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## Finding Identity Through Literature

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Finding Identity Through Literature

Darren Bartholomew

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**Abstract**

The focus of this Capstone Project is on how upper-grade elementary students view children's literature and its connection to self identity. The stakeholder perspectives that were obtained include students in upper and lower elementary grades and their teachers. According to the data analysis, younger elementary students desired to read more stories about anthropomorphized characters that are going through similar life situations. Older elementary students exhibited an overall desire to read books about fantastical stories and characters. However, when dealing with pressing issues both groups desired to read stories about characters who were similar to them in gender, age, ethnicity, or social group. Providing students with opportunities to explore identity issues through the literature is consequential as students who enjoy reading are more likely to orally communicate effectively, exhibit a desire to discuss it with peers and had an increasing desire to continue reading.

### **Finding Identity Through Literature**

I have loved stories my whole life. I loved telling stories, listening to stories, I loved being able to put myself into a situation that I would not have been able to otherwise. My favorite thing to do was to project my emotions and feelings onto the characters that I was creating. By doing this I was able to find my identity and was better able to identify who I was and what was going on in my life. Though I loved stories, I hated reading. I disliked everything about it. I did not like the framework in which it worked. It was a set story that I could not control, it went at a pace that I was not used to, and it just was not enjoyable for me. I remember struggling to make it halfway through a book and sometimes I would not even make it halfway and would just stop reading. The struggle and conflict that it created in my life was huge. I fought with my teachers about finishing the books and about my grades. I fought with my parents about my desire to read and the incentives they were going to me if I persevered and finished. The person that was hardest on me was myself. I constantly fought with myself about finishing. I wanted to be a good student and do my work. I wanted to desire to read popular books that my friends were reading but I did not enjoy the experience at all.

This all changed when I was in fourth grade. Miss Lawrence was my teacher and she had so much required reading. I entered her class with preconceived notions that this was going to be the worst year of my academic career. It was going to be the most reading that I have done in my life and I was going to complain, struggle and fight throughout the whole year. In Oregon, fourth grade students study the Oregon Trail and read texts relating to survival, the west, and adventure. Our first book that we read was called *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen. It is about a young teen who is on his way to Canada to visit his estranged father when the pilot of his small prop plane suffers a heart attack. Thirteen-year-old Brian is forced to crash-land the plane in a lake, and finds himself stranded in the remote Canadian wilderness with only his clothing and the hatchet. He is truly

desolate and alone. Tired, scared, and starving, Brian fights nature to find food and make a shelter for himself. Through perseverance, Brian learns to turn adversity to his advantage and he leaves behind the self-pity he has felt about his predicament as he summons the courage to stay alive (Scholastic, 2019).

While I was in fourth grade, I was living in Oregon. I would get home from school, both of my parents would still be working and my two younger sisters would be playing together. I was left alone to play with myself. I took my black lab and would venture out into the woods. I did this so would not have to do my homework and when I was out in the woods, I could make up the stories that I loved so much. But as we read *Hatchet* in class something began to happen. I was starting to see parts of myself in Brian, the character from the book. He was alone in the woods, trying to survive, and fighting off the self-pity. I was alone in the woods and though it was by choice I too was alone. My self-pity of not being able to enjoy was something that was beginning to identify me. As we continued to read the story in our class, I grew more attached to the character. Eventually, I began taking my book into the forest with me and would read chapters ahead just to see what would happen. I finished the book weeks before we were supposed to and read it twice within our assigned lesson period. All that I wanted to do was to tell my friends at school about the book, I also wanted to keep reading the other books in the series.

*Hatchet* allowed me to see myself through another characters eyes. I was able to put myself into situations that were similar to mine but different enough that it felt like I was escaping reality. As I was able to identify with Brian from the book through a story of survival and of transformation, I was able to survive my fourth grade year and I was able to transform into a student who not only read assigned readings but I desired to read and to discuss it with my

peers. As I was thinking about my capstone, I began to wonder how many students feel the way I did. How many students do not connect with literature? How many students do not have any desire to read? Using my life experiences and the questions that arose, the focus of this Capstone Project is on how upper-grade elementary students view children's literature and its connection to self identity.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Finding identity through literature is linked to many aspects of a person's life. Being able to read and understand what is being read is integral to a student's journey through school and through life. If a child falls behind in class with their reading they will be placed on the wrong learning track at their school which leads to poor grades and academic failure. Being able to read is a major problem in the country that should be addressed. There are three major problems that lead to and result in reading achievement and finding identity through literature. The first is failure to learn at the school-age level. The second is wasted healthcare costs due to lack of the ability to read forms. The third is 10% of the United States being under a third grade reading level.

### **The Problem**

“Almost every year, it seems like a new way of combining words, images, and video emerges and becomes a phenomenon among students. Meanwhile, teachers are left wondering how to respond to these new ways of writing and reading and the identities that students create

through them” (Williams, 2011.) Creating identities is an important part of a student’s childhood. One of the largest ways that student begin to form identities is when their language development meets their literacy skills. When these two begin to merge together is when the formation of self-identity arises. Children make significant gains in various areas of development through shared storybook experiences (Allen, 2015.) One of these areas of development is the discovery of self-identity. Developing positive identities touches on some fundamental questions facing every young child: “who am I”, “is it ok to be who I am” and “what is my place in the world?” By being able to identify and answer these questions are important to every child’s wellbeing (Rubaru, 2015.)

When a child’s wellbeing is being considered is when the problem becomes crucial. A study from 1992 to 2017 done by the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that students in fourth and eighth grade who are not literate, do not have the language development skills needed, and do not feel connected to literature show a significant deficit in below basic reading achievement levels (see figure 1).

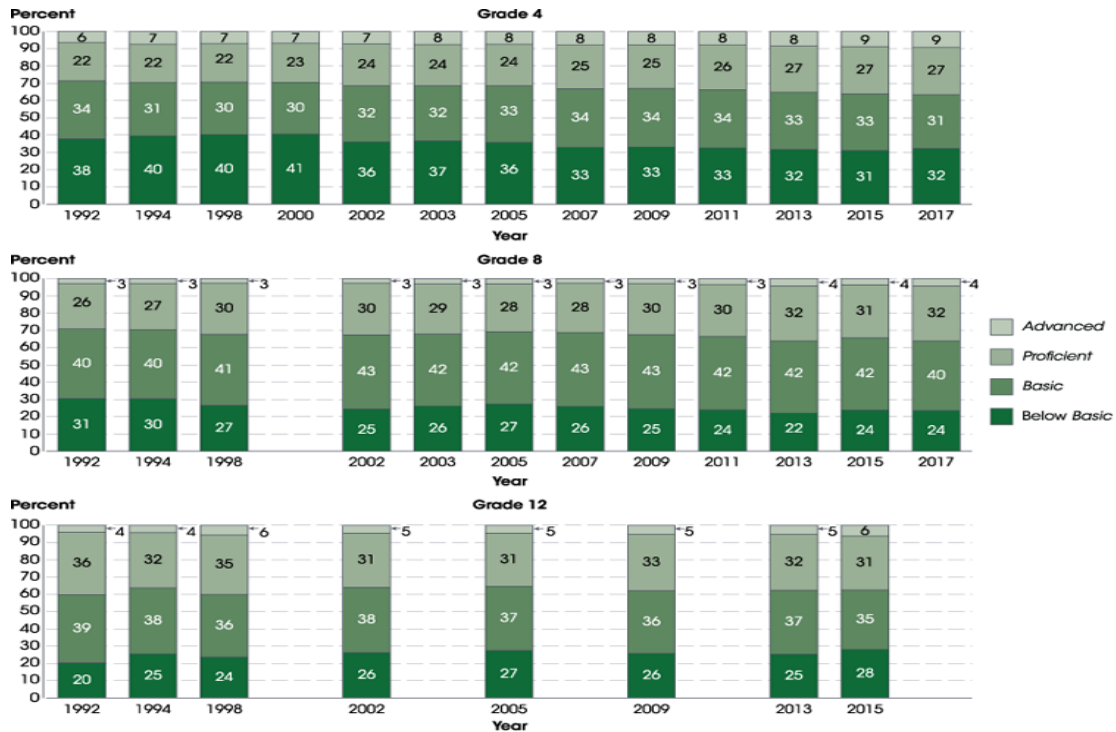


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade students, by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading achievement level: Selected years, 1992–2017

There is a steady decline in fourth and eighth grade reading achievement levels. This is a direct result from the combination of videos and images from the William’s study. As our society continues to drive toward an electronic one, our children will continue to grow less and less in literacy and grow more toward relying on electronics to assist them.

**Why it is an Issue**

With the education gap slowly growing, we cannot not ignore the fact that there are many people cannot read above the basic reading level. There are more than 30 million people in the United States that read at or below a basic third grade reading level (Room 241, 2018.) This reading level can lead to heavy and often extremely difficult consequences. Some of the outcomes may be lower wages, poor personal and mental health which all culminate to an increasing incarceration rate. While this reading achievement may benefit many, these 30 million citizens who are illiterate their achievement gap becomes an opportunity gap, an economic gap,



and a racial gap, which gets passed on from generation to generation unless it's disrupted. (Room 241, 2018.)

A senior capstone study done by Kelly Waldo at California State University at Monterey Bay states that the "California Department of Education (CDE) website has a detailed list of the California curriculum standards in every subject for every grade. There is also English language development for Spanish speakers." Information about the Academic Performance Index, Standardized Testing and Reporting, the Williams court case and No Child Left Behind.

The website also has curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, adequate yearly progress and the California High School Exit Exam. (California Department of Education, 2006). With set standards, performance levels, and curriculum frameworks, achieving the education gap for the 30 million people who are below the basic reading level still poses as a problem.

An estimated \$230 million is wasted in healthcare costs every year (Room 241, 2018.) The money is going towards healthcare that people think that they need but ultimately never utilize. This is occurring as people sign up for healthcare plans they are not able to fully read the fine print, other options or are taking more benefits than are needed. This is leading to results that show for every adult in the United States, the 30 million, that is below a third grade level and is enrolled in a healthcare plan, is wasting \$7.66 every. Though these numbers are low per person when added up the \$7.66 quickly adds up to \$230 million wasted. This could easily be saved by increasing literacy in American citizens. If each of these 30 million people were able to find self-identity through literature then less money would be wasted annually, and that is just on healthcare alone. There is a clear link between storytelling and healthcare as well. There is a trend towards the use of narratives, stories, and storytelling in the healthcare setting as a tool for diagnostics, therapeutics, and the education of patients, students, and practitioners. The

effectiveness of storytelling as a communication tool has been supported by evidence from several disciplines including nursing, social science, and psychology (Hartling, et al., 2010.)

### **Conclusion**

Finding identity through literature is linked to many aspects of a person's life. Being able to read and understand what is being read is integral to a student's journey through school and through life. If a child falls behind in class with their reading they will be placed on the wrong learning track at their school which leads to poor grades and academic failure. Reading achievement is also linked to wasted healthcare costs, repeating family trends of not reading and it leaves 30 million people in the United State without a way to make a living. Being able to read is a major problem in the country that should be addressed. This project aims to find a solution at a local level.

### **Methods and Procedures**

In order to find out how upper-grade elementary students view children's literature and its connection to self identity, individual research was conducted. Data was collected from a review of literature and a Santa Cruz area elementary and their after school enrichment program to see their perspective on how identity can be found in literature. Santa Cruz Prairie School<sup>1</sup>(SCPS) is an after-school and tutoring program that caters to elementary students age 5 to 12 or kindergarten to fifth grade. SCPS has their own, private classroom that is located near the back of the schools property. The daily average number of students that come to the test site is about 50 to 60 students per day. The students come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the three prominent ethnicities being African American, Hispanic/Latinx, and White (EdData,2018). As

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<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

SCPS is a private, non-profit company the families of the students must pay tuition to attend. About 70% of the families are able to pay for the program without assistance whereas 30% receive assistance to attend.

### **Participants**

The director and the teachers of the enrichment program were interviewed about the students who attend the program and the programs resources available for language development and self-assessment regarding self-identity. There were 6 students who emerged from the interviews who do not enjoy reading, did not exhibit a desire to discuss it with peers and had a decreasing desire to continue reading. The study group consisted of 3rd, 4th and 5th grade students. Four of them identified as female and two of them identified as male. All of them have been going to the test site since kindergarten. The students have been labeled as “Student 1” through “Student 6” for the purpose of sharing the interview responses throughout the results section.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions**

1. What are your favorite books?
2. What are your favorite stories or fairy tales?
3. Do you have a favorite character?
4. Why do you like these stories?
5. When you finish a book do you desire to talk about it?
6. Do you want to keep reading when you finish a book?
7. Do you think you are good at reading?
8. Where do you do the most reading, at home, at school, on the bus?

9. Do you read with a parent or guardian?
10. Would you be more motivated to read if your guardian read with you?
11. How do you think your guardians can help you read?
12. How do you think the enrichment program can help you read?

### **Materials & Procedures**

Questions were composed using data collected from peer reviewed articles and the interview with the program director and teachers (See Appendix A) to create the pre-action interview with the participants. The participants were each given an opportunity to answer the interview questions orally, written or both. The common theme of the interview was to analyze if the participants desired to discuss their required reading or desired to continue reading.

Participants were not separated during the interview and were in one small group during the duration of the research. After the first interview, the participants were given copies of the questions to take home and think about as they continued their teacher assigned reading. During the second meeting, the participants were asked the same interview questions as the week prior to evaluate if there was a growth in the desire to discuss the texts or a desire to continue reading.

### **Data Analysis**

The study found four major barriers that were preventing student identification through literature at the elementary school. These included time barriers, guardianship involvement, and the physical availability of diverse literature on the campus. Reducing these barriers are important because providing students with opportunities to engage in identity issues through the literature and allowing their guardians and teachers to guide these discussions provide the space needed for self-assessment.

### **Results**

For this Capstone Project, the director, teachers and six participants of the Santa Cruz Prairie School enrichment program were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve in order to find out how upper-grade elementary students view children’s literature and its connection to self identity. This is important because children make significant gains in various areas of development through shared storybook experiences. One of these areas of development is the discovery of self-identity. Developing positive identities touches on some fundamental questions facing every young child: “who am I?”, “Is it ok to be who I am?” and “what is my place in the world?” Answering these questions are important to every child’s wellbeing (Roburu, 2015, p.2). Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1).

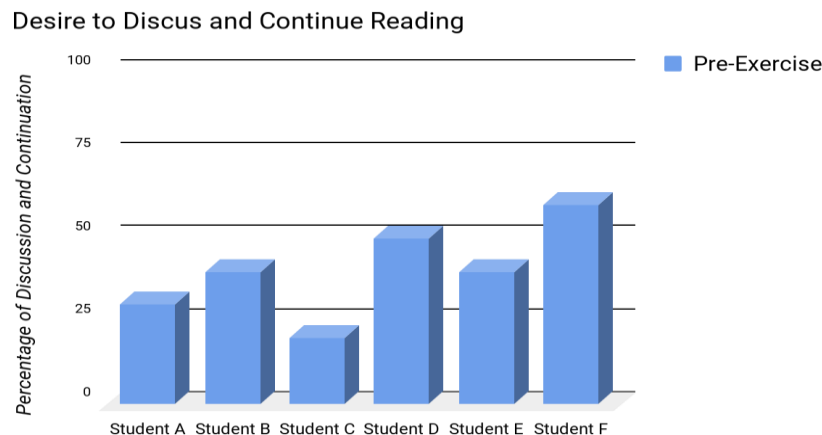


Figure 2. Percentage of Discussion and Continuation for Students A to Student F

Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential action option by the following criteria: time needed to complete the action; cost needed to complete the action option; and the effectiveness of the action option. The evaluation of time needed is important to consider as the teacher implementing the action will need to figure out the time needed into lesson planning and into class time. Guardians will also be considered when thinking about the

evaluation of time. Based on the evaluation of each action option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

	TIME	COST	EFFECTIVENESS
STUDENT LED SMALL GROUPS	MODERATE	LOW	LOW
NEW PHYSICAL BOOKS	MODERATE	HIGH	LOW
GUARDIAN OR TEACHER LEAD DISCUSSION	MODERATE	LOW	HIGH

### *Evaluation of Action Options*

While considering the action options the evaluation options of time, cost and effectiveness are all considered respectively.

### **Student led small groups**

When thinking about student led, small reading groups the time must be considered as teachers will need to make space in their schedule for students to get into these groups to not only read the literature but to discuss it as well. The time considered would be moderate as it

would take time out of class. The cost would be low as the teachers would be using the resources that are already in the classroom. The effectiveness of the student led groups would be significantly low as the groups are student led which carry a weight of error considering the age of the student.

### **New physical books**

The action option that requires teachers and schools buying new books was considered as well. The time needed to complete this action was relatively moderate as the teachers or guardians would go out and buy the books at a physical book store or on an online site. Buying the books would cost a significant amount of money as the teacher would have to buy a book for every group or student in the classroom, which would range from 15-30 books per books read. If a physical copy of a book is not available then the educator would have to buy an ebook which means that each of the students would need to have access to an online resource at school as well as at home, which is never guaranteed and would cost more.

### **Teacher or guardian led discussions**

The third and final option to consider was teacher and/or guardian led discussions on literature that was being read in class. There would be a moderate amount of time needed for this option. The teacher would again need to make time in the lesson plan to implement said discussion. Guardians would also need to make time after school, work or plans to implement the discussion with the student. The cost for this action option would be low as the document of questions would be printed out at school and would be a menial cost to the teacher and guardian. Having students be led by a teacher or guardian is highly effective as students who struggle with

reading desire to have a mentor involved in their work. This knowledge emerged during our participant interviews.

## **Conclusion**

Considering all of the action options along with their evaluation criteria the researcher decided on the third option of teacher and guardian led discussions. As mentioned before, the guardian's time is a large variable in the success of this criterion. Another variable to consider is the possibility that the guardian will not implement this action in a home setting. By asking questions teachers and guardians are encouraging language growth and imaginative development. As the student begins to master the art of their own storytelling they are furthering their oral and written language development, as well as comprehension for reading and listening, they are learning to see the perspective of others while forming a better sense of self-identity.

## **Implementation of Action and Critical Reflection**

### **Action Documentation and Reflection**

In order to find out how upper-grade elementary students view children's literature and its connection to self identity, individual research was conducted. Data was collected from a review of literature and a Santa Cruz area elementary and their after school enrichment program to see their perspective on how identity can be found in literature. Santa Cruz Prairie School<sup>2</sup>(SCPS) is an after-school and tutoring program that caters to elementary students age 5 to 12 or kindergarten to fifth grade.

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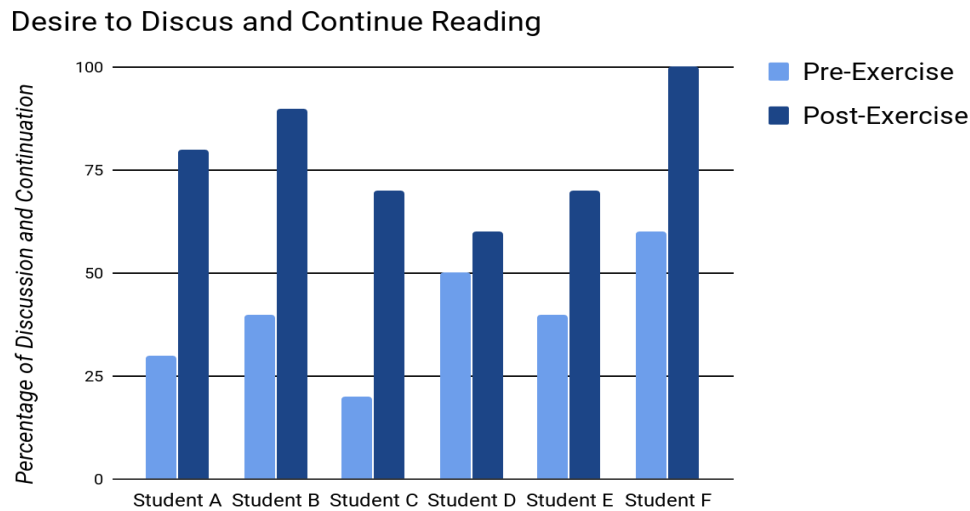


Using the questions from the pre-action interview with the director and the participants, the researcher compiled a list of questions that would be used for the teacher and guardian led discussion. In association with Pixar Animation Studios, the researcher used activities and questions that they use when their writers are suffering from writer's block, cannot decide on where to lead the stories or if they are having trouble projecting emotion into their characters (Khan Academy, 2019.) Some of the questions that were used were as follows: (See Appendix B for full list of questions used.)

1. Why do you feel connected to these stories?
2. What do these have in common? What are the differences?
3. Are there events in your life that only YOU have lived?
4. What is an event only the protagonist in your book has lived?
5. Think about how your emotions during this event. Do you remember it well? Why do you think that is?
6. How do you think the protagonist felt during their event?

Each of the six participants said that they would be more likely to discuss their literature with another peer. Data also showed that they are more inclined to continue reading. After our semi-formal interview and activity, participants were 38% more likely to do the activity with another piece of literature. Students found it easier to persist after engaging with the activity and were able to better label their emotions and identify with characters.

Figure 3. Student's desire to discuss and continue reading after action option activity



The study found four major barriers that were preventing student identification through literature at the elementary school. These included time barriers, guardianship involvement, and the physical availability of diverse literature on the campus. Reducing these barriers are important because providing students with opportunities to engage in identity issues through the literature and allowing their guardians and teachers to guide these discussions provide the space needed for self-assessment.

The researcher created a document (See Appendix C.) that the library of the school and the enrichment program will create more opportunities on campus for students to discuss literature they are reading. In addition to creating more opportunities for discussion, the enrichment program and school library will actively offer an information and activity sheet that was created after analyzing the data of this study. Using this activity sheet, guardians can further the students' oral and written language development, as well as comprehension for reading and listening. The students will learn to see the perspective of others while forming a better sense of self-identity. Persistence in reading of challenging and diverse literature while exploring various themes, cultures and character development plus active participation in encouraging reading

while initiating meaningful discussion of texts leads to student's self-assessment of personal attributes and awareness in relation to social context. The most surprising part of the study was the fact that student's just desire to be supported and seen in order to identify with literature. During this project the researcher learned that many people are just like them and have a moment when the literature, language development and identity clicked.

### **Synthesis and Integration**

As the research was being conducted, the researcher found that the fulfillment of the California State University at Monterey Bay, Liberal Studies Major Learning Outcomes were fulfilled. As a developing educator the researcher has to design, write and fulfill a lesson plan that could be implemented in an after school program and a school library. They became more diverse in multicultural literature as they allowed and supported the formation of identities of themselves, the teachers, the guardians and the students involved. All of the stakeholders examined multiculturalism and diverse literature. As an innovative technology innovator, the researcher used an interactive website to help conduct interviews as well as create lesson plans using Khan Academy and Google Documents. Finally, the researcher feels as though the study above exceeds the subject area content and complete a coherent depth of study for successful practice in California public education.

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### **Appendix A**

1. What does your program do?
2. How many students do you see a day?
3. What is the largest academic issue that your students face?
4. Do your students typically enjoy being here?
5. What does the parent involvement look like?
6. How many times a week is there conflict between teachers and students?
7. How many times a week is there conflict between teachers and parents?
8. Is it difficult to get students to read?
9. Is it difficult to get students to engage in daily activities?
10. what are the biggest obstacles that face this program daily, weekly or monthly?

**Appendix B**



**THE ART OF STORYTELLING!**

What stories do you tell?

- Do you draw? Comics?
- Do you play pretend? What stories do you tell on the playground?
- Do you talk about your life and what has happened or do you talk about pretend?
- Do you think you mix reality and pretend?

**ACTIVITY 1**

- a. Are there events in your life that only YOU have lived?
  - Think about a memory you have... happy, surprised, scared, angry....
- b. Why do you think you remember this so well? Try connecting one or more emotions to this memory...
- c. Now try and express your memory and emotion in some way. The goal is to get it out of your head. Here are some ideas for what you could do.
  - Orally: Tell your memory to someone.. Can you make them feel the emotion?

What story first pulled you in?

- A favorite bedtime story, family tale, favorite show... ANYTHING

My personal favorite was TOY STORY... Now why?

**ACTIVITY 2**

- A. Identify three films/books that you would take on a deserted island
- B. Why do you feel connected to these stories? → one reason for each.
- C. What do these three have in common? What are the differences?

**ACTIVITY 3**

A. Return to your 3 favorite films/stories and try reframing each of them in terms of a "what if" statement. Share these with someone orally and see if they can guess what story it is.  
 EX: WHAT IF... there is a man and he and all of his friends were changed from humans to monsters and household items. And what if a beautiful woman could save them by loving them for who they are not what they looked like.

B. Now it's your turn. Come up with 3-5 of your own ORIGINAL "what if" ideas.

**ACTIVITY 4**

- a. Return to your 3 films. Identify the worlds and characters in each. Write these down. Who are the main characters? Is there a character you identify with most? Where does the movie take place? Is it one world or multiple worlds?
- b. Try mixing a character and world from different movies. Try this a few times and see what happens.
- c. Return to your three "what if" statements from the previous exercises. Pick your favorite one. Can you imagine a possible character and world?

Here's a list of definitions introduced during this lesson.

**Story:** a sequence of events which unfold through time.

**Perspective:** a point of view or way of seeing the world.

**World:** the environment or set of rules where a story takes place.

**Character:** the subjects or individuals we follow on the journey of the story.

**Protagonist:** the main character(s), whose journey the story is about.

## Appendix C



Our Weekly Reading Questions

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# The Art of Storytelling!

Here are some questions and activities to do with your student before, during, or after their daily required reading. By asking these questions you are encouraging language growth and imaginative development. As your student begins to master the art of their own storytelling they are furthering their oral and written language development, as well as comprehension for reading and listening. They are learning to see the perspective of others while forming a better sense of self-identity.

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## Activity 1

Identify three books or stories that you would take on a deserted island.

Why do you feel connected to these stories?

What do these three have in common? What are the differences?

Try reframing each your books in terms of a "what if" statement. Share these with someone orally and see if they can guess what story it is.

Example: "What if there were bears who lived like humans, they had a house and owned things. One day they left for the day and a little girl came to their house, ate all of



their food, and slept in their bed..."

## Activity 2

Are there events in your life that only YOU have lived?

What is an event only the protagonist in your book has lived?

Think about how your emotions during this event. Do you remember it well? Why do you think that is?

How do you think the protagonist felt during their event?

Now orally tell someone about your event and the characters event and the emotions you both felt.



Here is a list of definitions for words used in these activities

**Story:** a sequence of events which unfold through time.

**Perspective:** a point of view or way of seeing the world.

**Character:** the subjects or individuals we follow on the journey of the story.

**Protagonist:** the main character(s), whose journey the story is about.



Thank you for your continuous support of your student's reading and success.

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**Appendix C**

