filled out daily by asking students what books they are reading and/or what page they are currently on. These logs are used with all students in my classroom in order to track their daily reading progress in order to hold them accountable. This is also a useful way to track what books my students are reading and how quickly they are reading a book. Data sources were triangulated to support analysis and research findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected from the reading questionnaire was used to notice trends in students selection of text in order to figure out if students selected a book randomly or based upon any prior knowledge on the topic. The questionnaire data was also used to

plan questions for future reading conferences. Anecdotal notes were analyzed in order to determine any similar patterns or trends in reading. These notes were also analyzed in order to figure out if students were making connections to text while reading as well as during the reading conference conversation. Reading logs were used as a way to plan the dates of reading conferences and track student progress in the book they were reading. An analysis of the data indicated the emergence of three distinct categories.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

I began my study hoping to find out about the use of reading conferences in my classroom. This study was guided by the research questions that asked how reading conferences can support my students? How prior knowledge could help support these conferences? The goal of my research was to focus on how reading conferences can help students become aware of their reading choices and text selection. Other research questions that would help me to learn about my students independent reading were: How are students selecting independent reading books? How can reading conference encourage conversations when the text connects to the student's interests? Do students make more connections to a text if they have prior background knowledge on the topic? I wanted to learn how my students were making their independent reading text selections. I also wanted to see how conversation that occurred through reading conferences could help students make connections and how these connections could help students select a text. I examined how the format of these specific reading conferences supported students in conversing about what they were reading. An analysis of the data indicated that students who participated in this study became more aware of why they selected a book, what knowledge they had on the topic before reading, and how this information can be used to select a new book. It was important for me to think about what I could learn about my students through reading conferences.



During the research period, three reading conferences occurred with each of the six participants. Students participated in approximately one reading conference per week. Questions were prepared for each reading conference based on data from the pre-conference questionnaire and data collected from the previous conference. The questions asked on the pre-conference questionnaire are listed below:

1. What chapter book are you currently reading independently?
2. Why did you choose this book?
3. Did you have any background knowledge on this book? Did you know something about it?
4. If you answered yes, what did you know?
5. Did you choose this book because you already knew something about its topic?
6. What connections can you make to this book?
7. What genre is this book?
8. Do you normally read books in this genre?
9. What do you like about the book you are reading?

Participants were reading a different book each time a conference was held. Reading logs were used to identify when participants had started a new book. Daily reading logs were used to help identify what book students were reading and what page they were on.

Questions for each reading conference were planned ahead of time but due to the nature of reading conferences and their ability for conversation to unfold, these were often not

the only questions asked. It was most beneficial during these conferences to use student responses as a way to ask follow up questions and allow the conversation to flow naturally.

### **Analysis**

The pre-conference questionnaire, anecdotal notes, teacher observations, and reading conferences all served as data sources. Data was analyzed and consistent categories were identified to indicate specific categories that emerged throughout all conferences and with multiple participants during each conference. Each conference yielded data that can be discussed in three major categories that are: text selection, connections/background knowledge, and series of books.

### **Text Selection**

Text selection is defined as how students were selecting their independent reading text. Jennifer Serravallo has conducted significant research on text selection and reading conferences. She states that “children in a reading workshop are expected to keep up with their own independent reading alongside class units of study, and some children need help with doing this. Teaching children to self-select books and set plans for themselves as readers for a chunk of time helps keep them engaged and motivated” (Serravallo, 2010, p. 86). The Pre-Conference Questionnaire that was administered before conferences began showed that my students were not selecting books based upon their interests and that much thought and effort was not going into this selection. The number of responses in the categories below indicate that students were limited in the ways they considered selecting texts.

Table 2

*How Students Selected Independent Reading Text*

	<u>Random Selection</u>	<u>Cover Front to Back</u>	<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>Genre</u>	<u>Series</u>	<u>Background Knowledge</u>
Number of Students	1	2	0	0	3	0

The pre-conference questionnaire supports the notion that some readers need support or supervision to make independent reading meaningful. Although research shows the benefits of independent reading Sanden (2012) points out that teachers “providing students with unsupervised reading time may not inspire the learning opportunities they envision. This notion is further supported in the responses below.

Table 3

*Pre-Conference Questionnaire Responses*

	<u>What book are you currently reading?</u>	<u>Why did you choose this book?</u>	<u>Did you know anything about this book before beginning to read it?</u>	<u>If yes, what did you know?</u>	<u>Did you choose this book because you already knew something about it?</u>
<b>Lily</b>	The Westing Game	I picked it randomly	No	N/A	Maybe
<b>Jack</b>	Restart	The cover looked interesting	No	N/A	No
<b>Eve</b>	This is so Awkward	The cover looked interesting	No	N/A	No
<b>Kate</b>	Nancy Drew Diary Secret at Mystic Lake	I have read other books in the series by this author	Yes	That it was a mystery	Maybe
<b>Vince</b>	The Lightning Thief #5	I have read other books in the series by this author	No	N/A	No
<b>Adam</b>	Big Nate Out Loud	I have read other books in the series by this author	No	N/A	No

## **Reading Conferences**

All six students each participated in three formal reading conferences. Reading conferences took place during Reader's Workshop, specifically during the time when students were reading from their independent reading book. Conferences occurred at the U-shaped reading table or at students' desks. Conferences on average took around 5 minutes, although some took longer as particular students elaborated more on their responses than others. All students were engaged and excited to participate in the conferences. Throughout the progression of these reading conferences, it was evident that my students became more aware of how and why they were selecting their independent reading books. Conferences were spaced out appropriately to track students' progress. Reading logs were used to keep track of where each student was in the book they were reading. This data was used to thoughtfully create useful questions for conferences in order to gather information on student text selection. Reading conference questions were written down on a data collection form which I used to jot down answers to the questions asked.

Informative data was collected during each reading conference. It is important to note that each reading conference was different. There were baseline questions that were asked during each reading conference with all students. These questions guided the conversation and follow up questions were asked as necessary based upon student response. This allowed for conversation to be natural and for students to feel relaxed and open for conversation. This did however occur with some students more than others. Kate, Eve, and Jack often explained their responses with more details than the others.

These three students extended their reading conferences by discussing specific genre and explaining any connections.

In all conferences, I used myself as a model for students. As in any natural conversation, both parties take turns conferring back and forth. This was a time when I would explain to students how I select books I read. During conferences we would make connections to books we have read as a whole class or during guided reading groups. By using myself as an example, I was able to show students beneficial ways to select a text and make connections.

Data collected through reading conferences consistently showed that students put thought into their text selection and were not selecting books randomly. As conferences continued, students had more detailed responses as to why they selected their current independent reading text. Data collected showed that students were more thoughtfully selecting their text and made more conscious decisions as conferences continued. During the first reading conference, Kate and Adam both chose their first books by looking at the cover and reading the back of the book. Lily, Eve, and Vince selected their books because they had previously read a book in that series. This showed that students were selecting text more thoughtfully, as they enjoyed a book in that series before and wanted to keep reading. Jack selected his first text because it was about a topic he was interested in. Eve, Kate, and Vince read books that were recommended to them. By the last conference, all students were able to clearly give a detailed explanation of how they selected their current independent reading books. No participants selected their books randomly. Interestingly, Adam was the only participant to select his first two books randomly by

looking at the cover of the book. By the last conference, Adam selected a book from a series he previously had read.

This data showed that students' thoughtfulness about text selection strengthened over the length of this study. I learned that my students often select a text based upon their present knowledge on that specific topic, series, or genre. Students often select a text because it was highly recommended by a peer, which is an idea that I had not thought of before my research. Peer opinion and recommendation was taken into consideration when half of the participants were selecting a text. Also, students made more conscience and specific decisions with their text selection after discussion about background knowledge and connections were held during early conferences. Data showed that during the last conference, all students were selecting a text based on a specific reason that can all be connected to background knowledge on the topic or series.

Table 4

*Text Selection Data Across the Series of 3 Reading Conferences*

	<u>Why did you choose this book?</u> Conf. #1	<u>Why did you choose this book?</u> Conf. #2	<u>Why did you choose this book?</u> Conf. #3	<u>How did you select this text?</u> Conf. #2	<u>How did you pick this book to read?</u> Conf. #3
<b>Lily</b>	I liked the cover and read the back	I read this book before and liked it a lot	It looked interesting and it was a fantasy book	I read this before and I love fantasy series!	I read the first one. I saw this one at Barnes and Nobel and it was a fantasy and it looked interesting so my mom bought it
<b>Jack</b>	I thought it would be funny	I like learning about sharks and this is kind of like a series	I read a little bit of it before and I liked it so I wanted to read it again	I wanted to learn more about sharks so I picked this book	I like sharks so I looked up sharks and it caught my eye
<b>Eve</b>	I liked the cover and I read a book like this one at my house	I read 3rd Grade Angels and I liked it	A friend recommended it	I like school and this is about stuff that happens in that specific school	This book is sort of like Life Boat 12 that we read last year and my friend told me to read it
<b>Kate</b>	It sounded good. I like books about friends	I read the back of the book at Barnes and Nobel and it sounded adventurous and fantasy	A friend recommended it	I read the back of the book	My friend read it and I love the beach and the ocean



	<u>Why did you choose this book?</u> Conf. #1	<u>Why did you choose this book?</u> Conf. #2	<u>Why did you choose this book?</u> Conf. #3	<u>How did you select this text?</u> Conf. #2	<u>How did you pick this book to read?</u> Conf. #3
<b>Vince</b>	I love this series	I wanted to read another book but I couldn't so this was a backup plan	My dad read it and I like Nick Foles	I read some of this series before and I liked it	My dad read this book and he said it was really good
<b>Adam</b>	The cover looked cool and I read the back	I read the back and looked at the cover and it looked cool	I have read the books in this series before	I picked it randomly	I already knew that I liked Big Nate. I also read the cover and back

Table 4 (continued)

The chart above shows why and how students selected each of the independent reading books they were reading during each conference. The progression of each students' thinking and reasoning can be seen throughout each conference. Data showed students made thoughtful text selections. Lily enjoyed reading books in the same series throughout the conferences and this was a genre she was interested in. Jack selected text based upon his interest in sharks. Eve used background knowledge when selecting text, as she made connections to previous books she has read and used that when she selected a new book. Kate based her text selection on recommendations and interest in genre. Vince also enjoyed reading books in a series and using recommendations to select a text. Although

Adam did read a book from a series that he previously read, he also selected a book randomly based on the cover.

The text selection data allowed me to look at all of the data together and figure out how students selected text as a whole. After categorizing student responses of why they selected a text, it can be seen that students selected books by reading the cover front to back and continuing to read a series. Six student participants each met three times for a conference, therefore there are eighteen responses in the chart. The data in the chart seems to indicate that students select a text based upon their familiarity with the series, as seven times students were reading a text because they had read a book in that series before. Some students were even reread books within a series. It can be assumed that students continue to read series that draw their attention and that are interesting to them. Data from how students selected their text is listed in the chart below.

Table 5

*How Students Selected Text Throughout All Conferences*

	Random Selection	Cover Front to Back	Recommendation	Genre	Series	Background Knowledge
Number of Students	1	4	3	2	7	1

## **Connections/Background Knowledge**

As conferences progressed, students were more likely to use prior knowledge to actively make specific and purposeful text selection rather than randomly selecting a book. In each conference, all six students discussed why they selected their book and how they normally go about selecting a book.

When analyzing data, connections and background knowledge were repeated topics that were discussed during each round of conferences. Connections and background knowledge can be defined as information that students have previous knowledge of. Students identify something in the independent book they are reading and connect it to something that they already have knowledge on. Students made different kinds of connections during reading conferences. Students made text to self, text to text, and text to world connections. Text to self connections are when students connect information about themselves to something in the book. A text to self example would be both the student and a character in the book both playing soccer for their school team. Text to text connections are when students connect information from their current independent reading book to a text they have previously read. A text to text connection example would be a student identifying that their independent reading book is written in verse, just as another book they have read. Text to world connections are when students make a connection between their book and something that has happened or is happening in the world. A text to world example would be the student is reading a book about a kid running for president during a presidential election in the United States. Connections/background knowledge is a category because questions throughout each conference

focused on these ideas. Five out of six participants made connections to self, text, and/or world throughout the three conferences.

Data collected shows that reading conferences helped my students to be more reflective and engaged. Background knowledge on a topic can be positively correlated to students' success when reading that book. Newman, Kaefer, and Pinkham (2014) believe that background knowledge is a very important part of reading. "It makes good sense that to comprehend a story or text, readers will need a threshold of knowledge about the topic. Without such knowledge, it becomes difficult to construct a meaningful mental model of what the text is about". They go on to say that "understanding text depends on readers supplying enough of the unstated premises to make coherent sense of what is being read. But to do this well, readers need to have a foundation of knowledge about the topic. Background knowledge acts as a road map for students, allowing them to stay on target" (p. 146).

After the first conference significant findings emerged. It appeared that students were selecting books based upon some connection that they had even if they did not realize they were doing so. As conversations progressed and new questions asked, these connections were made apparent. It was pointed out that it is useful to use connections to information that they already know to select a book and this was discussed during future conferences. It was very interesting to find out students' reasoning for selecting their text.

It was evident after the second conference that students were putting more thought behind their independent reading book selection. Four out of six students selected their

book because they had some prior knowledge on the topic or were able to make a connection. Their responses are listed below:

Lily: I read this book before and I am reading it again. I liked it a lot! I was looking to read something like this (fantasy) so I decided to reread this first book.

Jack: I love sharks and I like learning about them and how they have evolved.

Kate: This book sounded so good. I like books about friends and have read something like this before

Vince: This book was a backup plan but I have read some of the Diary of a Wimpy Kid series before but not this one.

Background knowledge is something students are familiar with and has been discussed frequently in our classroom. Although the specific term “background knowledge” is not always used, students often discuss what they already know about a topic of a book before reading it, specifically during whole group read alouds and guided reading groups. During the second conference when asked what background knowledge is, each student was able to come up with their own correct definition of the word. This can be directly associated to the fact that this is something we have previously discussed. Each students’ response about defining background knowledge included different variations of “anything you already know about a book or something you already know in general”. When asked how background knowledge could help someone select a text, it

could be clearly seen that students applied their understanding of background knowledge in their responses. Student responses are listed below:

Lily: If you know the author and how they write it can help you pick a book. If you know about a specific genre you will know how the book will be like.

Jack: If you know something about an animal you can choose a book on that topic. You can see if what you knew was right and learn more when you read the book.

Eve: If someone you know read it then you can talk about the book with them. You can look at the book to see if it is something you would like as you flip through it.

Kate: I can use background knowledge to help me pick a genre that I like to read. I can look at the back of the book and figure out if the book is on a genre or a topic that I like.

Vince: If you like a certain category or a person you can check out a book about that. You can use what you know already.

Adam: You can read the back of the book to see if it is something you're interested in. If it has ideas you like or something that is funny you can read that book.

Conversation through reading conferences help students more clearly understand why they selected a specific book to read. In the beginning of reading conferences, some students were not able to clearly explain why they selected an independent reading text to

read. This was very noticeable with Jack, Adam, and Lily, as they stated that they looked at the cover and read the back of the book without making any specific connections before selecting that book to read. When students were asked if they knew anything about the book before selecting it, it allowed students to become more reflective in their response. Students were asked follow up questions according to their response in order to help students more clearly understand their decisions. Students' responses became more detailed and more specific as each round of reading conferences continued. For example, Eve stated during conference #3 that she selected her book because it was written similarly to a book we read last year as a read aloud and she enjoyed reading that book so she thought she would like the one she selected.

In order to better understand why a student selected a text, it is important to understand what students knew about background knowledge. During conferences, students explained their understanding and definition of what background knowledge is. Once students were asked how they can use background knowledge to help select a book, they began to make more connections to why they were selecting a text. Five out of six students were able to give a clear, detailed explanation about background knowledge and text selection. Adam's answers to these questions were not as detailed, although he did explain that he selected a text because he already knew he liked a specific series. Lily talked about if you already know an author and how they write that could help you select a text. Jack discussed already knowing something about a topic, such as animals, can help you select a text. Eve spoke about looking to see if a book is about a specific topic that

she may like and talking to a friend about a book suggestion. Kate also discussed talking to a friend about a book and connection to what you already know can help select a text. Vince spoke about taking suggestions based upon topics of interest as well as continuing to read series like Harry Potter. After discussing background knowledge, students' decisions with text selection and their responses during reading conferences became more detailed.

Table 6

*Connection/Background Data Across the Series of 3 Reading Conferences*

	<u>Were you interested in this topic before reading?</u> <u>Conf. #1</u>	<u>What connections can you make to the book?</u> <u>Conf. #1</u>	<u>Did you know anything about this book before reading?</u> <u>Conf. #2</u>	<u>How can background knowledge help you choose a book?</u> <u>Conf. #2</u>	<u>How did you pick this book to read?</u> <u>Conf. #3</u>	<u>Why is background knowledge important when selecting a book?</u> <u>Conf. #3</u>
<b>Lily</b>	No but I thought it looked different	Nothing yet but I am enjoying reading it	Yes I read this book before. I was looking for something similar so I decided to read it again	If you know the author already and how they write. Or if you know a genre you know how it will be	I read the first one. I saw this one at Barnes and Nobel and it was a fantasy and it looked interesting so my mom bought it	It helps me take what I already know and pick a good book to read!



	<u>Were you interested in this topic before reading?</u> <u>Conf. #1</u>	<u>What connections can you make to the book?</u> <u>Conf. #1</u>	<u>Did you know anything about this book before reading?</u> <u>Conf. #2</u>	<u>How can background knowledge help you choose a book?</u> <u>Conf. #2</u>	<u>How did you pick this book to read?</u> <u>Conf. #3</u>	<u>Why is background knowledge important when selecting a book?</u> <u>Conf. #3</u>
<b>Jack</b>	I have read books like this before	I used to play pranks a lot when I was younger	Yes I know some stuff about sharks	If you already know something about animals then you can see if you were right when you read a book.	I like sharks so I looked up sharks and it caught my eye	I like sharks so I can choose a book about sharks since I know I like them
<b>Eve</b>	Yes! My sister read this book too.	I do dance and some of the girls in the book dance too	No not this one	If anyone else read it before, you can talk about it. If its a topic you like you can look through the book to see if you want to read it	This book is sort of like Life Boat 12 that we read last year and my friend told me to read it	If I know I like a topic or the way a book is written, I can pick a new book that is similar
<b>Kate</b>	Yes, I like books about friends	The girl is actually the opposite of me, she likes pink and jeans and I do not. It is cool to read something different	Not really, this is a kind of book I am only sometimes interested in	Yes it it book to help you choose a book but you don't always want to read the same kind of books	My friend read it and I love the beach and the ocean	I can choose a book that I know I will like because I like the topic. I love the beach so I knew I would like this book
<b>Vince</b>	Yes, I like stuff that is not real that makes you think.	None	Yes, I read some of these books before	You can see what you know and then check out that book	My dad read this book and he said it was really good	It can help me pick a book that I will like
<b>Adam</b>	Well, I usually like I Survived books	To the I Survived Series	No	You can read the back and see if you're interested in it	I already knew that I liked Big Nate. I also read the cover and back	If I already know I like a series or a character I know I will like the book I pick

Table 6 (continued)

Through analyzing the data in this study, I found that students are engaged when they find something that resonates with them. Students were excited to share information during their reading conference and tell about the current independent reading selection. Genre, topic of text, series, and peer recommendation were all areas that resonated with students. Lily loved reading fantasy books, Jack was very interested in sharks and pranks, Eve made text selection from recommendations and by style of text, Kate enjoyed reading books about the ocean and books that were recommended to her, Vince enjoyed continuing series, and Adam also read books in series that he previously read.

Data showed that reading conferences were longer with more back and forth conversation when the student was reading a book that they had previous knowledge. This could be due to the fact that students were able to make connections to these texts. Jack and Kate both selected books based on topics of interest. Adam and Vince discussed other text in the series they were reading in their conferences as well. During their conferences we discussed how their prior knowledge connected to the current text.

### **Series of Books**

Another category that arose from analyzing data was student choice to read a book series. A series is a sequence of books written by the same author that have similar characters and events that occur. Data showed that some students selected an independent reading book due to the fact that they had previously read books in the same series and

wanted to continue to read that series. Four out of six participants discussed how they have previously read books in a specific series during our reading conferences.

Reading conferences helped me to determine that students are really engaged when they find something that resonates with them. This can be clearly seen when students continue to read books in a series that they have enjoyed. It is important to note that not all students read a book within a series during the approximately month long time that the reading conferences occurred. Four out of six participants read a book within a series at some point during our reading conferences and one specific student, Jack, read books that were similar to those read before, although it was not a book in a series. Data collected through reading conferences shows that when students read books within a series, they are likely to continue to read the next book for their next independent reading text. Two participants, Lily and Vince, both were rereading a book from within a series. Lily was rereading the first Land of Stories book since it had been a while since she read the first one and wanted to refresh her memory before continuing the series. Vince really enjoys the Harry Potter series and therefore was rereading one of his favorite books from the series. Adam read a Big Nate book because he had read another from the series before and thought that they were funny. Eve also read a book that was the sequel to a book she read last year. Students were excited to continue to read books in a series and were eager to explain why they like the series. Student responses from conferences are listed below:

Lily: I read Land of Stories #1 again before I read the other books. I love fantasy books so I like this series. I like to reread books because you notice things you didn't notice before.

Jack: I have read this kind of book before. Where they tell you how to do things like pranks. I thought it would be fun to read another one.

Eve: I am reading 4th Grade Rats. I read the book before this, 3rd Grade Angels, last year and I really liked it, so I thought I would read the next book.

Vince: I love Harry Potter. I am rereading the third book. I love how this series is fantasy and makes you think.

Adam: I am reading another Big Nate book. I have read these books before and they are funny! I like to read this series because it's nice to know what the book will be like.

Table 7

*Book Series Data*

	<u>Responses from Conference #1</u>	<u>Responses from Conference #2</u>	<u>Responses from Conference #3</u>
<b>Lily</b>	n/a	Rereading Land of Stories #1, which is part of a series that she is reading.	Reading Land of Stories #3 and is continuing the series because she loves it!
<b>Jack</b>	Reading Pranks to Pull on Parents because he has read books like this before.	n/a	n/a
<b>Eve</b>	n/a	Reading 4th Grade Rats and previously read the book before, 3rd Grade Angels.	n/a
<b>Kate</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Vince</b>	Reading Harry Potter #3 because he loves this series!	Reading Diary of a Wimpy Kid and he has read books in this series before	n/a

	<u>Responses from Conference #1</u>	<u>Responses from Conference #2</u>	<u>Responses from Conference #3</u>
<b>Adam</b>	Reading a Survivor Stranded book that he chose because it fits in with the I Survived Series and he loves that series.	n/a	Reading Big Nate because he has read books in this series and likes them.

Table 7 (continued)

When students made the decision to read another book within a series, they were using prior knowledge on the series, characters, style of writing, and interest to select a text. Serravallo and Goldberg (2007) point out that students need to select their own independent reading book.

Data shows that students enjoy reading series. Having opportunities to select books in a series supports students in their reading independence.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Summary**

#### **Summary of Study**

At the conclusion of my research, I was left with new information learned about how my students select an independent reading book, how they make connections to a book, and their views on the importance of background knowledge when selecting a text. Students enjoyed conferencing and were eager to share knowledge about their books. Students enjoyed this one-on-one time with the teacher and loved sharing the book they were reading. Since the conferences were informal and questions were asked based upon student responses, this allowed for a very easy-going and relaxing feel. This allowed students to be open, willing to share their knowledge and be honest in their answers. Since these reading conferences were so successful, I plan to continue to implement them with all of my students. Reading conferences can give valuable information and can help guide future lessons and instruction.

As the study unfolded, useful information was discovered about reading conferences. Each of the six participants participated in three conferences. During each conference, students would answer questions and converse in conversation about their current independent reading book, how they selected this book, and what connections could be made with this book. As conferences progressed, it was discovered that students were continuing to read a series of books, were selecting a book based upon a recommendation, and were basing their selections on their interests.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of the data collection and analysis of the data, I was able to draw conclusions based off of the trends of data. Three major categories emerged during the analysis of the data. These categories are text selection, connections/background knowledge, and series of books. These emerged as categories as they were commonly discussed during multiple conferences with each participant.

Overall, a few conclusions can be drawn from this research. It can be concluded that reading conferences help students use background knowledge in order to successfully select an independent reading book. It also can be concluded that students make connections to a text before, during, and after reading. Reading conferences can help students form these connections. Lastly, it can be concluded that students' understanding of background knowledge and its usage during independent reading text selection strengthened as the reading conferences continued throughout this study.

I concluded after analyzing my data that reading conferences help students use background knowledge in order to successfully select an independent reading book. Some students were using prior knowledge to help them select books without recognizing what they were specifically doing. Reading conferences helped all participants become more cognizant of why and how they were selecting an independent reading book. For some students, this was selecting books because they were recommended by a friend or teacher. Students also used prior knowledge by continuing to read the next book in a series or another book by the same author of a previously read book.

Another conclusion that could be formed from analysis of data is that students make connections to a text before, during, and after reading. Reading conferences can help students form these connections. Reading the summary on the back of the book was a useful way for students to begin to form initial connections to a text. At the conclusion of the study, students were making more connections to the books they were reading and using these connections to begin to select books they would read next. Students were making connections to themes, topics, and genres of books.

Lastly, another conclusion that can be formed following data analysis is that students' understanding of background knowledge and its usage during independent reading text selection strengthened as the reading conferences continued throughout this study. Through the discussion during each reading conference, students were able to more clearly develop their understanding and definition of background knowledge. Students were able to identify why background knowledge is important when selecting an independent reading text.

It can be concluded that conversation that occurs during reading conferences allows students to become more aware of text selection. Reading conferences can help students make connections to their independent reading books as well as explain their reasoning for choosing a book. Students were excited to participate in these conferences, which encouraged them to be more motivated to read during independent reading time.

### **Limitations**

In order to further study reading conferences and their connection to background knowledge of independent reading text, more time to complete research would be



necessary. This study was limited to approximately one month during which three reading conferences occurred for each of the six participants. More time is needed to complete extra reading conferences to see if students are consistently applying their background knowledge and making connections to the independent reading text they are selecting.

Another limitation was the amount of participation in the study. Six out of twenty students who are in my class for reading participated in my study. It would have been useful and interesting to analyze and include the data of my entire class within my teacher research. Due to lack of participation, my data analysis was limited to about a third of my class. Students who did not participate may have had different knowledge or views on these topics and it would have been interesting to include all of this information in my research.

### **Implications**

During my review of literature surrounding independent reading and reading conferences, it was discovered that there is a lack of empirical research in these areas. It would be helpful if researchers continued to study these areas, as this will help ensure student growth and teacher development in these areas.

It was also brought to my attention through my experiences as a classroom teacher and through my research for the literature review that teachers have different views of independent reading. Some teachers, including myself, believe there are benefits to independent reading and have time in their schedules every day for students to participate. These teachers believe there is an importance in letting students select their own text and using this time to practice skills and strategies previously taught. There are

other teachers that may view independent reading and time that is not spent constructively or may believe that there is not enough time in their daily schedule to add independent reading. Because of this, this research would not be useful to all teachers as some teachers may not hold the same opinions as the researcher. Reading conferences may be more difficult to fit in during a reading block without independent reading time.

By having the opportunity to reflect on my own teaching practice through teacher research and analysis of data has not only broadened my knowledge as an educator but has extended my knowledge in this field of study. The value of this study and the usefulness of the data collected can be seen when applied to the classroom. This study showed how students select an independent reading text and specifically why they selected that text. By gathering this information, I was able to understand how and why a student goes about selecting an independent reading book. This is useful information in order to guide reading conferences, ensure books are available in our classroom library, and assess what knowledge students are applying during their independent reading.

This study can lead to future research opportunities. After understanding what book students select to read and why they would like to read them, this information could be used to guide future research with reading conferences. Research with reading conferences could be continued in order to discuss specific comprehension strategies, genre similarities and differences, or Fund of Knowledge. I look forward to continuing my research in my classroom while using reading conferences as a tool during independent reading.

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